**Slide Notes:**

Russian Revolution

Undoubtedly one of the most important events of the twentieth century

Much of the rest of the class will revolve around the capitalist/communist axis that started in 1917. For better or worse, the Russian Revolution left an indelible stamp on the twentieth century, so much so that prominent British historian Eric Hobsbawm bookended his period of the short twentieth century with the rise and fall of the Soviet Union.

Part one

We will look at three things today. The peculiarities of Russian economic development, to understand why socialist ideas, a minority elsewhere, fused with a revolutionary mass movement in tsarist. We will then look at Bolshevik thought in relation to the longer Marxist tradition. And, finally, we go over a very rough sketch of the events of the revolution itself.

Russian backwardness

To understand the revolution, we have to begin with the fact that Russia remained economically and politically behind its major imperial rivals throughout the nineteenth century

The economy was based on serfdom, which is to say unfree peasant labor, until 1861. By contrast, serfdom was formally abolished in England in 1574 and had disappeared from Western Europe by the end of the seventeenth century.

The political form reflected the persistence of serfdom. Tsarism was a form of absolute monarchy similar to that which prevailed in Western Europe prior to the spread of industrialism

Russian Capitalist development

Reform sentiment in Russia was spurred by their loss to France, Britain and the Ottoman Empire in the Crimean War. The war illustrated how far behind they were technologically, and how intimately tied together productivity and power had become in the modern era.

Russian state capitalism

Big economic push for Russia came in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, with its major industrial explosion in the single decade of the 1890s.

The trans-siberian railway linked Siberian rural populations into global markets and established Russia as a player in the bid for spheres of influence in China, which fueled the conflict with Japan that would lead to the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905

Last two statistics just illustrate the rapid pace and tremendous social dislocation that accompanied Russia’s first wave of industrialization. The majority of the population remained rural, but industrial development fueled urban migration among a generation at best one generation removed from serfdom. When they arrived at the cities, they went to work in modern factories built with foreign capital. Much of the struggles over wage labor that had spanned decades, or even more than a century in the case of England, exploded onto the Russian scene

1905

Strike wave began at the turn of the twentieth century and built to a crescendo as the Tsarist government squeezed the workers to produce more for the Russo-Japanese war.

Workers marched on the winter palace. They were fired upon by tsarist soldiers

Led to the formation of the first Soviet (workers’ council) in St. Petersburg. The Soviets were workers organizations, in a society that had not allowed for unionization, workers economic and political demands were inseparable.

Marxism and the Enlightenment

Probably their best-known work, the *Communist Manifesto* was written in 1848. Here they laid out their theory of historical materialism, in which they sought to apply Enlightenment ideas of reason and science to the study of the evolution of forms of society. They sketched a stage theory, undergirded by changes in the forces of production and social relations of production.

Their ideas did not end there but continued to evolve.

They wrote the Communist manifesto in the context of the nationalist revolution in Europe of 1848. In the aftermath, they surmised that the bourgeoisie had played a reactionary role in those revolutions because it was more afraid of too much democracy than the curtailments of democracy under monarchies

Marxism and Narodniki

Toward the end of his life, Marx was paying close attention to developments in Russia, and entertained the idea that Russian peasant communes could serve as the basis for initiating a socialist revolution in backward country, contrary to schematic sketch of historical stages.

Second International

Following Marx’s death socialist groups throughout the world unified in the Second International. The organization sought to coordinate the efforts of socialists and work out a unified program for world struggle.

Historically remembered as the origin of “orthodox” Marxism, where the first wave of self-identified Marxists enshrined the ideas of Marx and Engels into a set of dogmas. The reality is more complicated. The most current historiography shows the Second International was characterized by tremendous debates, including over the applicability of the stages laid out in the Communist Manifesto to semi-colonial and later developing capitalist countries.

RSDLP

Russian Social Democratic Labor Party was the Russian section of the Second International. Founded by Georgi Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism.

Agreed that the peculiarity of Russia is that it had industrialized without throwing off the political yoke of the rule of the feudal aristocracy, in the form of the absolutist Tsar. All also agreed the capitalist/state fusion under the tsar meant their was no bourgeoisie interested in pushing through democratic reforms. It would therefore be up to the working class to make the “bourgeois-democratic revolution”

Plekhanov led the Mensheviks in the split. Believed essentially that workers would provide the push and that progressive layers of the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia would implement the reforms that would modernize Russia under democratic capitalism. Social democracy would then prosecute an electoral strategy under a legitimate republic.

Lenin

Believed workers would have to make the revolution *against* a reactionary bourgeoisie. That in order to do so it would need the assistance of the peasantry, and must therefore put land reform at the center of their program. Also believed Russian bourgeois democratic revolution would unify with socialist struggles internationally.

Trotsky

Saw earlier and more clearly than anyone the course the revolution would actually take. The workers’ would lead the revolution, and in doing so would immediately foreground their own demands would exceed those of democratic reform and pass directly to workers’ control.

Believed this could only succeed if Russian workers’ government could unify with other workers’ governments.

Act one

The war was sucking working age men, mostly peasants to the front. Agricultural production was down, and what there was went to the war effort. International women’s day, a group of women and workers took to the streets to demand bread.

Soldiers

The Russian military was led by aristocrats who routinely abused soldiers and executed them for breaking ranks. Soldiers, and the peasant families from which they came, wanted an end to the war or at the very least and end to systematic abuse by the military upper brass. When they heard of the revolution against the tsar, they believed the war would come to an end and they celebrated, often with enemy soldiers as in the picture here.

Storming the palace

The King was abroad when the revolution broke out. The spontaneous mass movement went Tauride palace, which housed the largely powerless Duma to demand reforms. They protested for several days. Unlike bloody Sunday, the Tsar’s police refused to fire on the crowd, choosing instead in many cases to join their ranks. The result was an insurrection that the state was clearly powerless to put down.

When the tsar returned on March 14th the Duma, basically a council to the tsar rather than a legislative body, recommend that he abdicate immediately, which he did.

The provisional government

After the Tsar’s brother rejected the effort to retain the monarchy under his control, power nominally passed into the hands of a provisional government selected by the Duma and headed by Alexander Kerensky. The liberals who selected the provisional government wanted to push through land reform and workers’ rights (such as the right to union) in order to dissipate the revolutionary momentum until they could hold a constitutional assembly under conditions favorable to liberalism. But, unfortunately, Kerensky and the liberal Duma were committed to continuing to prosecute the war.

Petrograd Soviet

Though power was nominally in the hands of the provisional government, in reality the ease with which tsarism had toppled had demonstrate the extent of the power vacuum. If power is the monopoly over legitimate force, the government, including that of the provisional government, was clearly powerless.

Through the February Revolution, workers in Petrograd and Moscow had resurrected the Soviets, the workers’ councils they had formed in the 1905 revolution. As the revolution deepened, peasants and soldiers began forming their own Soviets. Soviets were elected representative bodies like a parliament or a congress, with the exception that they represented the exclusive interests of specific social groups. Workers in Petrograd, the capital, were tremendously loyal to their Soviet, and throughout the revolutionary year of 1917 the Petrograd was a highly democratic body in which common workers regularly participated in regular meetings and rallies through which the leadership was selected, and the program shaped.

The workers, by virtue of their control over the point of production, had a defacto control of the city, and thus though they had not accepted it sovereignty was essentially in their hands.

Lenin’s April Theses

Lenin had been in exile since the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, but from abroad had built the Bolsheviks into a powerful and disciplined party with tens of thousands of members. Before his return the Bolsheviks still adhered to his old theory, in which the Russian Revolution could not be anything but a “bourgeois-democratic” revolution. The Bolshevik leadership in his absence therefore campaigned with the Soviets on a platform of support for the provisional government.

But Lenin’s thinking had changed to be more in line with Trotsky’s analysis. From the moment he set foot in Petrograd, he reoriented the Bolsheviks behind a program withholding support from the provisional government and leveraging Soviet strength to achieve a more radical program, behind the slogan “bread, land, peace.”

July Days

Bolshevik membership increased, as did their share of representatives within the Soviets. Revolutionary fervor within the Soviets also increased, and every party except the Bolsheviks and the left SRs moved to the right the more the Soviets radicalized.

In mid-July the Kerensky government organized a military offensive to try to push the war to a conclusion, freeing up breathing room for the Provisional Government by taking the most contentious issue off the table. This was a mistake. Workers in Petrograd organized a mass protest, which the Provisional government met with force out of fear that they would be toppled.

Though the Bolsheviks had opposed the July protests, the Provisional Government sent out warrants for their arrests. Trotsky was imprisoned, Lenin went into exile.

Counter-revolution

July Days opened up room for the counter-revolution, which came in the form of military general Kornilov. Knowing it had at best tenuous support of the Soviets, the Provisional Government called on Kornilov to maintain peace. The conservative Kornilov used the opportunity to try to disband the Soviets, which almost certainly would have paved the way for a tsarist restoration backed by the military.

Turning back the attack

The Soviets, spurred by the Bolshevik rank-and-file, repelled Kornilov’s attack, proving once again that they alone held the monopoly of effective power. After the Kornilov threat had been neutralized, the Provisional Government had lost legitimacy, and that set the country on an unbroken path to the Bolshevik seizure of power.

Bolsheviks seize power

Bolshevik leaders were released from prison and Lenin readied his return to Russia. Based on their role in putting down the counter-revolution, the Bolsheviks now won a majority of the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets under the slogan “all power to the Soviets.”

Which they put into effect.