

# BASIC FACTS ABOUT RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION

## THE NAME

Until 1922, the key country in our study was called Russia



However, 50% of the country were non-Russians. They were people who had been conquered by the Russians over many centuries: Armenians, Kazakhs, Georgians, Tajiks, Turkmens, etc. Therefore, even though the Armenians were a conquered part of Russia, they spoke Armenian at home. They listened to Armenian music, ate Armenian food, appreciated Armenian art and taught their children about Armenian folk heroes. Their culture was Armenian, even though they lived in a country called Russia.

From 1922-1991: the key country in our study was called one of the following things:

- a) Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
- b) or by its acronym: USSR
- c) or shortened to: Soviet Union

During this time, the country was split into 15 republics (like the USA is split into 50 states) Armenia, for example, was still a conquered land, when many Armenians would prefer to be independent. However, they did have their own republic within the USSR, and could make some independent decisions.

In 1991: the union broke up, and each republic became an independent country. Armenia, for example, is now an independent country.



## **THE POLITICAL SYSTEM**

Until 1917: Russia was a dictatorship ruled by Tsars (Czars), which were Russian monarchs  
Freedoms of speech, press, religion and assembly were all severely limited

1917: Communists come to power (after a brief provisional government)  
Communists ruled the Soviet Union until 1991  
Freedoms of speech, press, religion, assembly and enterprise were all severely limited

1991 to the present:

The 15 countries, which were once part of the Soviet Union, all have differing political systems, with some being much more democratic than others

## **THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM**

Until 1917: Russia was characterized by “Feudalism”, but had begun to develop some capitalistic industry

1917: Russia had a Communist Revolution. Communists, now in power, took over most private property, and theoretically made attempts to develop a “classless society” It is important to note that they never achieved a pure, Communist, classless society. Some wonder whether the leadership was more interested in “lining their own pockets”, than in distributing the wealth equally.

Late 1980s: allowance of a greater degree of capitalism / free enterprise

1991 to the present: Break-up of the Soviet Union into 15 countries occurred in 1991  
Each country has reformed their Communist system in their own unique fashion

## **THE SIZE**

Between 1922 and 1991, the Soviet Union was the largest country in the world

Today, one of the 15 ex-republics of the USSR, Russia, is the largest country on Earth

The size of Russia:

- It borders 13 countries; it has more neighbors than any country on Earth
- It spans 11 of the 24 time zones on Earth
- It covers 170 degrees of longitude (out of the possible 360 degrees)
  - o Therefore, it spans half the Earth

Benefits of such a large size:

- It has a tremendous amount of resources
- It has room for an expanding population

Deficits of a large size

- It has had insecure borders; it grew to be such a huge nation by conquering its neighbors;
  - o Therefore, current neighbors are wary
- It has, perhaps, too much diversity (Ex: The USSR had over 127 different language groups)

## **THE LOCATION**

Russia is located in 2 continents

- Most of the land is in Asia, but most of the people live in Europe
  - 99.5% of Americans live south of 54 degrees latitude
- 80% of the Russian population lives north of 54 degrees latitude
  - this means it is incredibly cold for much of the year! In Siberia, it can get to - 127 F.
  - this means that in much of Russia, is dark 24 hours per day during the winter

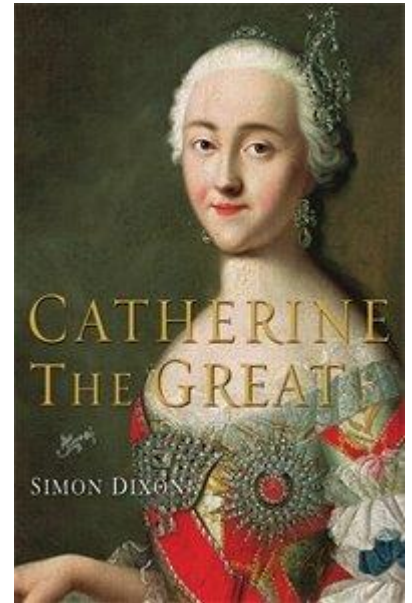
# RUSSIAN-SOVIET HISTORY

## The Tsarist Period (until 1917)

For over a thousand years, Russia was ruled by just two dynasties. The Rurikid dynasty ruled from the 800s until the 1600s. Then after a period of 15 years with no monarch, a new dynasty was founded, the Romanov dynasty. The Romanovs ruled from 1613 until the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Russian term for king was “Tsar” which is often written as “Czar.” They both mean the same thing: King. The term Tsar derives from the Roman Caesar. Here are a variety of generalizations about the Tsarist period:

- 1) Czars were monarchs, who were obviously not elected. They ruled as dictators, and most had absolute or near absolute power. As monarchs, they inherited their rule. Most were the oldest male offspring of the previous Tsar. The vast majority were male, but there were some notable female Tsars, the most famous being Catherine the Great who ruled from 1762 until 1796. She came to power after being involved with the ouster and murder of her unstable and unpopular husband, Peter III. As a result, her husband probably didn’t think that she was so “great”.
- 2) Human rights abuses: You certainly did not want to get on the bad side of a Tsar. Generally, there was very little freedom of speech, and if you tried to freely speak in opposition of the Tsar, you would find yourself in jail or worse. You didn’t have to do very much to get on the bad list of certain Czars.

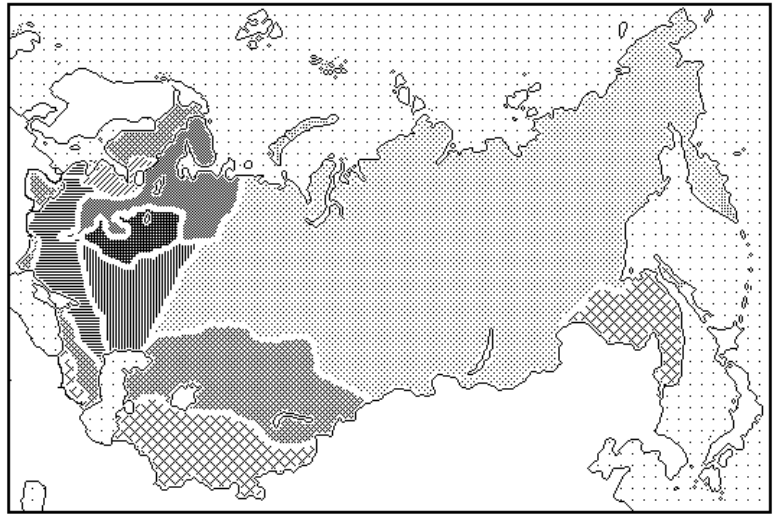


A great example was Tsar Ivan the Terrible who commissioned an architect to draw up plans for a wonderful cathedral in Moscow. The result was the beautiful St Basil’s Cathedral. Ivan was impressed so much so that he thought it was “one of a kind” and that it should stay that way. He figured a good way to prevent replication was to have the eyes of the architect removed, which he did! You can understand why he got his “terrible” nickname!

Catherine was no softy either. After a man named Emelian Pugachev launched an unsuccessful rebellion against her. Catherine ordered the captive rebel leader to have each of his 4 limbs attached to 4 different horses. The result of this was that pieces of Pugachev went in 4 different directions. No more Pugachev! The message was clearly sent that rebellion against Catherine wasn’t a good idea.

## RUSSIAN EXPANSION, 1462-1894

3) Expansionism: Most Tsars expanded Russia by taking over non-Russian territory. By the time of the Russian Revolution ending Tsarism in 1917, Russia was the largest country on Earth by far! You can see on the map that most of Russia was conquered between 1581 – 1689, whereas the far southeastern section of Russia, near Japan, was taken between 1856 and 1894. Remember, although all these areas became part of Russia, there were a great many conquered lands where the people spoke no Russian. They were not really Russians. In fact, in 1917, only half the people in Russia were Russians!



- Grand Principality of Moscow, ca. 1460.
- Expansion Under Ivan III and Vasily III, 1462-1533. (Novgorod, Pskov, and Northern Regions).
- Expansion Under Ivan IV, 1533-1584. (Smolensk, Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan).
- Siberian Expansion, 1581-1689.
- Expansion Under Peter I, 1682-1725. (Estonia, Latvia, Ingria, St. Petersburg).
- Expansion Under Peter's Successors, especially Catherine II, 1762-1796. (Rostov, Taman' Peninsula, Ukraine, Belorussia, Lithuania, the Crimea).
- Expansion Under Alexander I and Nicholas I, 1801-1856. (Kazakhstan, Northern Caucasus, Finland, Congress Poland).
- Expansion Under Alexander II and Alexander III, 1856-1894. (Amur River Basin, Southern Caucasus, Pacific Provinces, Central Asia).
- Territories of Other Powers.

### **ASSIGNMENT # 1:**

DO A LITTLE RESEARCH AND FIND OUT HOW MANY LANGUAGES THERE ARE IN RUSSIA TODAY. LIST 10 OF THEM, AND THEN WRITE 5-6 SENTENCES EXPLAINING WHY IT MIGHT BE DIFFICULT TO GOVERN A COUNTRY WITH SO MANY FIRST LANGUAGES.

4) Czars were not Communists: Don't confuse Tsars and Communists. Both were dictatorial, but whereas Communists supposedly favored making everyone economically equal (a classless society), Tsars certainly favored a class system, with the royal family at the top! For the most part, you could own your own business under the Tsars, whereas in Communism, free enterprise was very restricted.

5) Feudalism/Serfdom lasted until the 1860s. Russia, until the late 1800s, was primarily agricultural, with very little industry. Serfdom was not abolished until 1861, two years before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. (both much later than the Europeans) However, when Tsar Alexander II freed the serfs, (shown in picture to the right) they were the majority of the population, whereas slaves were a minority of the US population. This meant that it was much more difficult for Russia to move beyond slavery than it was for the USA.

6) Some Tsars were regarded as "progressive". Alexander II not only freed the serfs, he also initiated reforms which improved rural schools, hospitals and other services. Alexander II also reduced censorship somewhat, and he allowed the formation of a court system that was independent, rather than directly controlled by the monarchy.

7) Some Tsars were much more "reactionary". They wanted to maintain the traditional Tsarist system, and opposed what might be

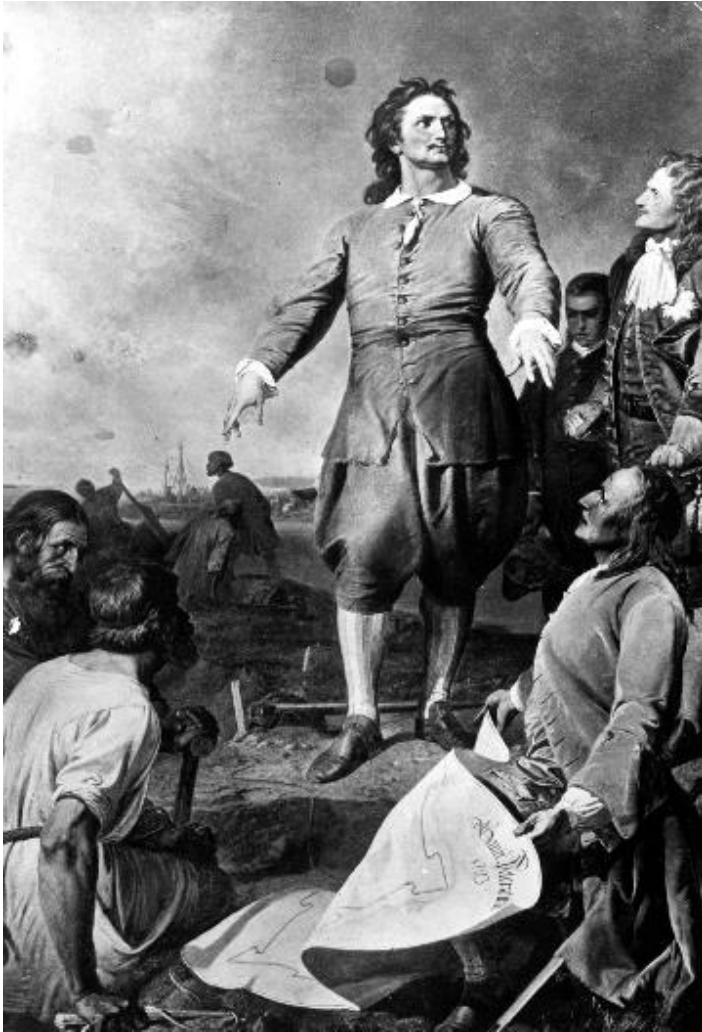




considered democratic changes. An example of this was Czar Alexander II, who was the son (predictably) of Alexander II. Well, it turns out that Alex II was assassinated in 1881. His son became Tsar, and reasoned that his father may have allowed too much freedom, that he was too “soft”, and that this might have led to his downfall. His son, therefore, decided not to give an inch of space to anyone who might oppose him. Hence, he upgraded the secret police, increased censorship, repressed religious and ethnic minorities and reversed many of his father’s other reforms. No one was going to mess with him!

8) All Tsars were the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was the official religion of Russia, despite there being a substantial part of the population who were not Russian or Orthodox. So, to use a Catholic analogy, Tsars were both King and Pope! In this role, the Tsar had a lot of influence in what was preached

in church, and what was taught in religious schools. You can bet your bottom ruble, that the Tsar was spoken of favorably in those settings. The Tsar, of course, would say nothing but niceties about the official church, and the state treasury would be lavishly spent on tremendous cathedrals, rather than projects for the poor. Peasants / serfs were taught to love the church and the Tsar, which, in a sense, were one and the same! As you can imagine, in order to rise up the ladder in Russia, you had better be a member of the Russian Orthodox Church. Being a Jew, a Muslim or a Buddhist would inhibit your upward mobility.



**ASSIGNMENT # 2:**

DO A BIT OF RESEARCH ON PETER THE GREAT (shown to the left). FOR EACH OF THE 8 CHARACTERIZATIONS ABOVE, WRITE 2-4 SENTENCES SHOWING EVIDENCE AS TO HOW AND WHETHER THESE WERE ACCURATE DESCRIPTIONS OF PETER THE GREAT

ALSO, WHAT DOES THIS PICTURE SAY ABOUT PETER THE GREAT (3 SENTENCES)

**TSARIST RULE LASTED UNTIL THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1917. WHAT WERE THE GENERAL, LONG TERM CAUSES FOR THE FALL OF TSARISM?**

1) First. There was the influence of the American and French Revolutions.

Kings, including Tsars, felt that they had a “divine right to rule”, that God had made them special; that the royal family was exceptional, and therefore should rightly rule. The notion, expressed in the French and American Revolutions, that “all men are created equal” directly contradicted the “divine rights of kings” doctrine. Many were influenced by this radical idea, and said out loud that maybe the monarch has no more right to rule than I have!

2) Tsarist human rights violations

The secret police, the torture, the execution of opponents led to understandable and inevitable resentment. Hosni Mubrak of Egypt, Moammar Gaddafy of Libya, Ben Ali of Tunisia and Abdallah Saleh of Yemen found out in 2011 that you can only get away with that for so long!

### 3) the influence of Marxism

Even though Marx's writings were very complex, and were beyond the reach of most Russians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there were those who could translate Marx's ideas into clear, bottom line principles.

Vladimir Lenin, who was a leader in the Russian Revolution, had an easily understood rallying cry : "Land, Peace and Bread"! He was telling the Russian people if they assist him in coming to power, they will get land to grow their crops. Lenin's government would take land from the rich, and give it to the poor. The result is that, after the Revolution, all will have enough to eat ("Bread") You didn't have to be a "rocket scientist" (actually, there were no rocket scientists then!) to be able to understand that Lenin and Marxists, in general, sided with the many poor against the few rich.

### 4) Poverty



By 1900, 80% of Russians were peasants

Literacy rates were about 24%

Life expectation was approximately 32 years old

43% of children died before the age of 5



### 5) Failure to promote meaningful reform:

President John F. Kennedy said in the early 1960s: "Those who make peaceful change impossible make violent revolution inevitable" Kennedy said this in response to the Cuban Revolution which brought Castro and the Communists to power. Kennedy felt that further Communist revolutions were inevitable unless there are significant reforms made to help the poor on the globe. With that, Kennedy's administration launched the Peace Corps.



Certainly, the Tsars did not promote sufficient reform, and neither did Mubarak, Gaddafi, Ben Ali and Saleh (the North African – Middle Eastern dictators who were challenged by protesters in the early 2011). One Tsar, Nicholas II, allowed for a legislature to be created. He hoped that this would lead people to be less revolutionary. However, he stacked the legislature with his own appointees. In Kennedy's , words, this was not "meaningful reform", and it only made many people more rebellious.

## **WHAT WERE THE SHORT TERM CAUSES OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION?**

- 1) the loss of the 1905 war to Japan
- 2) “Bloody Sunday” 1905
- 3) the dynamics of the family of Tsar Nicholas II, including Rasputin
- 4) World War I

Note: Numbers 1-3 are sufficiently explained in the Russia section of the other Module.  
However, World War I could use some explanation

## **WORLD WAR I: “THE STRAW THAT BROKE THE CAMEL’S BACK” (1914-1918)**

### **Pre World War I alliances:**

**Central Powers:** Austria – Hungary, Ottoman (Turkish) Empire, Germany

**Allied Powers:** France, Great Britain, Russia, Serbia

The US stayed out of the war until 1917, and then entered on the side of the Allies. This made a big difference. The Allies won!

Eventually: THE US ENTERS WAR ON SIDE OF ALLIES CALLING IT A WAR TO  
SAVE DEMOCRACY (BECAUSE THE OTHER SIDE WERE ALL  
DICTATORSHIPS)

### **Causes: of World War I:**

- a) Fighting over space in Europe
- b) competition for colonies abroad
- c) militarism
- d) nationalism: many ethnic groups wanted to have their own country, and therefore wanted independence (Ex: Poles were a people without a country. Most lived in Russia and Germany. Therefore, many Poles were seeking a redrawing of borders so as to create an independent Poland. Czechs wanted to be independent from Austria-Hungary, and the Finns wanted independence from Russia)
- e) The alliances sworn to defend each other  
They pledged to each other that if a member of their alliance were to be attacked by a country not in their alliance, that they would all come to the aid of their ally.

### **The spark: that set off World War I**

By 1914, relations between the Serbs of Eastern Europe and the Austro-Hungarians had reached a breaking point. The Serbs, who were supported by Russia, were interested in creating a “Greater Serbia”, uniting the country of Serbia with many Serb regions that were enveloped by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Obviously, the Austro-Hungarians saw the independent country as a threat, and felt it must be destroyed.

So, in June of 1914, as the heir to the Austrian throne, Francis Ferdinand, visited the area, a young Serbian man was able to assassinate the Archduke and his wife. Austria-Hungary then made many demands of Serbia, which were not met, and the verbal barrage escalated. The Russians mobilized troops in support of Serbia. Germany, allied with Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and Russia, and before you knew it, the opposing alliances declared war on each other.

### **The effect of World War I on Russia**

If you were a Russian peasant at the time, you had no idea where Serbia was. When told that Serbs were Slavic people like Russians were, that probably didn’t cause you to want to go off to war. The fact that Serbs and Russians were both Russian Orthodox peoples didn’t convince you to go 600 miles away to defend the Serbs. What convinced you to go fight in World War I was the Tsarist government. You had no choice! In the end, 15 million men were drafted into the Russian army, and 8 million of those were either killed, wounded or captured – all for a cause that was nebulous to the typical Russian. Who was to blame?..... the Tsar!!

Towards the end of the war, there were wide scale defections from the Russian army. At home, there was a shortage of basic goods, which crippled everything from railroad transportation to food distribution. There was indeed food shortages and “bread riots”. Lenin’s slogan “Land, Peace and Bread” suggested that Russia should pull out of this meaningless war, which would lead to more resources being used to produce food. Increasingly, there were more and more strikes and demonstrations against the Tsar.



<<<<Lenin

### The Tsar gives up his throne

In March of 1917, the Tsar abdicated, meaning he stepped down and gave up his rule. For approximately 6 months, Russia had a temporary government which made some reforms, but stayed in the war which was an unpopular move. The lead figure in the temporary government was Alexander Kerensky (below), who might be described as a Democratic Socialist, who favored reform, but not revolutionary change. He planned to hold elections at the end of 1917.

### The US enters the war

The US had sat out of the war from 1914 until 1917. President Wilson eventually decides that it was in the US interest to get into the war. The question was: what would be the rallying cry? For what principles would the US be fighting? Will the American people support sending their sons overseas to risk their lives?

Wilson proposed two major principles, each with its own slogan. Firstly, Wilson called it a “war to end all wars.” Wilson wanted to create an international peacemaking body, which would be involved in negotiating future conflict so as to resolve it peacefully. Thereby, it would end war. This body would be called The League of Nations. Wilson reasoned that the US should enter the war, prevail so as to be on the winning side, and then incorporate the League of Nations as part of the peace treaty. If the US weren’t in the war, it would have no leverage to get the League off the ground. In the end, the US entered, won, and the League was born.

The second slogan was that this would be a “war to save democracy.” Wilson’s argument was that the Central Powers were all dictatorships, whereas France, Britain and Russia, under Kerensky, were all democracies.



**ASSIGNMENT # 3: READ UP ABOUT ALEXANDER KERENSKY. WRITE 8-10 SENTENCES DESCRIBING HIS APPROACH TO GOVERNING, AND DISCUSS WHY HE CHOSE TO STAY IN THE WAR, AND WHAT WAS THE EFFECT OF THAT DECISION.**

### The Versailles Treaty

The treaty conference after the war was held in Versailles, outside of Paris. The only countries allowed to attend were those which fought on the winning side. (Ex: Britain, France and the USA) The losers were not invited. Neither was Russia, because they pulled out of the war in November of 1917. Lenin had come to power, and he followed up on his promise (“Land, Peace and Bread”) by “making peace” and pulling out of the war.



This was a very popular move with most Russians.

The winners punished the losers at Versailles in the following ways:

- a) The Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman Turkish and the German empires were all broken up:  
New countries created as a result: Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.  
Poland was created out of partly German and partly Russian territory.
  
- b) The Ottoman Empire lost a significant amount of land they controlled in the Middle East.  
The winners would get control of these former Ottoman lands, which they were supposed to prepare for independence. These would be called “mandates.” For example, the French were given the “mandates” to what is now called Syria and Lebanon. The British, likewise, were given mandates to areas such as Palestine and Iraq.
  
- c) Russia also loses the following territories: Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.
  
- c) Germany was the most severely punished  
They had to pay war “reparations” to France for damages done during the war.  
They were forced to accept guilt for starting the war.  
They were forced to de-militarize  
They were forced to end their dictatorship, with a Kaiser serving as their leader. Instead, they were forced to have democratic government.

**ASSIGNMENT # 4:** RESEARCH THE VERSAILLES TREATY A BIT AND THEN WRITE A 6-8 SENTENCE PARAGRAPH ASSESSING WHETHER YOU THINK GERMANY WAS TREATED FAIRLY AT THE PEACE TREATY.

### **BACK TO RUSSIA: Lenin's rule (1917-1924)**

In March 1917, the Tsar stepped down. A provisional (temporary) government was set up, and as was said earlier, Alexander Kerensky was perhaps the most powerful person in the government. However, as we know, The Communists (Bolsheviks) led by Vladimir Lenin overthrew the Provisional government in November of 1917. Essentially, there were 2 revolutions in 1917!

#### **Landmarks of Lenin's rule:**

##### **1) His government executed the Tsar and his family**

Seemingly, this was for the purpose of eliminating the possibility of a continuance of the dynasty, so that monarchists could not rally people to that cause. Apparently, this was why the Tsar's five children were shot as well.

##### **2) Treaty with Germany (during WW1)**

Lenin's government made a deal with Germany and pulled out of the war. The agreement meant that Germany would stop warring against the badly demoralized and exhausted Russians, and in return, the Russians gave Germany a variety of territories: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland and part of Poland. However, Germany never officially added those territories during the war; and at Versailles they were made independent. Russia was not allowed to reacquire these areas by the British, French and Americans at the peace treaty, because the Russians had dropped out of the war. They weren't even invited to Versailles to present their claim. This upset many Russians, and eventually Stalin will try to reacquire these newly independent countries during World War 2.

##### **3) Land reform / some “nationalization” of industry**

There was not a lot of industry at the time, but what did exist was taken over by the new government. Lenin took land away from large landowners and from the Russian Orthodox Church, and distributed it to the peasants, many of whom had already taken the land during the Revolution. Peasants were forced to turn over a certain amount of their harvest to feed the people in the cities.

4) Civil War: (1918-1920) between the

- a) “Reds”: Lenin’s supporters (Red is the color of Communism) (the eventual winners)
- b) “Whites”: Tsarists, opponents of Communist policies, those who favored democratic elections, and others. The US even sent in troops briefly to try to oust Lenin’s new government. Communists would thenceforth refer to this as the US attempting to “strangle the baby in its cradle.”

**ASSIGNMENT # 5:** RESEARCH US INTERVENTION INTO RUSSIA AT THIS TIME. WRITE A PARAGRAPH REVIEWING THE EXTENT OF US INVOLVEMENT, WHY THE US PULLED OUT AND WHAT THE SOVIETS MEANT BY THE STRANGLING THE BABY REFERENCE. ALSO, BRIEFLY STATE WHETHER YOU THINK THE US SHOULD HAVE STAYED AND REALLY TRIED TO OUST LENIN’S GOVERNMENT.

5) 1922: renamed country

Lenin changed the name of the country to “the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”

**ASSIGNMENT # 6:** RESEARCH WHY LENIN MADE THIS CHANGE, AND EXPLAIN THE VARIOUS TERMS (in the name USSR) (ONE PARAGRAPH)

6) 1921: Famine

More Russians died from this famine than died in World War 1 and the Russian Civil War combined. Estimates range from 5 – 7 million people died. Peasants often had to resort to eating weeds, food surrogates and even cannibalism trying to save seeds for planting in the fall. Critics of Lenin place the blame on Communist policies. Lenin’s policy was to take the surplus grown by peasants and feed it to his Red Army soldiers, and the people in the cities. The result is that the peasants only grew enough for themselves. However, the Communists still expropriated much of what the peasants produced, leaving both the countryside and the cities malnourished.

American grain shipments, supervised by Herbert Hoover, limited the famine’s devastation.

7) 1921-1928: New Economic Policy

Because strict Communist policies led many peasants to produce less because their surplus was taken by the government to feed the urban populace, and the Red Army during the Civil War, the Communist Party decided to modify Marx’s principles in the following ways:

- a) Peasants were allowed to sell their surplus and make more money. This led to certain peasants getting more wealthy, and then buying out the farms of other peasants, whereby they sometimes got even more wealthy. This was not the classless society that Marx envisioned, however Lenin went with it because it led to greater food production and an end to the famine.
- b) People were allowed to start their own small businesses. Major enterprises such as banks, railroads, mines and large factories remained under government control, but small businesses were returned to private ownership. Industrial production recovered more slowly than agricultural production, but nonetheless the progress was considerable. Lenin’s allowance of a certain degree of small private enterprise leads some to conclude that, at this point, he was more of a Socialist than a Communist.

8) 1924: on death bed, he warns against Stalin coming to power

Lenin urged the Communist party to opt for someone else other than Stalin to be the next leader. Lenin said that Stalin was “to rude”, a significant understatement! Lenin wrote: “I propose to my comrades ... that they appoint someone who is more patient, more loyal, more polite and more attentive to his comrades.”

After Lenin’s death, the Soviet government said they received thousands of telegrams asking for Lenin’s body to be preserved somehow for future generations. So, that’s what the Soviets did. Since 1924, Lenin’s body

has been on display in a special tomb located in Red Square in Moscow. (See below) In 1941, when the Nazis attacked, they took the body away to Siberia for safekeeping, and then they brought it back after the war!

At one point, in the early 1990s, some members of the government were discussing the possibility of making money by taking Lenin's body on tour. Sanity prevailed and they decided against it. In January 2011, the United Russia party created a website with voting on a question whether Lenin's body should be buried.



From 1953 until 1961, Stalin's body was in the tomb with Lenin's, but in 1961 the Communist party decided that Stalin killed too many people, so they took his body out of the tomb and buried it in the ground.

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Your author, Jim Buxton, was able to witness the spectacle when he visited the USSR in 1988. One of the students on the trip was taken out of line and led to a side room where they gave her a sweater to cover up her low cut blouse. Evidently, seeing a dead Communist leader on display necessitates proper dress!

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