

Chapter 1

Politics

In the modern world, politics forms the backdrop – perhaps the skeleton – of everyday life. The modern state taxes, conscripts, arrests or, to stress more positive matters, assures security, funds education, subsidizes culture, builds hospitals. Throughout Russian history, the state has played a strong role: classical *laissez-faire* liberalism never took root here. No Russian constitution ever proclaimed the right for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Rather the Russian Empire and Soviet Union aimed to protect its citizenry but at the same time to preserve the political leadership from the mainly uninformed and possibly seditious masses. This dynamic between, on the one hand, state policies sincerely aiming at the betterment of economic and social conditions and, on the other, policies restricting basic freedoms (the exercise of which seemed potentially dangerous for state order and stability) will be seen throughout the pages that follow. Both Russian and Soviet politics was often “for the people” but almost never “through the people.”

The Great Reforms: 1861–1876

The Great Reforms aimed to reform Russia’s social and economic structure in the wake of the stunning defeat in the Crimean War (1854–6). Despite having the largest army in Europe and fighting on Russian territory (though, to be sure, a great distance from central Russia: the Crimean Peninsula is closer to Istanbul than to St Petersburg), Russia suffered a string of military setbacks at the hands of British and French forces. The failure of the army to protect Russian territory convinced even the most conservative Russians that fundamental reforms were necessary, if only to preserve Russia’s military power and international prestige.

Yet there were other long-term causes for the reforms. The existence of serfdom, a form of unfree labor wherein peasants are not free to move and must give up a significant part of their labor and/or produce to the landowner, had long been seen as economically retrograde and morally repugnant. Liberal economists argued that serfdom (and unfree labor in general) stifled initiative and retarded economic development. Certainly industrial growth demanded a more fluid labor market than serfdom allowed. Many were disturbed by the moral implications of serfdom: arch-conservative Tsar Nicholas I (reigned 1825–55) reportedly feared divine retribution for presiding over such an immoral system, but at the same time dreaded the social upheaval that liberation might unleash. The obviously enormous complications of liberating nearly half of the Russian population (44.5 percent on the eve of emancipation, or even 80 percent if one includes “state peasants” owned by the imperial family and the Russian state) from serfdom prevented any significant reform from occurring during Nicholas I’s reign. The fear of serf rebellion always formed the background to discussions about serf emancipation. The number of disturbances on the countryside had been growing from the 1830s to 1850s and it was feared that trying to reform the system might touch off a general serf revolt.

The death of Nicholas I in the midst of the Crimean War brought to the throne his son Alexander II (reigned 1855–81) who was neither very young (born 1818) nor particularly liberal, but enough of a realist to recognize the need for major reform. Still, Alexander proceeded cautiously. In 1856 he famously announced at a gathering of Moscow nobles that while he had no plans for the immediate emancipation, it would be better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for it “to abolish itself spontaneously from below.” The tsar called on landowners (in other words, the nobility) to discuss the details of emancipation and report to him. Perhaps predictably the nobles submitted proposals very favorable to their own interests, in particular keeping the best land and demanding payment from the freed serfs for any arable land they would thereby obtain. Frustrated with the unwillingness of landowners to sacrifice some of their landed wealth for the greater good of the Russian state, Alexander set up a Secret Committee on Peasant Affairs (later known as the “Main Committee”) in January 1857 to consider concrete measures. Provincial committees of the nobility were allowed to submit proposals but these did not have to be accepted or even acknowledged by the Main Committee or the Editing Commission set up in 1859 to draft the actual emancipation statutes. The result was a compromise that satisfied few and disappointed nearly everyone.

One group that warmly welcomed emancipation was educated society, that is, the *intelligentsia* (see discussion in chapter 2, “Society,” pp. 64–8). From abroad the radical writer Alexander Herzen hailed the tsar’s planned reform in his influential newspaper *Kolokol* (The Bell). Within Russia the press eagerly discussed the

plans for reform, taking advantage of a less stringent censorship regime. Alexander in part encouraged these discussions, seeing *glasnost* (a word used at the time referring to public debate) as a means of gauging public opinions. On the other hand, proposals seen as too extreme or infringing on the tsar's power would bring a reprimand or worse. Alexander II wanted, indeed needed, the help of educated Russians to help craft and carry through the reforms, but fearing for his own unlimited power, he was constantly apprehensive about giving them "too much freedom." Serfs themselves, as mainly illiterate, were not consulted at all.¹

The cornerstone of the Great Reforms was the emancipation of the serfs. This measure – really a number of separate statutes – was immensely complex, filling a volume of over 300 pages. The act was announced in churches throughout Russia on February 19, 1861. The authorities' fear of peasant unrest can be seen both in the choice of this date (at the beginning of Lent, when Russians would refrain from drinking alcohol) and the mobilization of troops throughout the Russian provinces. As it turned out, despite eventual peasant disillusionment when the specific terms of emancipation came to be known, few significant clashes with government authorities or landlords occurred. The manifesto of February 19 abolished serfdom officially, making the sale of serfs with land impossible and ending the landlord's right to mete out corporal punishment on his serfs. On a practical level, however, little changed immediately: the manifesto admonished the peasants to continue to pay rents and other obligations to their landlords for the next two years.

The basic aim of emancipation was to sever the direct dependence of the peasantry on their former landlords, provide peasants with enough land so that they would not become an impoverished and dangerous rural proletariat, and leave the landlords with sufficient land to continue to serve the state as bureaucrats and army officers. Peasants were shocked to learn that they would not be granted all the land they tilled but only a part of it, and furthermore they would be obligated to pay for this land (few accepted the so-called pauper's allotment, which would give peasants a much smaller plot but without having to pay for it). Officially landlords were to receive compensation from the peasants only for the land's fair price, not for the loss of serf labor. In fact the rate at which land prices were figured was often inflated to their landlord's advantage. The former serfs were to make "redemption payments" for 49 years to compensate the government, which was to pay off the landlords. They did not, however, receive payment in cash but in government bonds that were to be cashed in over the following decades. In any case over half of the redemption payments from serfs to landowners went to paying the latter's accumulated debts to the state. Thus the emancipation statutes burdened peasants with long-term payments but did not provide landowners with capital that might have been used to modernize agriculture. In part a major

banking crisis further undermined the government's ability to help finance emancipation, an indication of the weak financial position of the Russian state.²

Another important aspect of emancipation was that peasants did not gain private ownership of the land they "redeemed" from their former landlords. Instead the peasant commune (*obshchina*) owned the land and was responsible for redemption payments and other state obligations such as the providing of draftees for the army. In certain respects the serf's former dependence on the landlord was replaced by the peasant's dependence on the commune. Now the individual peasant had to ask the commune's permission to leave (e.g., to seek work in the city), paid taxes and redemption payments to the commune, and was called to serve in the army through the commune. There were many reasons why the government decided to entrust the commune with these responsibilities, ranging from a Slavophile belief in the intrinsic moral value of that institution to practical considerations of administration and social control. The Russian state wished to "fix" the newly liberated peasants in some kind of institution: the idea of millions of "loose" peasants freely roaming the empire was terrifying. By entrusting the land to the commune, the government gave this institution considerable power, in particular as land would be periodically redistributed among peasant households according to their growing or declining size. With the tiny numbers of provincial and rural police, the Russian state needed to count on the commune to maintain order on the countryside.

The actual implementation of the emancipation provisions took years and in some cases even decades. When peasants realized that the landlords were to retain much land – and often the best quality fields – while former serfs would be saddled with payments over two generations, they were appalled. Peasants often refused to believe that this could be the long-awaited liberation; rumors persisted of a far more favorable "Golden Charter," supposedly issued by the benevolent tsar but hidden by evil nobles. The worst case of peasant unrest after the February 19 manifesto came in the village of Bezdna in Kazan province. Here in April 1861 the semiliterate peasant Anton Sidorov, after urgently consulting the extremely complex legal language of the statutes, announced that the tsar had granted the land to the peasants and had ended payments and labor duties to landlords. As thousands of peasants flocked to the village to hear Sidorov's interpretation, the local governor sent troops to arrest him. In the ensuing clashes over 50 peasants were killed and hundreds wounded. While Bezdna was the most significant incident of peasant unrest in the wake of emancipation, the general reaction of serfs to the terms of emancipation was stunned surprise, followed by deep disappointment and resentment.³

Several other significant reforms were also carried out, most remarkable among them reforms of local government, education, the justice system, the military, and censorship. Local government reform was undertaken at two different levels: on

the countryside and in urban areas. On the countryside an entirely new institution was set up in 1864, called the *zemstvo* (pl. *zemstva*), a word that evoked the noble land assemblies of centuries earlier (*zemlia* is the Russian word for “land”). The *zemstva* were elected in rural districts as well as for the entire province. At both levels the nobility was over-represented, but this was probably inevitable given the greater literacy and wealth enjoyed by this privileged group. More important was the fact that peasants were represented in all *zemstva* where they voted on an equal basis with representatives of the landowning nobles and clergy. The *zemstvo* was allowed to levy taxes to pay for important practical measures: building roads and schools, encouraging the local economy, setting up clinics and hiring agronomists to help modernize local agriculture. Besides these practical benefits for the local economy, the *zemstvo* influenced the development of civil society in Russia. The *zemstva* demonstrated that the Russian public (not government) could elect its own representatives – at least at the local level – who then capably carried out measures for the public good. *Zemstvo* members came to see themselves as representatives of the local people and not infrequently clashed with government administrators carrying out the orders of the central government. Participation in these bodies thus became a kind of “school for democracy.” But not every region of the Russian Empire had *zemstva*: in the western and Polish provinces, for example, the government mistrusted the largely Polish nobility and refused to allow the establishment of *zemstva* there. There were also no *zemstva* in Siberia or the north of Russia because the nobility was too weak there, the government felt, to assure their proper and loyal functioning.⁴

The pre-reform administration of towns was generally agreed to have been inadequate, inefficient, corrupt, and unable to cope with basic economic and sanitary needs. The city reform law of 1870 introduced elected city governments, though the vote was slanted toward those holding considerable urban property. The elected city council (*duma*) selected from among its members an executive board (*uprava*) and a mayor (*golova*), who had to be approved by the minister of internal affairs. The elected city governments, introduced first in central Russia and later elsewhere (though not in many non-Russian regions), allowed local citizenry to play a significant part in the economic development of their town and carried out improvements such as the construction of sewers, roads, public transport systems, and the like.

Reforms attacked the educational system from both ends, so to speak. The Elementary School Statute of 1864 allowed and encouraged the creation of schools at the local level, but did not provide money. Funding had to be sought from three sources: *zemstva*, the Orthodox Church, or the Ministry of Education. University reform was particularly significant: a reform statute of 1863 abolished previous restrictions, opened universities up to members of all estates from peasant to noble, and granted universities a significant measure of self-

government. Conservatives would soon complain that the university statute opened up a dangerous “free zone” where radical ideas could be discussed and advocated with impunity. Liberals saw matters differently, considering that the free exchange of ideas was crucial for the training of self-sufficient, enlightened, and professionally competent citizens.

Perhaps the single most successful reform of all was the judicial reform of 1864, which swept away a justice system universally acknowledged to have been corrupt, inefficient, and cumbersome. This reform set up a legal system independent of government administrators. Court trials were to be open to the public with both oral and documentary evidence accepted; juries decided on the guilt or innocence of the accused. With judges appointed according to their professional capabilities and enjoying lifetime tenure, it became more difficult for officials to intimidate or silence court trials. The need for competent judges and lawyers required the creation of a Russian Bar, a professional class of lawyers. Legal education was much improved and lawyers came to see themselves not just as advocates for a specific client but as the champions of justice. Many trained in the law helped create the first Russian political parties after 1905, and it is perhaps not without significance that V. I. Ulianov (Lenin) received a legal education. Parallel to and separate from the main legal system described here was a system of peasant courts generally presided over by a justice of the peace who dispensed quick, if not always legally sophisticated, justice.

Although not abolished, censorship was significantly mitigated during the Great Reforms. New regulations of 1865 abolished most “preliminary censorship” but allowed the government to confiscate, punish, or even shut down publishers responsible for material deemed in violation of the censorship law. For periodicals, a government license was required for publication and some periodicals received the privilege of not undergoing preliminary censorship. As writers and editors quickly grew accustomed to pushing the limits of censorship, a great variety of books, journals, and newspapers appeared, catering to growing literacy rates.

As we have seen, the primary impulse toward the Great Reforms was provided by Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War. The complexities of the military reform meant that it was the last major reform, going into effect on January 1, 1874. The urgent need for sweeping reform of the Russian army was provided by the outstanding performance of the Prussian army in the Franco-Prussian war and the subsequent unification of Germany in 1871. With a newly united, economically vibrant, and militarily strong neighbor on its western border, the Russian Empire could not delay in improving its own military institutions.

This new conscription law obliged every male Russian (in principle) to serve in the military for a period ranging from six years to only a few months. Thus an illiterate peasant lad called to arms would serve six years, but if he had attended an elementary school his service would be reduced to only four. University gradu-

ates served only six months and if they volunteered for service this term was cut in half. After this period of active service draftees were enrolled in the reserves for an additional nine years. The principle of all Russians regardless of birth or social class carrying out military service was thus established, though in practical terms peasants were far more likely to serve for six years than their middle-class or noble coevals would. Moreover budget shortfalls meant that only a fraction of young Russian men were actually called to arms.⁵ Besides the conscription law, the military reform set up new officers' schools based on western models, abolished corporal punishment for soldiers, and established literacy and basic educational training for illiterate recruits. In the next half-century before World War I more young Russians learned basic literacy in the army than in elementary schools.

The Great Reforms radically changed the political structure of Russia, transforming serfs into free peasants, creating an open and independent judiciary, allowing the public to contribute to local economic development through the elected city governments and *zemstva*. But the fundamental political reality of Russia – autocracy, the unlimited rule of the tsar – remained untouched. Alexander II refused even to allow the creation of any kind of advisory body elected from among his subjects. Moreover the government expressly forbade provincial *zemstva* to cooperate or even meet with *zemstva* in neighboring provinces, fearing that such cooperation would infringe on the administrative prerogatives of tsarist officials. In effect the tsar refused to recognize the population of Russia as citizens to whom the welfare of the country could be entrusted. Rather they remained the tsar's subjects, subject to his will and without any right or possibility to influence further political reform. This, combined with specific disappointments in the terms of serf emancipation, the limited scope of local government, and continued censorship, meant that in the next few decades a significant number of the tsar's subjects began to seek more radical – even revolutionary – solutions to Russia's economic, social, and political ills.⁶

Government under Siege: 1876–1904

On April 4, 1866, a young former student, Dmitrii Karakozov, approached Tsar Alexander II in a garden near the Winter Palace in St Petersburg, aimed a gun at him, and pulled the trigger. The gun failed to go off and the tsar was unhurt; Karakozov was instantly set upon by bystanders, arrested and eventually hanged. Alexander's first words to Karakozov were "Are you a Pole?", reflecting the tsar's knowledge of the great bitterness Poles felt toward him after his crushing of their November Insurrection in 1863–4 (see chapter 3, "Nations," pp. 97–8). In fact not just Poles but many Russians – Karakozov replied to Alexander that he was a "pure Russian" – were dissatisfied with tsarist rule, the failure to grant peasants more

land, and the lack of political reform. Karakozov's shot was the work of an unstable individual, but it reflected broad dissatisfaction that would only grow in the next decades. The gap between the Russian people, whether peasants, educated professionals, or even privileged noble landowners, and the tsar's government grew steadily, as Russians sometimes expressed themselves openly but were sometimes forced underground. The unwillingness or inability of the tsarist regime to compromise on political issues or at least to coopt some segments of the population meant that when revolution finally broke out in 1905 the regime barely survived, only to be entirely broken and swept away by the stresses of World War I.

Alexis de Tocqueville once remarked that the most dangerous moment for a government was when it embarked on major reforms. Certainly this appeared to be the case in Russia in the 1860s. Following his brother Nicholas I's repressive rule, Alexander II's apparent liberalism gave rise to hopes for concessions and reforms that far exceeded anything the tsar would or could advocate. We have already seen the delicate balancing act that serf emancipation entailed in order at least partially to satisfy the demands of the liberal public, the landowners, and the peasantry. Similarly Alexander wanted to ease somewhat the extremely restrictive policies followed by Nicholas I toward Poles, but his desire to allow more free play for Polish language and culture (including the opening of a university in Warsaw) backfired in the November 1863 Polish insurrection against Russian rule. The Polish uprising and Karakozov's attempt on Alexander's life convinced conservatives, and to some extent the tsar himself, that reform needed to be scaled back to prevent further unrest – or worse. Thus from around 1870 at the latest we see the paradoxical situation in which the government grew more and more suspicious of reform even as the Russian public showed increasing enthusiasm for liberal and even radical changes.

The alienation of Russian society from its government grew steadily in the 1860s and 1870s.⁷ The *intelligentsia* defined itself in opposition to a Russian state that allowed it no direct political role. The government's unwillingness to introduce even a conservative constitution like that in Prussia or Austria (from 1867 Austria-Hungary) meant that many middle-class professionals and businessmen could not see the tsarist state as supporting their interests. But the more immediate threat to the status quo came from radicals, mainly young university students who concluded that reform had run its course and failed. These young radicals advocated "going to the people" (when educated Russians said, "the people," they meant the peasantry) to convince peasants of the need for revolution. During the summer of 1874, thousands of idealistic young Russians left the towns and streamed to the countryside to propagandize the peasantry. The attempt was a failure. Peasants were certainly unhappy with the terms of emancipation, but continued to have more trust in the far-away figure of the tsar than in young radicals from the city.⁸

The failure of the “crazy summer” of 1874 convinced many young radicals that the peasantry were not ready to embrace radical measures. Since peasants remained stuck in a conservative and patriarchal worldview, the radicals would have to make the revolution themselves. The most important group dedicated to carrying out this revolutionary program was Land and Liberty, which soon divided between a moderate faction that stressed education and propaganda among the peasants, and the more radical “People’s Will,” which advocated terrorist violence. In the years 1879–81 the People’s Will carried out a number of attempts on Alexander II’s life, blowing up the tsar’s train and even infiltrating the Winter Palace itself and detonating explosives there, destroying a ballroom where the tsar was supposed to have been.

These repeated well-organized attacks threw Alexander and his advisors into a panic. The tsar wooed public opinion by dismissing the reactionary minister of education and appointing a more liberal minister of the interior, Loris-Melikov. Most remarkably Alexander agreed to create a new advisory body that would include some representatives from *zemstva* and elected city governments. While this body would have lacked real legislative power, it could have been the first step toward giving Russian society a more direct voice in influencing the tsar’s policies. Whether this body could have defused some of the discontent among the Russian public toward its government we will never know, for on March 1, 1881, the People’s Will finally succeeded in assassinating Alexander II.⁹

The new tsar, Alexander III, firmly rejected any compromise with liberal or radical demands and quickly rounded up those responsible for his father’s death; the police and the Russian public were astonished at the small number of conspirators. Of course the hoped-for peasant uprising and revolution did not materialize: the peasantry viewed the tsar’s assassination with horror. Rather than attacks on tsarist police or administration, the only mass-scale violence that followed Alexander’s assassination was a wave of attacks on Jews – so-called pogroms – that occurred in the southwestern provinces of the empire (present-day Ukraine) during the summer of 1881 (see chapter 3, “Nations,” p. 112). While Alexander III did not foment or condone attacks on Jewish property or persons, his open antisemitism certainly did little to discourage such violence. Alexander III also tried to reach back to pre-Petrine times (that is, before the westernizing reforms of Peter the Great) and present himself ceremonially as a tsar of the Muscovite era, ruling over ethnic Russians rather than a multiethnic empire. As Richard Wortman has documented, Alexander III endeavored to introduce would-be Russian elements into his public persona, from his coronation ceremony to his home life to court ceremonies. In this context it is also significant that Alexander III was the first tsar since before Peter the Great to wear a full beard, as was the tradition among male Russian Orthodox believers.¹⁰

The reign of Alexander III (1881–94) was one of reaction, repression, and chauvinistic Russian nationalism. For Alexander socialism, liberalism, Jews, and Poles came down to more or less the same thing: alien threats to Russian tradition and political stability. Alexander was no ideologue but, tall of stature, cut an impressive figure. His sheer physical bulk seemed to symbolize stability, conservatism, and the unchanging nature of the Russian Empire. His policies aimed to arrest the spread of liberal and socialist ideas, to stymie the development of non-Russian cultures, strengthen the Russian center over the non-Russian peripheries (see “Russification,” chapter 3, “Nations,” pp. 97–8), and to restrict – though not eliminate entirely – many of his father’s reforms. At the same time economic growth during his reign was impressive: industry, the railroad network, the middle and working classes all grew. But the apparent stability of Alexander III’s reign masked a more disturbing truth: the growing gap between Russians and their government. While discontent was forced underground, it did not disappear.

Alexander III’s son, Nicholas II, both admired and feared his father. He had not expected to become tsar (his elder brother died unexpectedly) and did not welcome the enormous power and responsibility thrust upon him by his father’s death in 1894. Many hoped that the new tsar would revert to his grandfather’s more liberal policies or at least mitigate his father’s repressive policies. But when the Tver’ province *zemstvo* dared to refer to such liberal hopes in a letter to the new tsar, Nicholas reacted harshly, dismissing these suggestions for reform as “senseless dreams” and promising to continue his father’s policies.¹¹

By the late nineteenth century, the reactionary policies of Alexander III and Nicholas II could not assure stability. Strikes in 1895 and 1896 demonstrated the growth of working-class discontent and showed that socialist ideas were spreading among Russian workers. An even more direct challenge to the existing political order was the formation of the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) party in late 1901. The SRs were the heirs of the 1870s radicals in at least two important ways: first, in their vision of a peasant-based revolution, and second in their embracing of terrorism as a political tactic. In 1902 the minister of the interior, D. S. Sipiagin, fell to an SR attack; his successor, V. K. Pleve, would be blown up by another SR terrorist in 1904.¹² Mere months after the forming of the Socialist Revolutionary party, a young Marxist, Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov (better known by his pen name, Lenin), published a pamphlet abroad calling for a small but dedicated party of activists who would dedicate their lives to the revolutionary cause. Lenin’s 1902 pamphlet, *What Is to Be Done?*, may be seen as the founding document of what would become the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social-Democratic party. Of course all of these radical parties could function openly only outside Russia, but the growth of their underground organizations within Russia was noted with concern by the tsarist police.

The Beginning of the End: 1904–1914

For almost two decades after the assassination of Alexander II, the Russian Empire may have seemed economically backward and politically reactionary, but its stability did not appear under threat. The revolutionary movement that had killed Alexander II in 1881 was driven abroad or underground. Still, the resentment felt by members of educated society and the growing working class toward a government that seemed oblivious of their interests continued to grow. This, combined with continued peasant poverty, meant that in case of crisis the government lacked a broad base of social support. Precisely such a crisis was caused by the poor performance of the Russian army and navy against Japan in 1904–5, a crisis that developed into the revolution of 1905.

The origins of the Russo-Japanese War may be traced to at least two fundamental causes: the weakness of China and Russia's expansion toward the Pacific Ocean. To be sure, Russia had claimed territory along the Pacific coast for centuries, but it was only with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the 1890s that sizeable numbers of Russians came to settle in the Far East, in particular in the railroad's terminus at Vladivostok, a city founded only in 1860. In order to reduce the length of the railroad's eastern portion the Russian government reached an agreement with China in 1896 allowing the construction of a line across Chinese Manchuria, founding the Chinese Eastern Railway and creating a major new Russian city in the middle of that railroad at Kharbin. The completion of this line in 1901 caused the Japanese government – itself recently industrialized and extending its influence over Korea after a war with China in 1895 – to fear further Russian incursions into China and Korea.¹³ In frustration at what they saw as Russian foot-dragging over evacuating their troops from Manchuria the Japanese decided to launch a preemptive strike, attacking the Russian navy at Port Arthur on the Liaotung Peninsula without a formal declaration of war on February 8, 1904.

The Russo-Japanese War began badly for Russia, with the almost total destruction of the Pacific Fleet at Port Arthur, and went downhill from there. A second fleet was dispatched around the world only to be met by the Japanese in late May 1905 at Tsushima and promptly sunk. The Russian army's performance on land in Manchuria was less abysmal, but the major battle of Mukden (March 1905) could at best be called a draw. By summer 1905 the financial strain of war combined with unrest at home made the Russian government desperate to find a way to end the war. The Peace of Portsmouth was negotiated with the help of US President Theodore Roosevelt and signed on September 5, 1905.¹⁴

For Russian and world history, more important than the Russo-Japanese War itself was the unrest it generated within the Russian Empire. From the start, the Russian military seemed unable to hold its own against Japan – an enormous

humiliation for a major European power fighting non-Europeans. The incompetence of the military leadership seemed to epitomize the inability of the government to accommodate and further the economic and political needs of the tsar's subjects. And, with the military tied up in Manchuria, the government was helpless to put down large-scale unrest in the European part of the empire. Demonstrations, strikes, peasant attacks on manor houses, and the killing of government officials forced Nicholas II to make major concessions, but the disturbances were crushed by the use of military force only in late 1905 and early 1906.

The revolution of 1905 has a specific beginning date: January 9 (o.s.), "Bloody Sunday." On this date a mass demonstration was planned, with thousands of marchers convening on the Winter Palace in central St Petersburg. Carrying icons and portraits of the tsar, the demonstrators planned to present a petition to their sovereign who, unbeknownst to them, was not in residence. The demonstration had been planned in advance but most of the participants were unaware that permission for their march had been denied by the imperial authorities. Worse yet, the incompetent tsarist police panicked at the size of the crowd streaming into palace square and opened fire, leaving over 100 dead and many more wounded. The shock of this unprovoked attack on unarmed petitioners rapidly turned to anger and, within days, further protests and strikes. In the Baltic and Polish provinces the government essentially lost control of the situation, and even in Moscow and St Petersburg policemen refused to walk alone in the streets, fearing a bullet in the back.

Gradually Nicholas and his government, forced into a corner, made some concessions. In mid-February it was announced that the emperor would summon together "elected representatives of the people" as a kind of proto-legislature. But by the time this consultative legislature known as the "Bulygin Duma" (named after the Minister of the Interior) was to be elected, events had made it superfluous. Faced with anarchy in Warsaw, mass attacks on landed estates in the Baltic, and major strikes in the Russian interior, the prime minister, Sergei Witte, saw no other possibility of restoring order except by making significant concessions to liberal opinion. On Witte's urging, Nicholas II grudgingly issued the October Manifesto, promising to respect civil rights and to create a legislature elected by broad suffrage. Most importantly the October Manifesto promised that henceforth no law would take effect without the approval of this legislature, the Duma. For liberals, the October Manifesto could be seen as a significant concession and a first step toward a constitutional order. Radicals, however, rejected it as too little (vague and narrow) and too late (Nicholas's insincerity as a constitutional ruler was only too apparent). The October Manifesto did split the opposition to tsarist rule, but was unsuccessful in ending the revolution.¹⁵

The revolution of 1905 was brought to an end not by tsarist concessions, but by the more familiar tactic of repression. The St Petersburg Soviet (the word

means "council" in Russian), set up by workers and leftist intellectuals to press for radical demands and coordinate strikes, was closed down by the authorities in November and December. As troops returned from Manchuria, they were used to suppress demonstrations, strikes, and rural unrest. In April 1906 Peter Stolypin was appointed Minister of the Interior and charged with the task of restoring order, a process bitterly described by one of his opponents as aiming to create "the quiet of the graveyard." Stolypin's energetic use of repressive measures caused his contemporaries to speak of the "Stolypin necktie," referring to the noose used to hang opponents of the regime.¹⁶

Stolypin is a complex character who has been called tsarist Russia's "last hope." While he did not shy away from the use of violence against the regime's opponents, Stolypin also recognized the fundamental reality that the government needed to work out a *modus vivendi* with the Duma. He was a convinced conservative and supporter of monarchy, but he could also agree to compromises with more liberal elements in Russia. The first Duma convened in May 1906 and was dominated by the left liberal Kadet (short for "Constitutional Democrat") party. The inability of the government to work with the Duma resulted in the latter's dismissal after 10 weeks and calls for a new election. The second Duma (February–June 1907) was, from the government's point of view, even worse. The socialists who won nearly 200 seats were more interested in denouncing the government and quarreling with the right-wing delegates than in creating a functioning legislature. When Stolypin, by now prime minister, claimed to have discovered evidence of an antigovernment plot among the socialist Duma members and demanded that 16 of them be stripped of their parliamentary immunity, the Duma balked. Stolypin seized the opportunity to dissolve the Duma, arrest the delegates, and issue the law of June 3, 1907, significantly changing the Duma electoral law to guarantee a more Russian and more pro-government (i.e., conservative) assembly.

Stolypin's dissolution of the Duma and issuing of a new electoral law was a flagrant violation of the principle that all new laws must be approved by the parliament. In a sense, however, he had no choice: to quote one of his most famous speeches (uttered to radicals in the Duma): "You want great upheavals. I want a great Russia." A Duma dominated by socialists and left liberals would have little interest in cooperating with the tsarist government. Stolypin's electoral law helped create a much more conservative assembly dominated by the Octobrist party (the name refers to their belief that the October Manifesto was a reasonable concession upon which to base a new government) with rightist and nationalist parties. Even with this much more moderate Duma, however, Stolypin and the government could not always have their way. Stolypin discovered that parliaments have a way of developing their own ethos and pride, which does not always correspond to the government's immediate wishes.¹⁷

While the Third Duma managed to “live out” its entire five-year term (1907–12) – the only pre-revolutionary Duma to do so, Stolypin did not survive. Despite his devotion to preserving and strengthening tsarist rule in Russia, Nicholas II, and even more his wife, Alexandra, strongly disliked their faithful servant. Incapable of decisive action himself, Nicholas deeply resented strong men like Stolypin. Probably the prime minister would have been dismissed had he not been assassinated by a former police informer under murky circumstances at the Kiev opera house (in Nicholas’s presence) on September 1, 1911. Stolypin was the last capable and memorable prime minister of imperial Russia.

This is not to say that imperial Russia was doomed as early as autumn of 1911. But neither liberal society, on the whole, nor the industrial proletariat, nor the peasantry could firmly support the status quo. Stolypin had recognized this and pushed through a major reform aimed at creating a class of individual peasant landowners (see chapter 4, “Modernization,” pp. 127–8). Whether this reform could have fulfilled Stolypin’s hopes is impossible to gauge, as World War I intervened before the reform could make a broad impression on the Russian countryside. From 1912 major strikes broke out at the Lena goldfields in Siberia and in industrial cities throughout the empire. Revolutionary agitation spread in factories and the countryside. Then in summer 1914, faced with the prospect of its Balkan “little brother,” Serbia, being overrun by Austria-Hungary, and fearful over the growing military strength in Germany, Russia was drawn into World War I.

War and Revolution: 1914–1917

Less than a decade after defeat against Japan, the Russian Empire did not want a new war. Although enormous efforts had been made to strengthen the army, many suspected that the German army was both better trained and better equipped. The events of August 1914 were to prove the pessimists correct. The German war plan focused on avoiding a two-front war by knocking out France with a massive assault in the first weeks of the war, and then turning on Russia. The Schlieffen Plan assumed that with its greater distances and weaker railroad network, Russian mobilization would require several weeks before the Russian army could pose a serious threat to Germany. The Germans thus concentrated the vast majority of their attack on the western front, with only a dozen or so divisions guarding the border between East Prussia and the Russian Empire.¹⁸

The Russian attack across that border in August 1914 deeply shocked German public opinion and forced the military to transfer troops from the western front, which may have been decisive in preventing French defeat. Once reinforcements for the German units in East Prussia arrived, however, the counterattack was

devastating to the Russians. The Battle of the Masurian Lakes of August and September 1914 was a huge defeat that revealed both the superior training and equipment of the Germans and the incompetence of the Russian generals. After this battle Russian troops would never again threaten German territory.

The Russian army fared somewhat better against the Austrians. The Galician city of Lwów (now L'viv in Ukraine) was taken in early September, and Galicia was to remain under Russian occupation for nearly a year. But from spring 1915 on, the Russian army suffered a number of losses, pulling out of Galicia, losing Warsaw in summer 1915, and abandoning Vilna (today Vilnius in Lithuania) in autumn 1915.¹⁹ In the war's first year Russia suffered four million casualties. While the initial crises in supply and ammunition were to some extent corrected by 1915, it seems clear that the only reason Russia survived militarily was Germany's choice to expend the bulk of its men and materiel on the western front.

The outbreak of war was accompanied in Russia – as elsewhere throughout Europe – by a wave of patriotism. Suddenly it became risky to be heard speaking German, and a mob sacked and torched the German embassy in St Petersburg. On the front, entire civilian populations were rounded up as “suspect,” and predictably Jews were among the worst hit by these mass deportations to the Russian interior.²⁰ In May 1915 a riot aimed at foreign stores and merchants broke out in Moscow and ended with the destruction of many foreign-owned (or simply suspected of being foreign-owned) businesses. On a popular level there is much evidence to show a marked increase in nationalist rhetoric and action, but the government too adopted policies to strip foreign residents of their businesses and land. Thus the war years helped spur Russian national consciousness and, conversely, antforeign sentiment aimed both at foreign citizens and at the diverse ethnic groups living within the Russian Empire (see chapter 3, “Nations”).²¹

Part of the reason why Russians sought a scapegoat in foreigner residents and non-Russians was the almost unrelentingly bad news from the front. From spring 1915 onward the Russian army was in nearly constant retreat, and politically matters stood no better. At the beginning of the war, the Duma had overwhelmingly embraced the war effort, with only a few left-wing delegates (including six Bolsheviks) refusing to approve war credits (they were promptly arrested). But the government squandered the possibility of better relations with the Duma and educated society by continuing to treat the Duma as an enemy or rival rather than a partner. Committees set up by *zemstva* and city Dumas to help the war effort, refugees, and the wounded, often found their efforts stymied by government officials.²²

After some initial enthusiasm for the war, particularly among the educated middle class, war weariness set in. The peasantry, who made up the bulk of the Russian army, had never welcomed the war and, with continued defeats and withdrawals, voices calling for an end to the war grew ever stronger. The fact that

the empress was by birth German (though raised in Britain) and the presence in the palace of the unsavory peasant adventurer Grigorii Rasputin did not help matters.²³ With his unfailing instinct for doing the wrong thing, Nicholas II decided in late 1915 to leave Petrograd for the army general headquarters or *stavka* (near the front lines in what is now Belarus) and assume direct control of the military. Despite the impassioned efforts of his advisors to dissuade him, arguing that he was needed in Petrograd and his presence at headquarters would associate him with military setbacks, Nicholas insisted that his place was at the head of his troops. In fact the tsar's ministers' worst predictions came true: Nicholas's presence at the *stavka* injected an unhealthy dose of court politics into military decisions, while his absence from St Petersburg gave credence to wild rumors that his "German" wife and her lascivious peasant lover Rasputin were running Russia.

The desperation of educated Russians at the military and political state of affairs is shown by two events of late 1916. On November 1, 1916, the leader of the left-liberal Kadet party, historian Pavel N. Miliukov, gave an extraordinary speech in the State Duma. Setting down a litany of government failures, Miliukov punctuated each with the question "Is this stupidity or treason?" Taking advantage of the fact that the Duma president could not understand German, Miliukov also read aloud from German newspapers, including a line accusing the empress of interfering in politics. For a liberal in a time of war to openly accuse his own government of complete incompetence or even treason is more than unusual; it is practically unprecedented and deeply shocking. Miliukov himself later wrote that his speech was interpreted as "an attack signal for the revolution," though he denied any such radical purpose, arguing that he merely wanted to clean up the corruption and incompetency that were hindering the war effort.²⁴

The second event of late 1916 was in its own way even more shocking. On December 17 a group of conspirators led by Prince Felix Yusupov and a cousin of the tsar invited Rasputin to Yusupov's palace where they poisoned, beat, and shot the Siberian holy man. By murdering Rasputin, these arch-conservatives hoped to end his influence over the empress and to bring the tsar back to St Petersburg. In fact Rasputin's influence on policy was minimal – he had always opposed the war – and his death solved nothing.

In early 1917 Russians were cold, hungry, and thoroughly sick of the war. Supply problems exacerbated food and fuel shortages in Petrograd. Inflation had sparked a number of strikes and rural unrest in 1916; no improvement of living conditions could be expected before war's end. In this atmosphere demonstrations for international women's day (March 9, n.s.) came together with unhappy women, who had waited hours in line only to be told that basic foodstuffs had not been delivered, to cause serious street disturbances in Petrograd. Away at the *stavka* (military headquarters), Nicholas ordered the street demonstrations repressed, but local police and military were incapable of restoring order – indeed,

many went over to the side of the demonstrators. Within days a Provisional Government was set up, drawing mainly from liberal Duma politicians. Finally realizing the gravity of the moment, Nicholas attempted to return to Petrograd, but railroad workers prevented his train from reaching its destination. Stranded in his train car outside the capital, the tsar was met by a delegation of conservative Duma politicians who begged for and finally received his abdication. The Romanov dynasty and imperial Russia was no more.²⁵

Nicholas's abdication ended autocracy in Russia, and Duma politicians stepped in to prevent a power vacuum, setting up the Provisional Government that was to rule only until proper elections could be held. After an initial short period of euphoria, however, the Provisional Government was faced with the same problems as its imperial predecessor. In particular the decision to continue the war effort, we can see in retrospect, was a mistake. Similarly the blanket amnesty of political prisoners declared by the Provisional Government in its first days undermined the liberal regime's shaky stability by allowing more radical elements to stream back to Russia and St Petersburg. However, the Provisional Government was not acting on its own: its power was held in check by the more radical Petrograd Soviet, elected by factory workers and military units, which could threaten strikes or demonstrations if challenged. The weakness of the Provisional Government is revealed by its acceptance of the Petrograd Soviet's "Order No. 1," which fatally undermined military discipline by allowing soldiers to challenge orders (except on the actual front line). The period between February and October 1917 (o.s.) is characterized by this "dual power" (*dvoevlastie*), in which the Provisional Government bore the responsibility for unpopular decisions while under pressure from the Petrograd Soviet to accept quite radical policies. The blanket amnesty of political prisoners was followed by the abolition of the death penalty and the annulment of all laws restricting the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. In July suffrage was extended to all citizens 20 or over, making Russia the first major European power to grant the vote to women.

The Provisional Government, as its name implied, saw itself merely as a caretaker until a Constituent Assembly could be elected, a constitution agreed upon, and democratic elections for a proper government held. The transition to democracy is difficult under any circumstances, and in a poor country like Russia in the midst of war, it took months even to set up elections for the Constituent Assembly. In the scant eight months of its existence the Provisional Government lurched from crisis to crisis. An attempt to rally the military in a summer offensive ended in a near complete collapse of the Russian army. The leftist parties (including, though reluctantly, the Bolsheviks) attempted to grab power in July, but this ill-planned coup attempt failed. From July the prime minister was the moderate socialist Alexander Kerensky, the only member of both the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government.²⁶ Kerensky first attempted to protect the Provisional

Government from a right-wing coup (the so-called Kornilov affair) in August and then from a left-wing power grab in October. While he succeeded in defeating General Kornilov's attempted coup, his government crumbled before the Bolshevik seizure of power. The Provisional Government disappeared not with a bang and barely with a whimper. To quote Lenin, "Power was lying on the street – we merely stooped down to pick it up." Russia had become the world's first socialist state – but few thought that the Bolsheviks would be capable of holding power for long.²⁷

The Revolution's First Decade: 1917–1927

The Bolsheviks, as good Marxists, did not imagine that Russia would long remain the only socialist country. They hoped that their example would be the spark that would set off the worldwide revolution long awaited by socialists. But initially they had more immediate concerns than spreading world revolution. Afraid that their hold on power would not last long, they aimed to make the strongest possible impression on history by passing a series of radical acts. Within days the Bolsheviks called for negotiations with the Germans to end the war, gave their approval to peasant seizure of landlords' estates, and even abolished the word "minister," adopting instead Trotsky's suggestion of the far more revolutionary-sounding "people's commissar." Thus the Bolshevik government was known as the "Council of People's Commissars" or Sovnarkom. Trotsky took over foreign affairs, where one of his first actions was to publish secret agreements between Russia and the western allies, which promised, among other things, Russian control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. These revelations were extremely embarrassing to western leaders, as they had steadfastly denied the existence of any agreement that might prolong the war and were now shown to be liars. The Bolsheviks also publicly repudiated the tsarist debt, meaning that thousands of middle-class investors, especially in France and Belgium, found that their gilt-edged Russian securities were now worthless.

A month after the Bolsheviks came to power elections to the long-awaited Constituent Assembly took place. While the Bolsheviks gained nearly 10 million votes (almost a quarter of all votes cast), the largest vote getter was the Socialist Revolutionary party with over 17 million votes (41 percent). The Bolsheviks did best in urban areas, while the SRs, as expected, were overwhelmingly supported by the peasantry. The liberal Kadets now found themselves on the right wing of the political spectrum and gained a mere two million votes (4.8 percent). The Bolsheviks allowed the Constituent Assembly to gather in Petrograd on January 5, 1918, but when the delegates refused demands to recognize the Bolsheviks as the legitimate government, Lenin decided to shut it down. Fearful that once



ТОВ. ЛЕНИН ОЧИЩАЕТ ЗЕМЛЮ ОТ НЕЧИСТИ.

FIGURE 1.1 Mikhail Cheremnykh and Victor Deni, “Comrade Lenin Cleanses the Earth of Scum.” 1920.

Source: Photos 12 Collection/Alamy.

disbanded, even for the evening, they would not be allowed to reconvene, delegates continued their discussions until early the next morning. At 4 A.M. they were told, memorably, *karaul ustal* – “The guard is tired.” The assembly was dissolved and, just as feared, not allowed to meet again. The Bolshevik party, not popular congresses, would decide Russia’s future.

The most immediate problem facing the Bolsheviks was the war. The German government had aided Lenin’s return to Russia and their investment appeared to have paid off magnificently.²⁸ But Lenin could not dictate policy on his own, as subsequent events would show. Negotiations began at Brest-Litovsk (now on the

Polish-Belarusian border) where the Bolshevik representatives were shocked at the draconian demands of the Germans. The Germans called for “national self-determination” for Poland, Ukraine, Finland, the Baltic provinces, and other territories that in 1914 had formed part of the Russian Empire. While Lenin and the Bolsheviks agreed to the principle of national self-determination, they hoped that most non-Russians would remain in some kind of federated state with the Russians. In any case the German demands were seen as too onerous and the Bolshevik party leadership rejected them in January 1918, much to the realist Lenin’s fury. After further fruitless negotiations Trotsky announced to the astonished German delegation a policy of “no peace, no war” in mid-February, shortly after which the German army simply began marching into Russia. Lenin furiously demanded that any German conditions be accepted, and after several attempts succeeded in convincing the Central Committee that peace at any cost was necessary. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on March 3, 1918. Compared with 1914 borders, the treaty deprived Soviet Russia of some 1.3 million miles of territory, including major industrial regions, and 62 million citizens, few of whom were ethnic Russians.

A week after signing the treaty, the Soviet capital was transferred from Petrograd (now some 20 miles from the Finnish border) to the historical capital, Moscow. In the same month the Bolsheviks changed their party name to “communist” to emphasize the difference between themselves and the Social Democrats who in various European countries had initially supported the war. At the same time serious frictions arose between the Bolsheviks and their erstwhile allies, the left SRs. Angered by the shutting down of non-Bolshevik periodicals, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, and the ever narrowing of political expression, the SRs reverted to their old tactic: terrorism. On July 6 a member of the left SR party assassinated the German ambassador, Count Wilhelm von Mirbach. SRs led insurrections against communist power in several cities and a number of prominent Bolsheviks were likewise assassinated. SR armed resistance provided the communists with the opportunity to be done with these uncomfortable allies and, at the same time, to sweep away all manner of “class enemies.” The secret police set up already in December 1917 and known as the Cheka (from the first letters in Russian of “Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage”) targeted not just SRs but anyone suspected of opposing the revolution and the Communist Party. Thousands were arrested and many were summarily executed. In the midst of these repressions or “Red Terror” the SR Fanny (Fanya) Kaplan attempted to assassinate Lenin, wounding him in the arm and chest. While the communist leader recovered from his wounds, they are thought to have hastened his early death in 1924.

As Fanny Kaplan was taking aim at Lenin in Moscow, communist rule was facing a far greater threat than the SRs: the so-called Whites. Various

anticommunist groups had gathered in the former borderlands of the empire: in summer 1918 General Anton I. Denikin was pushing north along the Volga while troops under Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak threatened Soviet power from the east. Britain and France, furious at the Russian withdrawal from the war, assisted the White effort with materiel and to some extent with men. But the Whites were never unified, either ideologically or militarily. White supporters ranged from liberal democrats, such as former Kadet leader and foreign minister under the Provisional Government Pavel Miliukov, to conservative monarchists and antisemitic nationalists. The White armies were strong enough to threaten the communists in 1918 and 1919, but never succeeded in unifying their efforts to deal the Leninist regime a fatal blow.²⁹

The Soviet regime survived the Civil War for several reasons. First of all, it always maintained control over the central part of Russia, including Moscow and St Petersburg. The fact that Moscow was always in the hands of the “Reds” meant that troops could be shifted by railroad from east to west, north to south. The main munitions factories also remained in Bolshevik hands. The communists also benefited from excellent leadership and a strictly organized party. The Whites had no leaders comparable to Lenin or Trotsky, creator of the Red Army. It is remarkable that this entirely unmilitary man Trotsky, who had spent his life in libraries, cafés, and editorial offices, suddenly proved himself an effective – and ruthless – leader of the Red Army. The one-party state and the Cheka’s repressive apparatus allowed the Reds to introduce such unpopular measures as the military draft and grain confiscations from peasants to feed the troops. It must also be noted that the ruthlessness with which the communists dealt with real or imagined enemies was also effective in stifling dissent during these critical years. Peasant support for the Bolsheviks, though never complete or unalloyed, also played a role. While peasants quickly became disillusioned with many communist policies, when push came to shove, they always supported the Reds over the Whites, whom they associated with their former landlords.³⁰ Finally the lack of unity among the Whites and the lackluster support for them on the part of the Allies (support that was to be much exaggerated by Soviet historiography) allowed the Reds to prevail.

The Bolsheviks had counted on a European-wide revolution when they took power in October 1917. Battles between Reds and Whites in Finland and the Baltic region, radical uprisings in some parts of Germany from late 1918, and the creation of the “Soviet” governments in Munich and Budapest in 1919 made it seem that world revolution might really be on the horizon. In fact by the end of the year the radicals had been defeated in all of these places. As the Civil War wound down in late 1919, Soviet Russia was drawn into a war with Poland over Belarusian and Ukrainian territory. Polish troops took Kiev in early May 1920, but the Red Army’s counterattack was so successful that it was decided – against

Trotsky's advice – to pursue the war onto Polish territory. By taking Warsaw, the communists hoped, direct contact with the German working classes could be established to spark revolution there and throughout western Europe. It was not to be. In August 1920 Polish troops led by Marshall Józef Piłsudski defeated the Red Army on the Vistula River north of Warsaw, an event celebrated in Poland as the “Miracle on the Vistula.” Exhausted by war, Soviet Russia and the Republic of Poland signed the Peace of Riga on March 18, 1921, ending hostilities and setting the Polish–Soviet border that would be in place until 1939.³¹

The phrase “War Communism” is traditionally used to describe communist policy in 1918–20, that is, during the Civil War. The Bolsheviks came to power without any real experience in administration, running enterprises, or supervising an economy. While Lenin and his colleagues did not set out to nationalize all aspects of the economy, within months this process was already far advanced. Factory and enterprise owners, not surprisingly, seldom welcomed communist rule. They were thus pushed aside (or worse); their place was taken by workers' councils or appointed administrators. Lack of managerial experience and simple incompetence devastated the already weak Russian economy. Basic infrastructure from railroads to electricity functioned fitfully if at all; citizens went hungry and cities remained cold and dimly lit. It became common to see a formerly well-to-do woman at the market trying to convince a peasant to give her a few kilograms of potatoes for a silk shawl, a silver spoon, or some piece of jewelry.

By late 1920 the Civil War was over. The country lay in ruins, factories and mines lay abandoned, millions were hungry and without shelter. The currency was ruined (in late 1920 a ruble was worth less than 1 percent of its 1914 value), basic foodstuffs and heating material were expensive and hard to find. The utter misery of everyday life led to strikes and demonstrations, despite severe repression. Most shocking of all for the communist leadership was the Kronstadt rebellion of February–March 1921. Baltic sailors had been among the most fervent supporters of the Bolshevik cause, so this uprising at the island naval base near Petrograd showed just how far popular support for Soviet rule had eroded. The sailors' demands ranged from the practical (such as the right to bring food from the countryside to the cities, abolition of special “privileged” rations) to the political (return to secret ballot, reestablishment of press freedom for the left). The Communist Party, meeting at its Tenth Congress in Moscow, rightly viewed the uprising as a direct challenge to Soviet rule. After negotiations failed, communist troops stormed the island and crushed the rebellion in blood.³²

Lenin remarked that the Kronstadt rebellion “illuminated reality like a flash of lightning.” Presumably he meant that the fury expressed by the sailors revealed that the continued existence of Soviet rule in Russia required rethinking. While the communists resolutely rejected the sailors' call for more democracy and freedom of expression, their practical economic demands were to some extent

met by the New Economic Policy (NEP). Faced with almost total economic collapse in early 1921, the Tenth Party Congress decided to make concessions to the market, small business, and in particular to the peasantry: these became the main NEP reforms. NEP left much of the economy unchanged in state hands: all big business, international trade, banks, and a state-run (and much reviled) system of retail stores remained under government control. NEP did, however, open up a certain space for the individual entrepreneur, trader, and farmer. Peasants had to pay a tax on the foodstuffs they produced but could freely market their produce. Butchers and bakers could set up small stores with a limited number of employees. Overnight the retail trade was back in private hands. Artisans like shoemakers, tailors, and seamstresses could also legally produce and sell wares. Cafés, restaurants, music halls, and other such entertainment establishments could open again. Politically, however, the NEP did not bring any change. The Communist Party remained the only tolerated political grouping and even factions within the party were banned at the Tenth Party Congress.

As the terrible famine of 1921–2 (especially in the Volga region) showed, the NEP did not instantly solve Soviet Russia's economic problems. This tragedy in which millions starved (and many others were saved by the foreign assistance reluctantly allowed into the region by the communist leaders) was itself a bitter legacy of the Civil War period. Only a year or two later, however, the economy showed distinct signs of improvement. (On the economic effects of NEP, see chapter 4, "Modernization," pp. 130–2.) By 1926 existing factories had been repaired, railroads put back in operation, mines pumped out and returned to production, but, for impatient communists, this was all too little. They longed for crash industrialization and a leap from a mainly agrarian country to a modern, industrialized Soviet Union.

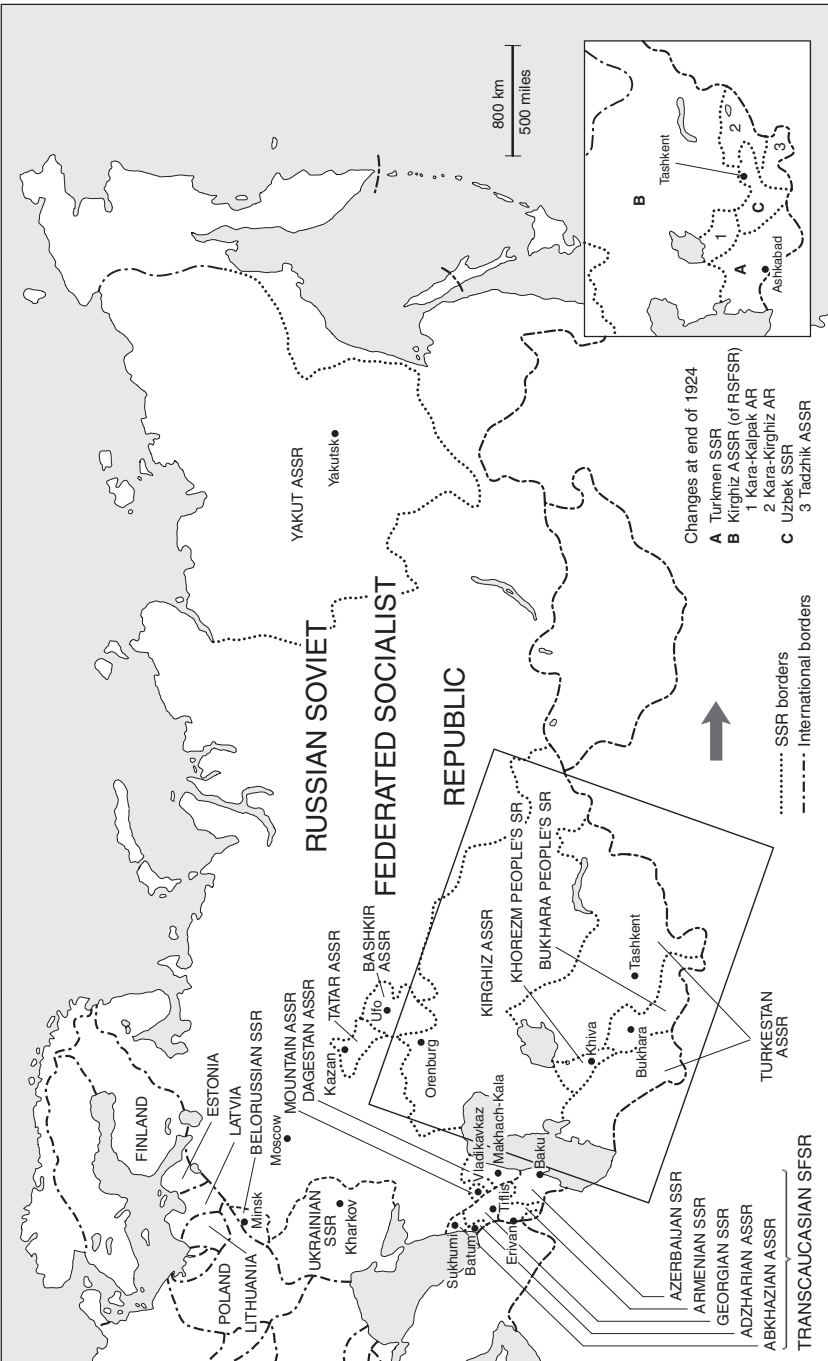
Unhappiness among communists with the slow pace of economic growth and with the toleration – at least at the retail level – of a market economy was exacerbated by the strikingly negative social aspects of NEP. In an effort to prevent runaway inflation, government expenditures were severely limited. Many orphanages were shut down for lack of funding, and city streets filled with abandoned or orphaned children who engaged in petty crime, sold their bodies, and threatened law-abiding citizens. This phenomenon was so widespread that the Russian language acquired a new word for such children – *bezprizornye*, those without anyone to look after them. At the opposite end of the income scale were the so-called *nepmen*, profiteers who made large profits and spent it ostentatiously (while honest communists had to scrimp). The revolution was to have brought about a fairer, more egalitarian Russia, but during the NEP years social injustice and inequalities continued to exist. The dissatisfaction – disgust even – felt by many at the social injustice and vulgarity of NEP society encouraged many communists to support an end to NEP and a more radical line. Many of those disgusted

with NEP would thus support Stalin's agrarian collectivization and crash industrialization of the late 1920s.³³

NEP did not bring about any significant political liberalization. Institutionally the USSR was proclaimed on the last day of 1922, which further cemented the position of the Communist Party and its leadership. Since 1917 the undisputed leader – though not dictator – of the communists had been Lenin. But the “old man” (as he had been called since his thirties) suffered a stroke in May 1922 that left him partially paralyzed. Against doctors' orders he tried to continue work while bedridden by dictating texts to his faithful wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, but Lenin would never be the same. Among the texts set down by Krupskaya was one that has come to be known as “Lenin's Last Testament” in which he angrily called Stalin “too rude” and recommended that other members of the Central Committee “think about a way to remove Stalin from [his] post [as General Secretary of the party].” At the same time Lenin critically evaluated members of the Central Committee, praised Trotsky's “outstanding ability” but also noted his (and everyone else's) weaknesses. When the great man finally passed on in January 1924, the Politburo read aloud the “testament,” Stalin offered his resignation (which was not accepted), and it was decided to keep the text secret and to govern as a body.³⁴

While the Politburo (Stalin, Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Alexei Rykov) publicly minimized differences between themselves, behind the scenes battle lines were being drawn. At first Stalin allied with Zinoviev and Kamenev, who feared and resented Trotsky's arrogance, charisma, and popularity with much of the rank and file. Trotsky's Menshevik past and pre-1917 statements critical of Lenin were brought up against him in party circles. But soon Zinoviev and Kamenev began to mistrust Stalin's motives and switched their support to Trotsky after the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1925. This ill-advised move allowed Stalin to play on the resentment against internationalist Jews (the three were born Ovsei-Gershon Radomyslsky [Zinoviev], David Bronshtein [Trotsky], and Lev Rozenfeld [Kamenev]) felt by many rank and file communists. Cooperating with Rykov and the new Politburo member Nikolai Bukharin, Stalin had Trotsky expelled from the party in 1927 and exiled from the USSR in 1929. Once Trotsky was out of the way, Stalin went ahead in 1928 with a program of crash industrialization (the First Five-Year Plan) and the brutal collectivization of agriculture. When Bukharin, Rykov, and Mikhail Tomsky (the head of the labor unions) opposed Stalin's policy (in particular the violence used against the peasantry), they lost their influential positions and their places on the Central Committee. By 1930 Stalin was by far the most powerful man in the USSR.

Why did Stalin prevail over Trotsky, an opponent undoubtedly more intelligent, charismatic, and with a far better understanding of Marxist thought? In part Trotsky's own strengths worked against him: he was brilliant, no one denied, but



MAP 1.1 USSR in 1922 (or post-Civil War but pre-1945).
 Source: based on Donald Treadgold, *Twentieth Century Russia*, 8th edn., Westview Press, 1995, p. 152.

could also be brutally intolerant of incompetence and stupidity among his subordinates. Like many intelligent men, Trotsky underestimated his opponent: Stalin did not possess a scintillating intellect, but he did grasp human psychology and probably understood the ill-educated communist rank and file better than his more intellectual fellows at the party's top levels. Stalin's acceptance of the job of general secretary when this position was first created in April 1922 also helped him in his struggle for power. The majority of members of the Politburo, including Trotsky, were only too happy to let Stalin assume the bureaucratic drudgery that this administrative position represented. Stalin, however, saw clearly that the general secretary, who had control over all party files, could easily use that information for his own benefit. While recent archival research has called into question the thesis that Stalin was able to "stack the party ranks" with his own men, it is clear that Stalin's position as general secretary gave him unfettered access to information that helped him win power.³⁵

Trotsky's brilliant public speaking and charisma earned him a wide following among communists, but his dynamism and arrogance also offended – and frightened – at least as many. For many communists, Trotsky, more interested in his own brilliance than in party unity, seemed a much greater danger than Stalin. Stalin might well have been, in the communist David Riasanov's famous words, "a gray blur," but he was a far better politician than Trotsky. Stalin's careful use of fears and resentment toward Trotsky, as well as his utter lack of scruples in switching positions and misrepresenting his own and others' positions, helped bring about Trotsky's downfall. It should also be remembered that Stalin was skillful at subtly playing on antisemitic and antic cosmopolitan resentments within the party. In his suspicion of Jewish intellectuals, even those with impeccable communist credentials, Stalin was also closer to the average party member than his opponents. For many, supporting Stalin made sense from the viewpoint of party unity as well as personal ambition.

Building Socialism: 1928–1939

NEP was never formally ended but, for practical purposes, the expulsion of Trotsky from the party and the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan on October 1, 1928, spelled its abandonment. The next decade would be one of immense human suffering but also impressive economic transformation. As we have seen, many communists saw NEP as a compromise with market forces unworthy of a workers' state. Controversies raged within the Communist Party, however, on just what steps should be taken to replace the NEP with a more socialist economic order. For the communists, as for Marxists in general, the "free market" was nothing more than a fiction that allowed capitalists to exploit workers. While the

nepmen of the 1920s were hardly “capitalists” on a grand scale, they certainly used market forces to make profits, and spent their money nearly as rapidly as they made it. The adoption of the First Five-Year Plan meant a transition to a planned and supposedly more rational economy. The plan set down production targets not only for entire industries (coal mining, steel making, machine building, etc.), but for individual factories and enterprises. The advantage of the plan was that it allowed the government to coordinate resources and inject capital and manpower where needed in the economy. In reality, however, this supposed advantage was often reduced or eliminated by the disadvantages of bureaucracy and unrealistic targets.

The most serious potential obstacle to crash industrialization was the attitude of the peasantry. In order for quick industrialization to go forward it would have to be financed by the payment of low prices for agricultural goods (produced by peasants) and charging high prices for consumer goods (consumed by peasants). Would the peasants simply stockpile their grain rather than sell it? Would they even rebel against Soviet power? These were the fears that propelled the communist leadership to embark on a mass campaign to collectivize agriculture. The harvest of 1928 had not been terrible, but the amount of grain actually put up for sale (at relatively low prices) was inadequate to feed the growing cities and to export grain to pay for needed western technology. It seemed clear that the only way to force peasants to give up their grain at state-controlled prices was to use pressure – or force. In the long run the only way for the Communist Party to maintain this pressure on the peasantry, Stalin concluded around 1928, was to set up collective farms. The collective farms would serve at least three purposes. First, they would allow large-scale production that would be more productive than existing small peasant farmsteads. Second, the collective farms would be headed by managers – preferably Communist Party members – who would be responsible to see that sufficient grain was sold to the state. Finally the collective farm would destroy old rural elites (the so-called kulaks, or wealthy peasants) whom the communists suspected of hindering recruitment of peasants into the party (less than one rural dweller in 300 was a party member).³⁶

After the grain procurement crisis of 1927–8, when the peasants’ refusal to sell grain at low prices led to bread shortages, Stalin decided to proceed with a crash collectivization program. Initial application of violence in certain regions – the so-called Urals-Siberian Method – had brought in significant amounts of grain without setting off the feared peasant rebellion. But in 1928 still only around 3 percent of farms had been collectivized. In November 1929 Stalin announced the push for mass collectivization and the following month declared that kulaks had to be “liquidated as a class.” In the next three months any relatively wealthy peasant – which could mean a farmer who merely owned a cow or horse – was labeled a kulak, singled out for arrest, confiscation of property, physical violence,

and worse. Not only individuals but their entire families were targeted, often forced to leave the village (arrested or not) with barely the clothes on their back. Anyone who openly opposed collectivization or tried to organize resistance was also denounced as a kulak and shared a similar fate.

In the next three months intimidation, arrest, and violence forced many peasants to sign on to the collective farms. The communist authorities also tried to woo poor peasants by offering personal property (clothing, implements) confiscated from kulaks and painting a picture of a promising future of mechanized, prosperous agriculture. Most peasants remained skeptical, but faced with the threat of arrest or violence, gave in. Others simply fled to the cities where labor shortages meant that work was easy to find. Historians have estimated that at least six million peasants were forced to leave their homes in this short period.

On March 2, 1930, Stalin published a key article entitled “Dizzy with Success” in *Pravda*. Noting that over one-half of peasant households had been collectivized, Stalin approvingly wrote, “a radical turn of the countryside towards socialism may be considered as already achieved.” Most of the article, however, took a far more negative tone, criticizing the use of violence and coercion in Turkestan (and by implication, other isolated areas) as “distortions,” “bureaucratic,” and “unworthy threats.” The article stressed that the goal of collectivization was admirable and well within grasp, but the “voluntary principle” should be followed and “excesses” avoided. To be sure, this was all breathtaking hypocrisy coming from the man who had pressed for rapid “dekulakization,” but it allowed Stalin to blame problems and violence on overzealous underlings. The timing of the article should also be noted: the communists feared that the huge disruptions on the countryside would prevent spring sowing from taking place, causing mass famine. “Dizzy with Success” aimed to reassure peasants so that they would return to agricultural work. It worked. Peasants returned to the fields, but many also dropped out of the collective farm: the collectivized rate by June 1930 was only 24 percent. Now the party turned to more gradual and methodical means of persuasion, with the result that by 1941 98 percent of agricultural land had been collectivized.

Despite promises, collectivization did not improve life for peasants. In 1932–3 a famine swept the grain-producing regions in the south of the USSR, mainly but not exclusively in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), as well as Kazakhstan. This famine was specifically exacerbated by the unrelenting demands on local collective farms to provide grain for the cities and Russian center. Ukrainian historians refer to this famine in which millions starved as the *Holodomor*, seeing it as a cynical attempt at genocide against the Ukrainian people. Other historians have questioned the specifically Ukrainian nature of the tragedy, noting that other regions such as southern Russia and the Urals also suffered severely and that a higher percentage of Kazakhs than Ukrainians perished (see chapter 3, “Nations,” pp. 104–5). No one disputes, however, that Soviet grain procurement

policy forced local collective farms to give up their grain for the cities even while locals were starving.³⁷

The first Five-Year Plans (for more detail, see chapter 4, “Modernization,” pp. 132–5) set unrealistic and unattainable goals, but the actual achievements were nonetheless impressive. The production of energy (from coal to electricity) increased, as did mining in nearly all sectors, steel production, and (particularly from 1934 to 1936) the construction of new industrial plant and even entire new cities (of which the steel-producing city Magnitogorsk is only the most famous). Certain sectors of the economy lagged behind or even declined, in particular consumer goods. By the mid-1930s the Soviet economy was humming, but most Soviet workers lived in crowded, unhygienic, depressing dwellings. The rationing of basic foodstuffs such as bread (begun in 1928) was ended in the mid-1930s, prices were high and many goods were simply unavailable. Clothing was expensive and of poor quality. In general the entire economy was geared toward the production of capital goods (i.e., more factories, more heavy industry, and by the late 1930s more weaponry) rather than making life more pleasant for Soviet citizens. However, unemployment disappeared, cities grew, industry developed, and production figures expanded throughout the 1930s.

The fevered pace of industrial expansion in the 1930s was matched by a feverish level of political discourse. Newspapers warned of constant threats on the international scene (and, to be sure, the rise of Adolf Hitler to power might well worry any Soviet citizen, communist or otherwise). Soviet citizens were admonished to be constantly wary and on the outlook for “enemies,” “wreckers,” “spies,” and the like. The young American John Scott, who worked in the USSR in the mid-1930s, recalled seeing a play about a school training spies and terrorists to be used against Soviet interests. The climax of the piece was the revelation that “number 1,” an actor made up to look like Hitler, had a Russian passport with the name Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov (i.e., “John Jones,” the Russian everyman). In such an atmosphere of distrust and fear, mistakes or laziness could easily be labeled “wrecking” or sabotage and severely punished.

The first “show trial” used for propaganda purposes was the Shakhty trial of 1928 in which engineers were accused of plotting with the bourgeoisie and foreign governments to wreck Soviet development. Meanwhile, real or imagined opponents of Stalin were arrested or exiled – such as Trotsky in 1929. In the 1930s the charge of “wrecking,” implying sabotage and malicious destruction of state property, came to be routinely leveled at workers whose incompetence or mistakes caused production breakdowns or wastage. But while arrests for “wrecking” were by no means rare, mass political arrests began later with the show trial of old Bolsheviks Zinoviev and Kamenev (with 14 others) in 1936 and lasted until the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Explaining the background of her own arrest in 1937, Evgeniia Ginzburg wrote, “The year 1937 began, to all intents and pur-

poses, at the end of 1934 – to be exact, on the first of December.” On that day the popular head of the Leningrad party committee, Sergei Kirov, was assassinated – possibly by Stalin’s order – in his office. At the time, Stalin expressed grief and outrage at the murder of an upright communist and friend, and would later accuse his enemies of planning the murder.

Historians have long argued over the supposed link between the assassination of Kirov in December 1934 and the Great Terror that picked up speed some two years later. For one thing, did Stalin order Kirov’s killing? Robert Conquest argued that Stalin had Kirov rubbed out as a feared competitor for the party’s loyalty, but more recently historians have shown that no hard evidence backs up such a view (though many continue to hold it).³⁸ But why the lag of two years between Kirov’s death and the major show trials and mass arrests? One theory is that the purges began in an attempt to root out corruption and inefficiency but in the feverish atmosphere of the 1930s snowballed into mass repressions.³⁹ More recently Paul Hagenloh has argued that the mass repressions of the later 1930s derived from the frustration felt by communists at the continuing existence of “alien elements” (whether slack workers, Trotskyites, or speculators) “endangering” Soviet society.⁴⁰ Recent studies do not deny the importance of Stalin in the terror, but emphasize also the thousands of “little Stalins” who eagerly participated in repressions out of fervor, to gain professional advancement, or to exact personal revenge.

The accusations levied against old Bolsheviks like Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, and Trotsky were patently absurd. These were, after all, men who had dedicated their entire lives to the revolutionary cause. How could anyone believe accusations that they had turned into agents of British imperialism, the international bourgeoisie, or (a specific charge against Trotsky) Nazi Germany? It also seems bizarre for Stalin to have mounted such a campaign when his own power was already virtually unchallenged. Historians speculate that he was possibly motivated by a combination of paranoia and thirst for revenge against party members who had once slighted him. In an atmosphere of generalized paranoia the widely publicized trials against these formerly influential party leaders snowballed into a mass purge of party members. Stalin’s repeated calls for “vigilance” were then repeated endlessly by anyone in a position of power – better to arrest ten than to leave any possible “enemy” at large.

High party officials, who were more likely to have had contact with those arrested and were also perhaps more threatening to Stalin, were especially likely to be arrested. Of the 1966 delegates to the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, over half (1,108) were arrested. Among Central Party committee members, two-thirds were arrested (98 of 139). Similarly a purge of the officer corps led to the arrest of three of five field marshals (a rank only recently revived), 90 percent of Soviet generals, 80 percent of colonels, and thousands of lower-ranking officers.⁴¹

During these terrible years millions were arrested and disappeared into the Gulag (forced-labor camp) system, many never to return. Hundreds of thousands were shot as spies, wreckers, and Trotskyites. An anonymous denunciation would frequently lead to arrest, even without any concrete proof – causing thousands of unscrupulous individuals to settle personal scores, denounce neighbors with attractive apartments, accuse their boss (to rise professionally), and the like. There is perhaps some poetic justice in the fact that 20,000 NKVD (secret police) operatives were also swallowed up in the arrest wave, including the head secret policeman in 1936, Genrykh Yagoda (executed in 1938). The arrest and disappearance



FIGURE 1.2 Viktor Govorkov, "Stalin in the Kremlin Cares about Each One of Us." 1940. Source: Novosti Collection/Topfoto.

of millions of Soviet citizens, it has been argued, helped create a fearful and paranoid atmosphere that in certain ways persisted in the USSR even after Stalin's death in 1953.⁴²

While the arrest wave was peaking in 1937–9, the international situation appeared ever more ominous. Moscow watched uneasily as Japanese troops continued to conquer Chinese territory, and in August 1939 Soviet and Japanese troops engaged in a massive tank battle on the Mongolian border. Since 1933 Germany had been ruled by Adolf Hitler, whose maniacal antisemitism was paralleled by his fanatical hatred for communism. In 1938 Hitler had extended German rule to Austria and destroyed Czechoslovakia the following year – all without having to resort to arms. The next victim was obvious: Poland. Britain and France warned Hitler against any hostile action, while the world hoped that the fear of a two-front war would deter Nazi aggression. Thus the news of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (named after the Soviet and German ministers of foreign affairs who negotiated it) on August 23, 1939, came as a massive shock to the world and most of all to Poland. And indeed, barely a week later, on September 1, 1939, Nazi troops invaded Poland. World War II had begun.

World War II: 1939–1945

When the Wehrmacht poured across the Polish border on September 1, 1939, the USSR initially took no military action, as dictated by its nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany. Then on September 17 Soviet troops crossed the border set by the Peace of Riga and occupied the eastern half of Poland, following a secret clause of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact dividing Poland and the Baltic States into “German” and “Soviet” spheres of influence.⁴³ By the end of September the Polish army was no longer capable of open resistance and went underground, while the Polish government went into exile. Following further negotiations with Nazi Germany, the USSR began to put pressure on the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) to allow Soviet bases there, legalize the Communist Party, and align their foreign policy with the USSR. This process culminated with the absorption of the three Baltic states into the USSR in July–August 1940. The former eastern territories of Poland were absorbed into the Belarusian and Ukrainian SSRs, with the city of Wilno (now Vilnius) given to Lithuania.

The USSR applied similar pressure on Finland by trying to persuade the Finns to accept a large portion of Soviet territory to the north in exchange for shifting the Soviet–Finnish border near Leningrad some 20 miles further west. The Finns assured the Soviet negotiators that neither Finnish nor foreign troops would threaten the security of the USSR, but with the important arms-producing city Leningrad so close to the Finnish border, Moscow was not reassured. The Finns,

on the other hand, had every reason to mistrust Soviet intentions; furthermore, the shift of the border in the south (away from Leningrad and toward Helsinki) would have rendered useless their carefully built defenses (the so-called Mannerheim Line). In November 1939 the Red Army attacked Finland and suffered major losses. For two months the small, but nimble and well-trained Finnish troops held back the Soviet aggressors. Meanwhile, the unprovoked attack caused the USSR to be expelled from the League of Nations. But eventually the military and economic strain was too great for the Finns who were obliged to sign an armistice with the USSR in March 1940, giving up nearly 10 percent of Finnish territory and twice that of Finnish industry. Almost a million refugees fled their homes rather than remain under Soviet rule.

The Soviet–Finnish “Winter War” (Finnish: *Talvisota*) was a military and public relations disaster for the USSR. Soviet casualties have been estimated as at least 270,000 men – fighting an army that could mobilize only 180,000 men. While Red Army troops and commanders quickly learned from the first disastrous weeks of fighting, the overall impression remained that the Red Army was disorganized and weak. Foreign commentators argued that the purges in the officer corps had destroyed morale, placing inexperienced and incompetent men in key leadership positions. The military losses against Finland sent a shock wave through the Communist Party and Red Army leadership. Major reforms and improvements would be rushed through in the following year. Adolf Hitler and his military advisors were careful observers of the Red Army against the Finns, but underestimated the extent to which the communists learned from their mistakes.⁴⁴

The western border of the USSR changed significantly in 1940: besides acquiring land in Finnish Karelia, the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were absorbed into the USSR after fraudulent plebiscites in summer 1940. Formerly Polish territory was incorporated into the Belarussian and Ukrainian SSRs. To the south, Moscow handed the Romanian government an ultimatum in June 1940 demanding the return of formerly tsarist lands then known as Bessarabia. This territory was absorbed into the Moldovan SSR in August 1940. In all of these regions the year between incorporation into the USSR and the Nazi attack of June 1941 is remembered as a period of mass arrests, deportations, nationalization of property, and crude Stalinist propaganda.

The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact had never been seen as permanent; Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union differed far too much in ideology for that. From September 1939 onward, especially after the disastrous Winter War with Finland, the USSR was desperately rearming and reforming its armed forces in preparation for war. At the same time Stalin went out of his way to avoid giving the Germans any excuse for a premature attack. In 1941 Stalin was convinced that the Red Army could not yet withstand the Wehrmacht; he had also persuaded himself that Hitler would wait at least another year before attacking. Despite a great deal of

evidence from a number of sources that an attack was indeed planned, Stalin continued to believe that rumors of an impending invasion were spread by the British in order to pull the USSR into the war. Thus when Operation Barbarossa exploded across the Soviet frontier in the early morning hours of June 22, 1941, Red Army commanders were caught off guard. The Wehrmacht threw over three million soldiers – both Germans and allies such as the Hungarians and Romanians – against the weak Soviet defenses. At first commanders on the front lines frantically asked whether they were allowed to shoot back. In the first months of the war over a million Red Army soldiers were taken prisoner; most would die under the brutal conditions of German captivity. By autumn as the cold winds of winter began to blow, the Wehrmacht had reached the outskirts of Moscow and Leningrad.⁴⁵

Stalin apparently suffered a nervous breakdown upon receiving word of the German invasion. He was unable to make a radio address calling on Soviet citizens to resist the invaders; ironically, that task fell to Patriarch Sergius of the Russian Orthodox Church who urged Russians to destroy and expel the invaders just as the Napoleonic troops had been destroyed in 1812. Nearly two weeks after the invasion, on July 3, Stalin took to the radio waves with a patriotic speech, but privately was pessimistic. As the Germans neared Moscow, panic broke out with citizens storming the railroad stations to get out. With a combination of violence and persuasion, Stalin ended the panic, promising that he and the government would remain in Moscow (though he sent Lenin's embalmed corpse eastward just in case).

Cut off by German troops in early September 1941, Leningrad came to symbolize the heroism and tragedy of the Soviet people in this war. Under siege for 100 days, with only a small route across the ice of Lake Ladoga to bring in supplies, some 1.5 million died of cold and starvation, with another 1.4 million being evacuated. The siege of Leningrad would be broken only in January 1944.⁴⁶

By late 1941 it was apparent that Hitler's risky strategy to deal the USSR a knockout blow had not succeeded. Assuming that the campaign would be over before winter set in, Wehrmacht planners had not provided their troops with adequate winter clothing. By year's end, the Wehrmacht had suffered over 600,000 casualties; possibly only Hitler's fanatical refusal to allow withdrawals prevented military collapse, though at a high human cost. In 1942 the German armies failed to take either Moscow or Leningrad, but surged to the south, capturing oil fields in Azerbaijan and, fatefully, taking the city of Stalingrad on the Volga river. The Wehrmacht conquered the city with large losses in building-by-building street fighting, but the Red Army evacuated its troops and artillery across the Volga in good order. From the eastern bank of the river Soviet artillery pounded the Germans who found themselves dangerously overextended. Despite pleas from German general Friedrich Paulus to allow a withdrawal, Hitler adamantly refused

to budge. As Paulus had feared, he and his army was cut off. He surrendered with 91,000 troops and 22 generals on January 31, only a day after Hitler had promoted Paulus to the rank of *Generalfeldmarshall*. Only about 5,000 of the soldiers who surrendered would survive captivity and return to Germany, some a decade or more later.⁴⁷

Whether one considers Stalingrad in early 1943 or the Battle of Kursk six months later as the true “turning point” of World War II, by late 1943 it was clear that the Red Army had Hitler’s troops on the run.⁴⁸ To be sure, it would take hundreds of battles and many thousands of casualties before the last German soldier was expelled from Soviet soil. In summer 1944 the Red Army occupied the Baltic states and entered eastern Poland, setting up a communist-friendly Polish government in the city of Lublin. By early 1945 the Red Army was in East Prussia, where commanders tacitly allowed their troops to pillage, attack, and rape whatever German civilians remained. As the Red Army marched westward, millions of Germans fled toward the German heartland.

World War II in Europe – dubbed the “Great Patriotic War” like that of 1812 against Napoleon – ended for the USSR on May 9, 1945, with an unconditional German surrender. The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 brought the Asian war to an end without significant Soviet participation, but the USSR gained back from Japan the southern half of Sakhalin Island and several nearby small islands. In 1945, with its army firmly in control of eastern Europe and a goodly part of Germany, the USSR was indisputably one of the two world superpowers. At home, however, Soviet citizens were cold and hungry, Soviet cities – and enormous parts of the countryside as well – were in ruins, and tens of millions of Soviet citizens had perished in the struggle. Still, the news of the war’s end was received with great joy. Many hoped that the USSR’s victory against fascism and its secure place as a world power would translate into a more prosperous and less repressive Soviet Union in the postwar period.