Lenin and the Russian Civil War

In the months and years after the fall of Tsar Nicholas II’s government, Russia went through incredible, often violent changes. The society was transformed from a peasant society run by an absolute monarchy into a worker’s state run by an all-powerful group that came to be known as the Communist Party. A key to this transformation is Vladimir Lenin.

Who Was Lenin?

- Born into a wealthy middle-class family background.
- Witnessed (when he was 17) the hanging of his brother Aleksandr for revolutionary activity.
- Kicked out his university for participating in anti-Tsarist protests.
- Took and passed his law exams and served in various law firms in St. Petersburg and elsewhere.
- Arrested and sent to Siberia for 3 years for transporting and distributing revolutionary literature.
- When WWI started, argued that it should become a revolution of the workers throughout Europe.
- Released and lived mostly in exile (Switzerland) until 1917.
- Adopted the name “Lenin” (he was born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) in exile to hide his activities from the Tsar’s secret police.

Lenin and the French Revolution

Lenin admired the revolutionaries in France 100 years before his time, though he believed they didn’t go far enough – too much wealth was left in middle class hands. His Bolsheviks used the chaotic and incomplete nature of the French Revolution as a guide - they believed that in order for a communist revolution to succeed, it would need firm leadership from a small group of party leaders – a very different vision from Karl Marx. So, in some ways, Lenin was like Robin Hood – taking from the rich and giving to the poor. However, unlike Robin Hood, he and the Bolsheviks maintained strict control over what was produced and distributed.

Germany helped in the collapse of the provisional govt. by helping Lenin to return to Russia and (probably) financially supporting him as well. Lenin and the Bolsheviks "agitated" against the democratic Provisional govt. with promises of "Peace, land and bread."

Lenin and the Bolsheviks Make Enemies

Once the Provisional government fell in October 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks who took charge made several mistakes...

- They gave away the territory involved in the treaty of Brest-Litovsk which upset land owners, nobles, investors and ordinary Russians who found the treaty embarrassing and just too much to give up.
- They killed the Tsar and his family (to prevent them from being returned to power) which upset royalists and many peasants who still had great respect for the Tsar.
- They redistributed property (factories to factory workers, farms to peasants) which upset the original owners.
All these groups began to fight against the Bolsheviks... the result: the Russian Civil War. Britain, France and the United States even got involved. These countries were worried about a Bolshevik Russia not paying back the war loans owed them by the tsarist government, and they worried about the spread of communism. Despite troops and supplies, the White Armies (anti-Bolsheviks) never had the coordination to defeat the Red Army - they often didn't even talk to each other. The Russian Civil War lasted from 1918 -1921 and killed upwards of 14 million Russians... more than were killed in WWI...

- War
- Farmers refusing to grow food that was just going to be taken away by the Bolsheviks
- Drought
- Food shortages
- Famine
- Epidemic levels of disease

By 1922, there were at least 7 million street children throughout Russia, orphaned by war, famine, and disease.

**What Was the “Red Terror?”**

Lenin’s govt. used secret police and terror during (and after) the Civil War to maintain control - by any means necessary. Execution lists were drafted and published, and tens of thousands were tortured and killed. They also attacked the Russian Orthodox Church - taking church lands and executing priests.

Bolsheviks experimented with communist principles... forcing land owners (even those peasants who had been given land) to turn over all grain and excess livestock to the government in exchange for government rations - enforced by the communist Red Guard. Those farmers who resisted were sent to work camps, poisoned or shot.

Lenin and his leadership team realized they needed trained officers to lead their armies, and so took former Tsarist officers’ families as hostages... forcing the officers to lead Red Army forces.

Once the Bolsheviks consolidated power, they went through a series of “purges” to get rid of people with a royalist past, army officers deemed less than loyal and others who had formerly opposed the Bolsheviks. At this point the Bolsheviks called themselves the Communist Party and changed the name of Russia to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union for short).

**Lenin, Karl Marx, and the NEP**

Lenin’s idea of communism was very different from Karl Marx who thought the revolution would follow a natural course and not lead strong leadership. Lenin did not trust workers or peasants to run a revolution any more than they could lead armies. Iron-fisted control of the revolution would need to be maintained by the Communist Party

The needs of a shattered Russian economy did force Lenin to make some ironic choices, however. After the Civil War, Lenin could already see the economy needed to be jump-started... that his communist experiments during the Civil War had not worked (peasant rebellions)... so he instituted the NEP - the New Economic Plan. It used small-scale capitalism, including private ownership, to get the economy back on track. So, for a time, Communists used capitalism to succeed.
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Use the slideshow and the “Russia Under Vladimir Lenin” Reading to fill in the sentence frames.

1. Two facts that contributed to Lenin becoming a revolutionary were ______________________ and ______________________.

2. Lenin believed that socialism would occur if he led a violent revolution against the Tsar. Unlike Karl Marx, Lenin believed that only ______________________ would be able to lead a successful revolution.

3. Lenin was like Robin Hood because ____________________________________________.
   He and the Communist Party were like the Tsar because ____________________________.

4. Actions that Lenin and the Bolsheviks took that upset the Russian people included...
   ____________________________ which upset ____________________________
   ____________________________ which upset ____________________________;
   and
   ____________________________ which upset ____________________________

5. Russians’ displeasure with Lenin and the Bolsheviks led to the _______________ which the Red Army won because ____________________________.

(What are some things that Lenin might say?)

The "_______ and _______"

(Facts about the Russian Civil War!)

(The flag of the Soviet Union: Label its parts)