The Russian Revolution
Czar Nicholas II, a member of the Romanov dynasty and autocratic ruler of Russia
Czar Nicholas II and his family
Gregori Rasputin (+1916), the “Mad Monk”

-Rasputin exercised considerable influence over the czarina Alexandra
-Many believed that Rasputin could cure the czarevitch Alexei of his hemophilia
-Many others resented Rasputin’s inordinate influence at court
-Many plots were hatched to kill Rasputin; eventually, in 1916, one of these plots succeeded
Russian troops in World War I

- They were poorly equipped, poorly trained and poorly led
- Casualties consequently were high
- By 1917 there were many desertions also and morale was at rock bottom
- Many soldiers, as well as most of the public, wanted the war to end
- The Czar, however, felt that Russia had to honor its treaty obligations and defend its territory
Women march on government buildings during St. Petersburg Bread Riots

- Like other workers, women worked long hours.
- They then had to stand in line to get bread.
- By now bread was rationed; these women sometimes had to wait several hours to get food after work.
- Angry and frustrated, they decided on 8 March 1917 to march on the Winter Palace (the czar’s residence in St. Petersburg) to get food.
- Within days there was a general strike in St. Petersburg and other major cities.
- Troops sent to put down the strike joined the strikers instead.
- The Czar was forced to resign.
Alexander Kerensky, Socialist leader of the Provisional Government from July 1917 onwards

-Kerensky (1881-1970) was a lawyer
-His government decided to continue the war
-Its authority was not complete; the soviets, councils of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies, attracted the allegiance of many workers and in the cities and peasants in the countryside
-The soviets came increasingly under the control of Lenin and the Bolsheviks (Communists); the Communist slogan was “Peace, Land, Bread”
Storming of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg

The czar’s former palace had become the seat of the provisional government.

During the night of 6-7 November, Bolshevik forces stormed the palace and seized control of the government.

Kerensky and other government ministers fled.

Within weeks, the Soviets, eager for Russia to withdraw from the war, began negotiations with the German government; these ended in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918).
Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924)

-Lenin had been born Vladimir Ulianov near Kazan (on the Volga River)
-Upper middle-class family background (his father was a school superintendent, his mother was a doctor’s daughter
-Very good student; got gold medal in high school (where, ironically, Alexander Kerensky’s father was the principal!)
-Older brother Alexander Ulianov had been executed as a revolutionary in 1887
-Lenin studied law on own in St. Petersburg; he passed the qualifying exam but didn’t practice law much
-Eventually arrested for revolutionary activity and exiled to Siberia for three years; he married his wife, Nadezhda (“Nadya”) Krupskaya, during this period
-from 1900 to 1917 he spent most of his time in western Europe, esp. Switzerland (see Tom Stoppard’s play *Travesties* for an amusing take on this subject!)
-His views on the need for a small group of professional revolutionaries rather than a large group of activists of various occupations cause a split between Bolsheviks (led by Lenin) and less radical Mensheviks (led by Julius Martov) in 1903
-Return from Swiss exile (April 1917) with German help (in a sealed train)
-By Fall 1917 the Bolsheviks had gained control of the Petrograd Soviet’s key Military Revolutionary Committee and used it as a means for their takeover of the country in November
-Shot by Dora Kaplan in August 1918, Lenin survived; the Red Terror, in which several hundred Socialists were rounded up and executed without a trial, started shortly thereafter; there were thousands of other victims
Leon Trotsky (1879-1940)

- Leon Trotsky was a noted Marxist intellectual and writer
- He was also an excellent orator
- Originally a Menshevik, he had played a key role in organizing the Bolshevik seizure of power
- By 1918 he had become Commissar, or head, of the Red (i.e., Communist) Army, where his tactical and organizational skills were put to good use
-Stalin ("Koba") was **Georgian**, not Russian
-Had studied in a Georgian Orthodox seminary as a teenager
-Like Stalin and Trotsky, he had spent time in exile in Siberia
-He was not, like Trotsky, an intellectual or a great speaker but he was nonetheless very determined and ruthless
-He used his position as **Party Secretary**, where he could promote supporters and remove opponents, to outmaneuver rivals
-Stalin was also **Commissar of Nationalities**, where he had control over non-Russian areas in what later became the U.S.S.R. (founded 1923)
-He believed that the Communists needed to focus their efforts on developing communism in Russia ("Socialism in one country") whereas Trotsky favored exporting the revolution to other countries (in a form of "**Permanent (or Worldwide) Revolution**")
As a Marxist, Lenin sought to impose a dictatorship of the proletariat but encountered considerable opposition; eventually this opposition hardened and led to a civil war.
This War was fought between the Reds (Communists) and the Whites (non-Communists).

The Whites included not only monarchists and liberals but also some Socialist opponents of Lenin.

To counter this threat, Lenin instituted what came to be known as War Communism:

1. Banks were nationalized
2. Land was confiscated and turned over to peasant collectives
3. Grain was requisitioned
4. Draft was established

The Secret Police, called first the Cheka, later the NVKD, will be organized by Felix Dzierzynski.
War Communism

Lenin employed drastic measures to further his cause.
Propaganda was used by both sides in the civil war (see these war posters, e.g.)
This propaganda poster, entitled “This is what Bolshevism brings,” criticizes Bolshevik (Communist) rule and supports instead the Whites in the Civil War.
The civil war was very bloody and involved foreign troops too

-Czech troops (ex-prisoners of war) attacked the Bolsheviks from the East
-Polish forces attacked from the West
-French forces attacked from the South, American forces from Murmansk and Archangel, two ports in the North
-In the end, the Bolsheviks won the Civil War, for several reasons:

1) The Whites, unable to agree among themselves, often couldn’t coordinate their offensives with each other
2) Trotsky was very effective at organizing his forces
3) Its propaganda was effective in portraying its forces as defending Russia from foreign invaders
The Kronstadt rebellion

-The Reds may have won the Civil War but they still had many problems to contend with; the Civil War caused somewhere between 300,000-500,000 to die from the fighting alone and many millions more had died as a result of disease (from typhus, e.g.) and starvation.

-As a sign of that discontent, in 1921 there was a naval mutiny at Kronstadt, a fortress near Petrograd; many of the sailors there had strongly supported Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917.

-This rebellion was brutally repressed by Trotsky and the Red Army, with 20,000 casualties.

-After this incident, Lenin and others decided that they needed to be more flexible regarding the economy.
New Economic Policy (NEP): 1921-1924

- Under this policy, peasants were permitted to sell their surplus produce for profit
- Other kinds of traditional markets were also permitted and money was allowed to be used again
- In a short time there developed a class of Kulaks, or rich peasants, esp. in the Ukraine
- This made other Russians angry
- They were afraid that Russia was backsliding, going back to the way things were before the Revolution

(The poster at the right suggests that the people will collectively cause the kulak to howl by sowing seed together)
By 1924 the government had begun criticizing Kulaks and other profiteers (see e.g. this poster targeting Tsar, Priest and Kulak)
The “Bread Spider” (or “Kulak Bloodsucker”), draws attention to alleged hoarding by the Kulaks and Capitalists.
Other propaganda was more graphic (see this poster of a Russian soldier killing kulaks, priests, capitalists, and emperors, for instance)
In 1924 Lenin, who for two years had hung on to power despite two strokes, suffered a third and fatal stroke; the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky now intensified. Who would triumph?
Joseph Stalin as a middle-aged revolutionary

-In the end Stalin was more cunning than Trotsky; he forced Trotsky into exile, then, many years later (1940), had him assassinated in Mexico.

-Other potential rivals such as Bukharin, Zinoviev or Kamenev, all members of the Old Guard, lost their power to Stalin’s appointees.

-A **Cult of personality** around Stalin is soon developed.

-Stalin also puts into place the **First Five-Year Plan (1928-1933)**; it emphasizes industrialization (heavy industry) and the forced collectivization of agriculture.

-The U.S.S.R. now has a **command economy**, where quotas are set by the central government, not the market.

-Production of consumer goods is secondary; Stalin wants more tractors, not more toasters!
The Soviet people are encouraged to work hard out of patriotism and for the collectivity!
Collective farms

- Under Stalin the NEP is definitively reversed; peasants are forced to give up ownership of whatever farmland they have and they must now join kolkhozes, or peasant communes.

- This process of collectivization doesn’t work well economically; harvests decline markedly and many people starve, especially in the Ukraine.

- Those that resist Stalin’s directives are either killed or sent to gulags, prison camps located mostly in Siberia.
Women played important roles during the early phase of the Revolution; aside from Lenin’s widow Krupskaya, for instance, who was a Deputy Minister of Education from 1929 onwards, mention might be made of Alexandra Kollontai (in the photo below, she is sitting to the right in the first row).

- Kollontai was first a Menshevik, then a Bolshevik.
- She benefitted from her contacts with the Soviet leadership and became a high-ranking diplomat.
- She later became the first female ambassador in the world (to Norway, in 1922).
Despite persecution, many interesting Soviet artists, composers and writers (like Mikhail Bulgakov, pictured below) flourished for a while during the 1920s and 1930s.
Early Soviet-Era Poets: Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam

-Both of these lyric poets (in the photo, they are the two figures standing to the far right) were persecuted by Stalin

-In 1938 Mandelstam was taken away from his friends and family by the secret police and later died in a prison camp

-Akhmatova (+1966) continued to write poetry despite harassment by Stalin’s goons; she was often prohibited by the censors from publishing important works (such as Requiem (1935-1940), a stinging critique of Stalin’s rule)
Soviet realism, in contrast, often represented the government and party’s position.
This kind of art is usually political or didactic in nature (see e.g. “Cultivate Vegetables” ca 1930)
In art Stalin’s cult of personality was also encouraged
Sergei Kirov’s Murder

-Kirov (in the center in the picture to the right) was a popular figure in the Communist Party.
-In the early 1930s he was named Communist party leader in Leningrad (the former St. Petersburg).
-He could be ruthless at times yet by 1934 he became known for calling for greater tolerance toward party dissidents.
-His rising star seemed to threaten Stalin’s hold over the public.
-In December 1934 he was murdered.
-Stalin used the opportunity as a pretext to crack down on his opponents.
-The Great Purge, then the Show trials began shortly thereafter.
-Many historians now believe that Stalin was probably behind the murder.
The Great Purge and Show Trials of the 1930s

- In Stalin’s Great Purge many hundreds of thousands of people died
- Prominent among the victims were Old Bolsheviks like Bukharin, Zinoviev and Kamenev
- Many generals, admirals, and high-ranking officers were also killed; at the start of the Second World War, this lack of ability and experience in the Soviet military leadership would put the Soviets at a great disadvantage against the German army
- Most victims were subjected to torture, put on trial, made to confess, and then were executed
Stalin, the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), and destalinization

- Stalin led Russia during WWII
- After Operation Barbarossa began, Russia was allied with the U.S. and Great Britain
- Stalin continued to rule Russia until his death in 1953
- In 1956 Stalin’s successor as party chairman, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced Stalin and his crimes in a speech before other Communist leaders at the 20th Party Congress in Moscow; a period of destalinization then took place