I. **Purpose and overview of the lecture**

A. To provide an interpretive overview of the Russia in Revolution

B. To pick up many threads left in previous lectures
   1. Last lecture on WW I
   2. Lecture on Marxism, where I suggested that Leninism represented a kind of synthesis of Marxism and anarchism
   3. Lecture on Russia and the West
   4. References to the “revolutionary mystique” in several lectures
   5. The unparalleled destructiveness of modern times

II. **Images of the Revolution**

A. Few episodes have captured the imagination of the modern world as the revolution in Russia

B. Especially the second revolution, in Oct-Nov, the Bolshevik Revolution, became a model
   1. Revolutionaries in the West tried to copy it, and, later, so did revolutionaries in the rest of the world
   2. It has spawned a vast, “romantic” literature, movies, t.v. productions, etc.
      a) Movies such as “Reds,” before that “Dr. Zhivago,” before that “Nicholas and Alexandra”—among scores of others
      b) Yet few episodes are so utterly misunderstood—interpreted in such astonishingly different ways
      c) This issues have been taking on new forms, because of our growing access to Soviet archives, revealing important matters, with implications for how we understand the revolution and communist rule more generally

C. One of my purposes, thus, is to try to provide you with some interpretive tools
   1. I will not devote much time to the welter of facts
   2. Rather, I will try to make the meaning of the revolution
clearer
a) “Meaning”, however, is a problematic word, since the revolution has meant so many different things to different people

III. Long-range background

A. We can profitably begin with a review of matters covered in previous lectures:
1. Russia’s backwardness in relation to the West
   a) The country’s pressing desires to catch up, its paranoia about the threat from the West
   b) Russia industrialized and modernized in a rather impressive way from the 1880s to WW I
   c) But it was still not enough: The country was notably behind the major industrial powers by 1914

2. The development of Marxism in Russia
   a) After the failure of the narodnik movement, Russia's intellectuals became more and more interested in Marxism
   b) Such was the case especially because Russia seemed clearly to be entering into the path of the West—not a “special path”, as the narodniki foresaw

B. Nonetheless both Russian industrialization and Russian Marxism were undeniably "special" in certain ways

1. Russia’s industrialization was to a large degree “imported”
   a) Capital came from the west, as did the industrial know-how, the managers, engineers, technicians

2. Russia’s industrialization also was concentrated in certain areas
   a) Often there was industrial concentration in cities like St. Petersburg, yet the rest of the country remained barely out of the middle ages
   b) “Islands of advanced industry” in a “sea of backward peasants”

3. Thus, paradoxically, by the time of the war a higher proportion of Russia’s relatively new proletarians were
engaged in large factories than was the case in Germany
a) Of course, not higher absolutely—in Germany there were many more factories, but they were middle-sized and small; Russia’s were mostly large and indeed advanced

4. The Marxism that developed in Russia also differed notably from that in the West
   a) One key difference: the dogmatic, almost fanatical attachment to the concept of violent, dramatic revolution—what has been called “barricades revolution”

C. At the same time in the West, many Marxists were beginning to accept the opposite possibility, that is, of gradual reform—“legal revolution”

D. Such gradual, legal change did not seem possible to Russian intellectuals, since there were really no organs for legal change
   1. Power remained in the hands of the autocracy, which stubbornly resisted the notion of reform based on popular sovereignty

E. Another important, if related difference: Russian Marxists’ notion of party organization and propaganda
   1. Russian Marxists looked to party of elite, intellectual leaders, working in secret, conspiratorial manner—leadership by those who “know more”
   2. The reasons for such preferences are fairly obvious
      a) Open, legal organizations were not allowed
      b) The masses were far less educated than in the west
      c) Even the factory proletarians were often little more than peasants, recently arrived from the village

F. These differences found expression as well in the arena of formal theory
   1. This is a dizzyingly technical and complex arena, but for our purposes the ideas of two famous theorists are most revealing
      a) V.I. Ulyanov (Lenin) and Lev Bronstein (Trotsky)

G. Lenin’s most characteristic ideas were set down in a small book entitled, Chto Delat’? (What is to be Done?) (1902)
   1. A key difference in emphasis from western Marxists was
the Russian understanding of the nature of proletarian mentality

2. The orthodox Marxist viewpoint was that the proletarian achieved consciousness through his or her experiences—in the factory, in the street, etc.—as capitalism evolved and its contradictions become more important
   a) The workers' experience of exploitation and domination would gradually turn them toward a revolutionary socialist mentality

3. Lenin denied that such a consciousness would evolve
   a) "Unaided," workers were capable only of "trade-union consciousness"
   b) That is, they were only capable of a desire to improve their immediate condition through better wages, shorter hours, etc.
   c) Workers would not be able to understand the larger picture, the need for overthrowing capitalism and introducing socialism
   d) Only through the leadership of a party of professional revolutionaries could such a consciousness be widely achieved
   e) Lenin further argued that the party of professional revolutionaries would have to be organized much like a military organization
   f) Strict hierarchy, unquestioning obedience, clandestine activity

H. Not all or even most Russian Marxists accepted these ideas as Lenin developed them
   1. But nearly all of them did accept the idea of an elite leadership, and even of a highly organized, disciplined party
   2. However, a majority of them believed that Lenin went too far
      a) Trotsky was prominent among those who warned that Lenin’s party would eventually end up in a one-man dictatorship
   3. Lenin and Trotsky also differed on another vital point of theory: the nature of the coming revolution
      a) Here it was Lenin who was closer to western-style
Marxism

b) He asserted that revolution in Russia would have to pass through a more or less “normal” bourgeois stage—as had France and England—before a socialist revolution could be attempted

4. Yet, even in this “orthodox” Marxist perspective Lenin had some peculiarly Russian ideas

a) He argued that because the bourgeoisie in Russia was so weak—and often foreign—it could not be expected to make a bourgeois revolution on its own

b) Rather, the proletariat would have to take the leadership, pushing the bourgeoisie, in making the equivalent of 1789 in Russia

c) But, once that had been accomplished, a normal stage of bourgeois capitalism would have to ensue

5. It was here that Trotsky became more unorthodox

a) He argued that such a scenario was unrealistic

b) If the proletariat led the revolution, it could not be expected to relinquish revolutionary power

c) More to the point, it could not be expected to accept the rule of the capitalists, of many years of exploitation

d) Thus, the proletariat would press on for socialism

e) And its hope for socialism would be justified, since it could link up to the advanced proletariat of the west, in “permanent revolution”

6. Lenin dissented, and warned that such a path could have “absurd and reactionary” results

a) And he insisted that the proletariat could only hope to hold power when capitalism had done its job of “creating” socialism

b) Moreover, revolution in the West could not be relied upon

I. In this debate we can see the beginnings of one of the greatest ironies in modern history:

1. In 1917 Trotsky could come around to Lenin’s ideas about a highly centralized, dictatorial party organization (in spite of his earlier warning about the dangers of a one-man dictatorship)
2. At the same time, Lenin would come around to Trotsky’s views on revolution
3. And, as we will see, both were tragically if highly ironically correct in their earlier criticisms and predictions
   a) Russia would indeed turn into a one-man dictatorship and the revolution would indeed take “reactionary and absurd” directions—in totalitarianism and Stalinism

IV. The impact of the war
A. We should not think that these theories of Russian Marxists had much to do with the actual outbreak of revolution in 1917
B. To explain the collapse of tsarism, we need to examine the impact of the war on Russia’s state, society, and economy
C. It seems reasonably clear that tsarist rule might have lasted indefinitely, or at least much longer, without the war
D. But the war made tsarism in its present form simply impossible
   1. It subjected Russia to enormous strains
   2. Such strains were of course felt by all countries, but other countries were better able to deal with them
   3. In Russia, the strains aggravated the country’s economic weakness, underlined its political insufficiencies, intensified its social conflicts
      a) Totalitarian warfare required the marshaling of a total effort
      b) It required the voluntary cooperation, enthusiasm, even at times grass-roots initiatives, throughout society
      c) And these were nearly impossible within the framework of tsarism
      d) Sharing power, cooperating with various previously “outsider” groups, simply was beyond what the tsar and his officials could accept
   4. In more practical, palpable terms the inadequacies of the country were revealed in food shortages, transportation break-downs, poor or non-existent weapons, food, and clothing for the troops
E. All of these difficulties were typified and exaggerated by the person of the tsar himself, and his wife
1. He was a slow, inflexible, mediocre kind of man
2. He was unable to adjust to the needs of totalitarian warfare
3. And he stubbornly resisted any suggestions that his autocratic powers be limited
4. His wife was, if possible, even worse
   a) Limited in mental horizons, stubborn, fanatically attached to autocracy, willful, ignorant, and superstitious
5. Both were weighed down by a personal tragedy
   a) After four daughters, a son was finally born, but he turned out to be a hemophiliac
6. After trying all kinds of doctors, without success, the royal couple turned to quacks and charlatans
   a) And, in one of the strangest developments in modern history, found one who seemed able to stop the boy’s bleeding
   b) Rasputin was able, through his influence over the royal couple, to assume a wider and wider range of control over the operations of the Russian state
   c) And he used this power to indulge in just about every conceivable form of debauchery without fear of punishment

F. Thus, while Russia’s condition due to the war became progressively desperate, it was clear to most observers that her power-center was thoroughly rotten
1. In December, 1916 a group of conspirators—one a relative of the tsar—murdered Rasputin
2. But this effort to save the monarchy was really too late
3. In Feb-March, 1917 food riots in Petrograd spread into a general insurrection
4. And that led very quickly to the abdication of the tsar and the end of tsarism in Russia

V. The Development of the Revolution

A. With the power center of centuries now dissolved, everyone had great hopes for a new, free Russia
B. This initial euphoria had of course characterized all of the
revolutions since 1789

C. But no one knew, or at least agreed, just what steps should be taken

D. A Provisional Government was set up
   1. Everywhere spontaneous committees or councils, known as soviets, began to exercise a de facto authority, since tsarist authority had so collapsed

E. But huge problems had to be dealt with by the soviets or any other institutions

F. Perhaps the greatest one of all was that of excessive, run-away expectations
   1. The country had long awaited “revolution” and “democracy”, and now it seemed almost like the millennium—miracles were expected
      a) The revolution would solve everything, resolve all disputes, make everyone happy
   2. For the peasants the revolution meant getting rid of the wealthy landowner, the taxes—and the war
   3. For the workers it meant better pay, shorter hours, control over the factories
   4. For the national minorities it meant immediate autonomy or even independence
   5. For liberals it meant new freedoms, the rule of law, the protection of business
   6. For radical intellectuals it meant a new social order, one of reason, justice, brotherhood and cooperation
   7. It all came to resemble a gigantic scramble, a kind of gold rush, but on twenty different levels

G. Limitations of the Provisional Government
   1. Probably no government could have ruled over this initial stage
      a) But the Provisional Government was especially unsuited
   2. First of all, it was unwilling or unable to give forceful direction
      a) Its members had little experience in government
      b) But more important, they reflected different constituencies, with often quite contradictory
programs  
c) Typically, the Provisional Government hesitated, procrastinated, created committees to study problems  

3. Its most momentous decision was also a disastrous one: to continue the war  
a) By this time, the masses had no enthusiasm for continuing what seemed an utterly senseless conflict  
b) And the efforts of the Provisional Government to continue the war were undoubtedly the most important reason for its rather rapid loss of popular support  

H. The role of the soviets  
1. The voice of the masses was heard most directly in the soviet organizations throughout the country  
2. And in them the cry for “land, bread, and peace” became louder and more insistent as the months of revolution passed  
3. Into this raging sea of hopes and aspirations the bolsheviks plunged with enthusiasm and determination  
4. At least, so much may be said of Lenin and Trotsky  
a) Both now begin to call for a second revolution, a revolution that would establish the rule of the masses, through the direct rule of the soviets, leading to the introduction of socialism  
b) The key rationale, one that sought to reconcile this view with orthodox Marxism, was that world revolution was at hand  
c) Revolution in Russia would be the “spark” to set the industrialized west afire  
d) And the west and Russia would then join hands, building socialism together  
e) Thus, backward Russia had a vital, even leadership role to play  

I. The “making” of the revolution  
1. What Lenin and Trotsky were able to do was not so much make the revolution as “catch” it, after helping to whip it up
2. To change the metaphor, the “bucking bronco” of the revolution was throwing off all contenders
3. By October of 1917 it had thrown all but the Bolsheviks
   a) That is, all other major parties had discredited themselves in association with Provisional Government
   b) The Bolsheviks stood as the last alternative to absolute chaos (or at least so it seemed to many observers)
4. In February and March they had seemed an impossible alternative, an utterly fringe group of fanatics
   a) And in truth they could not have ruled in March, or indeed at any point before October
5. But now they could be seen as the last chance, the only party left
J. The “seizure” of power
1. This was a remarkably simple matter for the Bolsheviks, in the direct military sense
2. There was not really much to oppose them
3. But even after the short, violent stage, the Bolsheviks gave the appearance of being masters
4. They did so by identifying themselves with processes and developments over which they in fact had little control, although they encouraged them
   a) They recognized the spontaneous expropriations in the countryside and in the factories
   b) The peasants were taking land and the Bolsheviks said “go ahead!”
   c) Workers were taking over the factories and the Bolsheviks said “go ahead!”
   d) Soldiers were deserting and the Bolsheviks said “go ahead!”
   e) National minorities were taking over and the Bolsheviks said “go ahead!”
5. One might say, then, the Bolsheviks began not by establishing order but by recognizing disorder
   a) The Bolsheviks were, for the time being, approving measures that were much closer to the anarchist
program than to that of the Marxists

b) That is, anarchists called for the end of state control, the end of command from above, the end of the principle of central authority of any sort

K. The Bolsheviks’ efforts to hold on to power

1. To “catch” power in a chaotic situation, through opportunistic appeals, by recognizing spontaneous and contradictory developments, meant relatively little

2. Being able to hold on to power afterwards was the real test

3. And the success of the Bolsheviks in doing that must be in large part attributed to the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky

   a) They formed a remarkable partnership, both theoretically but even more practically

4. Lenin provided organizational talents, a respected leadership role behind the scenes

   a) This was extremely important, in getting band of willful and contentious men to work together

5. Trotsky was a courageous and brilliant commander of the troops, both in Oct. Nov. 1917 and in the ensuing Civil War, when he fashioned the Red Army

   a) He was a spellbinding orator, a charismatic leader, a ruthless commander

6. Quite aside from these matters, the Bolsheviks benefited from being able to identify as Russian nationalists as well as socialist revolutionaries

   a) The White, reactionary armies, supported by the West, and seeking to bring back the old order, caused many to rally to the Bolsheviks as the lesser evil

   b) Indeed, this civil war of 1918 through 1920 gave the Bolsheviks a legitimacy they never had before

   c) It also helped them to forge means of real power—the Red Army, Cheka, party organization, the new state bureaucracies

VI. The bolsheviks in 1921: Defeat in Victory

A. By early 1921, after horrific struggles, the Red Army and the
Bolshevik Party stood supreme over Russia

B. But the expected revolution in the west failed to come to their aid

C. Thus, the Bolsheviks faced a profound dilemma
   1. How could they as proletarian revolutionaries maintain control over a country that was overwhelmingly peasant or “bourgeois” (non-socialist, at any rate)?
   2. If the socialist revolution in the west did not occur, would not the proletarian revolution in Russia lapse back into a bourgeois stage?

D. For Marxists, this would be a puzzling and distressing dilemma
   1. And the warnings of Trotsky and Lenin reverberated:
      a) A party like the Bolshevik Party would inevitably turn into a one-man dictatorship
      b) A proletarian revolution in Russia, without the industrial preconditions of one, would have “absurd and reactionary” results