Opposition to Tsarism

Ideas and Leaders

What were the revolutionary ideas?

Defining ideology

Ideology is the set of ideas or beliefs that characterise a particular revolutionary movement. Revolutionary leaders often adopt a specific ideology to explain to the masses their dreams for the country’s future. Such ideas need to be attractive to the wider population by addressing and providing readily achievable solutions to society’s problems.

Revolutionary ideologies have a number of important features: they harness mass philosophies, like nationalism, equality or peace; they sometimes deliberately exaggerate or distort the truth; they are often a source for slogans and revolutionary symbols; and they are a means of social control.

Introducing Marxism

A solid understanding of Marxist theory is crucial in understanding the Russian Revolution. An appreciation of Marxism helps to empathise with the revolutionaries who devoted their lives to implementing it in Europe. Writers who lack such historical empathy often describe communism as a mere ‘experiment’, the implications being that it was always a flawed idea, and therefore doomed.

Background of Marx and Engels

Whilst Karl Marx was born in Germany, the birth of his revolutionary spirit can be traced to studying the French Revolution in Paris where he was working as a journalist. It was there in 1844 that he befriended Friedrich Engels who, earlier, had been sent by his wealthy father from Germany to establish a business in Manchester. Their work was often written together and they need to be considered a team as it is difficult to separate their individual contributions.

Marx’s and Engels’ observations

Marx and Engels visited factories in northern England to make scientific observations of the real world. Engels described the life of the industrial worker in 1846 as best to be one of ‘utter monotony; it is his mission to be bored every day’, but at worst ‘children [are] deformed, men enfeebled, limbs crushed, whole generations wrecked, afflicted with disease and infirmity, purely to fill the purses of the bourgeoisie.’ Since the industrial revolution, the aim of business has been to lower costs and raise profit. As the largest cost was often employee wages, labour was exploited by factory owners. Observation of similar exploitation in Germany convinced Marx and Engels that this was an unjust international problem requiring a radical solution.

Communist Manifesto (1848)

1847 saw Marx and Engels become two of the founding members of the Communist League. At the League’s request, the two drafted a pamphlet criticising the capitalist system and explaining the communist understanding of human history. Published in 1848 and called the Communist Manifesto, this now universally recognised document revealed their philosophical answer to society’s problems - a new political system called communism.

Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution.

They proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE!

Final sentence of the Communist Manifesto (1848)

Communism inevitable

Marx and Engels’ underlying prediction in the Communist Manifesto was that the demise of capitalism and the subsequent rise of communism were both inevitable. They believed that capitalists would continue to exploit workers, that neither government nor workers’ organisations would significantly improve their situation, and that workers would therefore be forced to revolt.

Stages of History

Marx and Engels considered society to be continually evolving as more efficient methods of production were invented and society’s demands changed. This led to their crucial definition of history as a series of class struggles between those who controlled production (employers) and those who did not (employees). Marx and Engels wrote that: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.’

Current system:

Definition of Capitalism

An economic system in which investment and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of wealth is in the hands of private individuals and corporations.

Marx and Engels’ system:

Definition of Communism

A system of economic and social organisation in which industry, capital, land and other means of production are owned and controlled by the community as a whole.
### How was revolutionary leadership expressed?

#### Defining leadership

Revolutions become synonymous with their leaders: Robespierre symbolises the French Revolution, Mao, the Chinese, and Lenin, the Russian. In reality the control of revolutionary leaders over events and policies was far more tenuous and fragile that the word itself suggests. Years of planning were not successful in inspiring the outbreak of revolution. Instead, the model for revolutions suggests that after missing the initial outbreak of revolution through exile or imprisonment, the leaders’ main role begins in harnessing the power of the crowds after their return. A common perspective amongst historians is that revolutions are begun by spontaneous popular movements which are then directed by powerful leaders through the use of influential ideas.

Whilst it is recognised that revolutions exist due to the combined influence of several leaders, Lenin and Trotsky were the two most prominent leaders from 1917 onwards, with Lenin being the ideological master and Trotsky the brilliant tactician.

#### Revolutionary theories: Marxism vs Leninism

The theory of communism was primarily proposed for industrialised countries like Germany, France and England, rather than the semi-feudal agrarian based Russia. Whereas Marx and Engels simply believed that a classless utopia would inevitably occur, Lenin worked to accelerate the natural progress of economic and social evolution. The *Communist Manifesto* focused on detailing the flaws in the capitalist system, but did not explain how the socialist transition period would work on what the communist utopia might actually look like in practice. These understandable omissions meant that Lenin needed to fill in the gaps himself. Lenin’s suggestions of how Marx and Engels’ theoretical ideas should be interpreted and implemented is called ‘Leninism’. Lenin’s writings about revolution and his *April Thesis* are crucial examples of Leninism.

Understanding Lenin’s approach to revolution is crucial. Lenin was a prolific writer. Research one of his pre-1917 writings:
- *What is to be done?* (1902)
- *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904)
- *Two Tactics* (1905)

Use the resources listed below to help you.

- [http://marxistsfr.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm](http://marxistsfr.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm)
- [http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/index.htm)
Leadership Profile - Vladimir Lenin

Portrait of a Revolutionary

1870 - 1889
- Born into a middle class family in the province of Kazan in 1870 as Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov.
- Excelling throughout high school, with one report card reading ‘Quite talented, invariably diligent, prompt and reliable’.
- Revolutionary impulses developed after brother handed in 1887 for assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander III.
- Was on the Tsar’s list of ‘dangerous persons’ from the age 17 onwards.
- Managed the family farm in Samara from 1889 where he once successfully sued the neighbouring peasant family for letting their cattle walk over his crops.
- Was officially reported to the Ministry of Education whilst at Kazan University for ‘secretiveness, inattention and impoliteness’.
- Graduated as a lawyer.

1890 - 1899
- Avid reading of Marx had turned him into a committed Marxist revolutionary.
- During the 1891-92 famine he was not in favour of providing aid hoping it would ‘cause the peasant to reflect on the fundamental facts of capitalist society’ and ‘destroy his faith in the Tsar’.
- Did only two years paid work, 1894-94, as assistant to a barrister. Lived off his mother’s pension, a Party salary, and private supporters. Writings and newspapers brought only meagre income.
- Arrested in St Petersburg for ‘subversive activity’ in 1895.
- Exile to Siberia 1895-99 provided the opportunity to study and write.
- Adopted the pen name ‘Lenin’ (the most famous of his 160 revolutionary aliases).
- Met and married Nadezhda Krupskaya in Siberia in July 1898, but had no children with her.

1900 - 1909
- Released from exile in 1900 and began revolutionary newspaper called Iskra, meaning ‘Spark’, taken from a phrase used by the Decembrists of 1825, ‘a spark will start a big blaze’.
- Published What is to be done? in 1902.
- Led the Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Party in 1903.
- Played no role in the 1905 revolution and only returned to St Petersburg in December.
- Exiled again from 1906 through to 1917.

1910 - 1917
- Began a relationship with the young and enthusiastic Inessa Armand in Paris from 1910 who became an accepted trio with Lenin’s wife.
- Began a daily newspaper called Pravda, meaning ‘Truth’ in 1912.
- Badly shaken by his mother’s death in July 1916.
- Returned to Petrograd in April 1917 after the February Revolution and then initiated the Bolshevik takeover of October 1917.
Revolutionary fortunes: Marx and Lenin

By design or destiny, Lenin’s life mirrored Marx’s in several ways. Both studied law which developed their reasoning and logic. Both were exiled from their country of birth for the majority of their adult lives. Both became popular through controversial writings that illuminated the fundamental problems underlying European society. Both considered the capitalist system unfair because it produced rich individuals whilst others remained poor. A critical difference, however, was that whereas Marx died in exile in 1883, Lenin finally witnessed his philosophies implemented in Russia after 1917.

THE STORY SO FAR...

1. Opposition to tsarism was not new in the 1900s. The fortunes of revolutionary ideas and leaders rose and fell throughout the 1800s.
2. The key ideas that inspired many revolutionaries was Marxism, an economic theory proposing that history was a series of class struggles inevitably resulting in the downfall of capitalism and the victory of the workers (called the proletariat).
3. Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik Party from 1903, had been politically active and agitating for revolution since his brother’s death and spent nearly all of the period before 1917 in exile.