Aleksandr Blok, *The Intelligentsia and the Revolution*: ‘An artist’s job, an artist’s obligation is to see what is conceived, to hear that music with which ‘the air torn up by wind’ resounds…We love those dissonances, those roars, those ringing sounds, those unexpected transitions…With all your body, all your heart, and all your mind, listen to the Revolution.’

This part of *True October* is a collection of quotes from historians purposefully structured so that they read like a conversation. I like to think of historians actively engaging in debate: stating their case, disagreeing and agreeing over various issues, and contributing their own particular insights. Conceptualizing historians’ perspectives as debate is one of the best ways of understanding the nature of historiography which is, in essence, a dialogue. Historians set out to explain the revolution; they feel that they have something of worth to say about past events. This may involve offering a new perspective, challenging the views of others, or attempting to elucidate more clearly what has been said previously. As you read the quotes, note how there is a certain amount of agreement on different matters, but also subtle and glaring divergence of opinion. Ask yourself how, why and where these historians might ‘fit’ amongst historiographical trends traditions. You may need to refer back to Part 1 to check whether a historian belongs to a definitive school of thought or whether they were prominent in debates over a particular issue. You might also like to consider why I’ve placed different historians into certain trends. I have made what I consider the best categorizations, but my judgments are subjective and open to debate. To assist in guiding your reading, headings have been included to split up the quotes into different periods and themes. These quotes also tell the story of the Russian Revolution – the dialogue is itself a history.

**Tsarist Russia in Crisis 1890 - 1905**

Leon Trotsky: A population of 150 million people, 5.4 million square kilometers of land in Europe, 17.5 in Asia. Within this vast space every epoch of human culture is to be found: from the primeval barbarism of the northern forests, where people worship blocks of wood, to the modern social relations of the capitalist city, where socialist workers consciously recognize themselves as participants in world politics and keep a watchful eye on the Balkans and on debates in the German Reichstag. The most concentrated industry in Europe based on the most backward agriculture in Europe. The most colossal state apparatus in the world making use of every achievement of modern technological progress in order to retard the historical progress of its own country.¹

Robert Service: …the Russian Empire was deeply fissured between the government and the tsar’s subjects; between the capital and the provinces; between the educated and the uneducated; between Western and Russian ideas; between rich and poor; between privilege and oppression; between contemporary fashion and centuries-old custom.²

J.P. Nettl: Above all, this polarization was self-reinforcing, centrifugal; the tendency was repression and greater extremism, not compromise or reduction of conflict. There might be a startling plethora of different views as what was wrong or what should be done to put it right, probably greater in range than the policy dissensus that to some extent exists in all societies, but on one thing almost all critics were agreed: a sense of impending disaster. It runs through the literature of the three decades before 1917, both fact and fiction, like an incessant roll of thunder.³
Albert Nenarokov: The general backwardness of the country could not be overcome by half-measures or reforms of any kind. It was a reflection of the crisis of the whole system and called for its reorganization.4

Steve Smith: The collapse of the autocracy was rooted in a crisis of modernisation. The government hoped that it could carry out modernisation whilst maintaining tight control over society. Yet the effect of industrialization, urbanization, internal migration, and the emergence of new social classes was to set in train forces that served to erode the foundations of the autocratic state.5

Tsuyoshi Hasegawa: …the tsarist regime was pregnant with irreconcilable internal contradictions that it had no capacity to resolve.6

Isaac Deutscher: The social crisis under which Tsarist Russia laboured manifested itself in the stark contrast between her status and importance as a great power and the archaic weakness of her social structure, between the splendors of her empire and the wretchedness of her institutions.7

W.H. Chamberlin: Nicholas II, whose personal misfortune it was to rule in a period of wars and profound social and economic changes, was less fit for the role of an autocrat than any sovereign since the mad Tsar Paul. He was a man of weak character, limited intelligence and singular lack of initiative; indeed the most distinctive psychological trait of the last Tsar was his inability to react strongly to the most tragic and significant events.8

Bernard Pares: The sovereign might be as weak as water, he might change his mind every five minutes, but the thing which he said last, was the thing that was done, and the government of the Empire at once reflected in full every variation of his will.9

Leon Trotsky: Nicholas II inherited from his ancestors not only a giant empire, but also a revolution. And they did not bequeath him one quality which would have made him capable of governing an empire or even a province or a county.10

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: In tsarist Russia the capitalist yoke was aggravated by the yoke of tsardom. The workers not only suffered from capitalist exploitation, from inhuman toil, but, in common with the whole people, suffered from a lack of all rights. The politically advanced workers therefore strove to lead the revolutionary movement of all the democratic elements in town and country against tsardom. The peasants were in dire need owing to lack of land and the numerous survivals of serfdom, and lived in a state of bondage to the landlords and kulaks. The nations inhabiting tsarist Russia groaned beneath a double yoke – that of their own landlords and capitalists and that of the Russian landlords and capitalists. The economic crisis of 1900-03 had aggravated the hardships of the toiling masses; the war intensified them still further. The war defeats added fuel to the hatred of the masses for tsardom. The patience of the people was coming to an end.11

Richard Pipes: …the Marxist notion that revolution always results from social (“class”) discontent cannot be sustained. Although such discontent did exist in Imperial Russia, as it does everywhere, the decisive and immediate factors making for the regime’s fall and the resultant turmoil were overwhelmingly political.12

Orlando Figes: Time and time again, the obstinate refusal of the tsarist regime to concede reforms turned what should have been a political problem into a revolutionary crisis: decent minded liberals like Prince Lvov were forced into the revolutionary camp by the regime’s idiotic
policy of blocking the initiatives of patriotic bodies such as the zemstvos…The tsarist regime’s
downfall was not inevitable; but its own stupidity made it so.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Richard Pipes}: …the collapse of tsarism, while not improbable, was certainly not inevitable.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Bernard Pares}: …those essential changes which were required in Russia could come without
convulsions, and they very nearly did.\textsuperscript{15}

\section*{The Revolution of 1905 to WWI}

\textbf{Orlando Figes}: It was ironic but somehow fitting that the 1905 Revolution should have been
started by an organisation dreamed up by the tsarist regime itself. No-one believed more than
Father Gapon in the bond between Tsar and people.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{History of the CPSU (b.) short-course}: The streets of St. Petersburg ran with workers' blood…January 9 (22) came to be known as “Bloody Sunday”. On that day the workers received a bloody lesson. It was their faith in the tsar that was riddled by bullets on that day. They came to realize that they could win their rights only by struggle.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Leon Trotsky}: Although with a few broken ribs, Tsarism came out of the experience of 1905 alive and strong enough.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Bernard Pares}: The monarchy had been saved; the economy was prosperous; and Russia had – shall we say – half a constitution.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Orlando Figes}: …although the regime succeeded in restoring order, it could not hope to put the clock back. 1905 had changed society for good. Many of the younger comrades of 1905 were the elders of 1917. They were inspired by its memory and instructed by its lessons.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Alan Wood}: Neither fish nor fowl, the notion of a ‘constitutional autocracy’ was not only impractical, it was clearly a political absurdity which was doomed to fail.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Leon Trotsky}: The events of 1905 were a prologue to the two revolutions of 1917, that of February and that of October.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{History of the CPSU (b.) short-course}: The revolution disclosed that tsardom was the sworn enemy of the people, that tsardom was like the proverbial hunchback whom only the grave could cure.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{Richard Pipes}: In the end, Russia gained nothing more than a breathing spell.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{History of the CPSU (b.) short-course}: The triumph of the Stolypin reaction was short-lived. A government which would offer the people nothing but the knout and the gallows could not endure. Repressive measures became so habitual that they ceased to inspire fear in the people. The fatigue felt by the workers in the years immediately following the defeat of the revolution began to wear off. The workers resumed the struggle. The Bolsheviks' forecast that a new rise in the tide of revolution was inevitable proved correct.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Orlando Figes}: There is no reason to suppose that the tsarist regime was doomed to collapse in the way Marxist determinists once claimed from their narrow focus on its 'social contradictions’. It could have been saved by reform. But there is the rub. For Russia’s last two tsars lacked the
will for real reform…It was there tragedy that just as Russia was entering the twentieth century they were trying to return it to the seventeenth.26

**Richard Pipes:** In sum, while the collapse of tsarism was not inevitable, it was made likely by deep-seated cultural and political flaws that prevented the tsarist regime from adjusting to the economic and cultural growth of the country, flaws that proved fatal under the pressure generated by World War I.27

**David Longley:** The collapse of 1917 was paradoxically the consequence of the success of the regime in meeting the military challenge, at the expense of civilian Russia: a traditionally Russian situation.28

**Tsuyoshi Hasegawa:** Once a crack appeared in the monolith after the first humiliating defeat of the Russian army, the war that had initially cemented all segments of society together began to rip them apart with ferocious force.29

### Tsar Nicholas II and the Rasputin Scandal

**W. Bruce Lincoln:** Ever since the Emperor Nicholas II had taken command of his country’s collapsing armies in August 1915, he had allowed his neurotically introspective Empress to turn his empire onto one of the most bizarre courses ever taken by a nation at war.30

**Bernard Pares:** And so the Russian Emperor was compelled by his wife to flout all thinking Russia, his Ministers, the Duma, the organs of local government and the general public, and go off to the front to win the war without them, leaving her to manage the rear for him.31

**Albert Nenarokov:** The decay of the tsarist regime was most apparent in the Rasputin cult.32

**Alan Wood:** …the scandal which had surrounded Rasputin’s name was merely a symptom, not a cause, of the acute malaise which inflicted an incompetent and unpopular regime now deep in the throes of a devastating war.33

**Michael Lynch:** Rasputin’s extraordinary life at court and his murder by courtiers were but symptoms of the fatal disease affecting the tsarist system.34

**Orlando Figes:** Alexandra’s ‘sexual corruption’ became a kind of metaphor for the diseased condition of the tsarist state.35

**Bernard Pares:** In the midst of a world wide struggle, in a time of the closest collaboration with the best brains of Western statesmanship, the Russian ministers were selected by an ignorant, blind and hysterical woman on the test of their subservience to an ignorant, fanatical and debouched adventurer.36

**Robert Service:** There were those at court who made criticisms, but they castigated the symptoms of decadence, not the disease: they reviled Rasputin while refusing to recognize more basic political problems.37

**Alan Wood:** The tsar foolishly added to his own isolation by assuming personal command of the Russian army in 1915. His unhelpful presence at military headquarters in Mogilev left the conduct of affairs in the capital…in the hands of his neurotic wife – contemptuously known by the public as nemka (‘the German Woman’) – and the abominable Rasputin.38

**Orlando Figes:** Nicholas was the source of all the problems. If there was a vacuum of power at the centre of the ruling system, then he was the empty space. In a sense, Russia gained in him the
worst of both worlds: a Tsar determined to rule from the throne yet quite incapable of exercising power.  

Bernard Pares: Autocracy really ended in Russia on November 1st, 1894, when the last autocrat died.  

Richard Pipes: In my opinion, the principal causes of the downfall in 1917 (as also in 1991) were political, and not economic or social.  

Nenarokov: “The crux of the matter was not the weak character of the last autocrat…and not the baneful influence brought to bear on him by Grigory Rasputin …The root cause was elsewhere, in a more complex set of circumstances reflecting the total collapse of the regime – the degenerate state of the autocratic system. The activities of Nicholas II and the political maneuvers of the court coterie enhanced the isolation of the autocracy and hastened its downfall, but any other activities, any other political course and any other ruler could not have done a thing to save tsarism.”  

Service: “…although Nicholas II may not have been an outstanding emperor, it was the general situation and not his personality that enfeebled the regime’s reaction to the assaults made upon it.”  

W.H. Chamberlin: It is highly doubtful whether under any conditions the Russian political, economic and social organism could have stood such an ordeal as the World War. But the characters of the Tsar and the Tsarina accelerated and made inevitable the doom of the Romanov dynasty.  

Orlando Figes: …whereas the other European powers managed to adapt and improvise, the tsarist system proved much too rigid and unwieldy, too inflexible and set in its ways, too authoritarian and inefficient, to adapt itself to the situation as it changed. The First World War was a titanic test for the states of Europe – and one that Tsarism failed in a singular and catastrophic way.  

Deutscher: “It is true that the war drastically exposed and aggravated the fatal weakness of the ancien regime. But it was hardly the decisive cause of that weakness. Russia had been shaken by the tremors of revolution just before the war; the streets of St. Petersburg were covered with barricades in the summer of 1914. Indeed the outbreak of hostilities and the mobilization swamped the incipient revolution and delayed it by two years and a half, only to charge it eventually with greater explosive force.”  

Christopher Hill: “The fundamental cause of the Russian Revolution, then, was the incompatibility of the tsarist state with the demands of modern civilization. War accelerated the development of revolutionary crises, but their deep-lying causes could not be wished away in times of peace.”  

Sheila Fitzpatrick: “The pressures of the First World War – and, no doubt, the personalities of Nicholas and his wife, and the tragedy of their young son’s haemophilia – threw the anachronistic traits of the Russian autocracy into sharp relief, and made Nicholas seem less like the upholder of the autocratic tradition than an unwitting satirist of it.”  

Christopher Hill: “Not only were the ministers shockingly incompetent, they were also changed with bewildering rapidity as the situation went from bad to worse.”  

David Longley: As the soldiers died pointlessly at the front, corrupt minister ‘leapfrogged’ corrupt ministers in a struggle for power: the ultimate proof that the government was in capable
of winning the war and worthy only of the accusations made by V. A. Maklakov that the tsar was a ‘mad chauffeur’, or by Milyukov that the ministers were either guilty of treason or of folly.\textsuperscript{44}

**Bernard Pares**: The result of all this atrocious mismanagement was complete chaos.\textsuperscript{45}

**Tsuyoshi Hasegawa**: This incompetence was by no means an accident, however, but was rooted in the structural weakness of the regime itself.\textsuperscript{46}

**Deutscher**: “That the Tsar and his advisors committed many foolish mistakes is, of course, true. But they committed them under the pressure of the Tsarist bureaucracy and of those elements in the possessing classes who had a stake in the monarchy.”

**Robert Service**: Truly this was already a creaky structure of power. Matters were not helped by the fact that the Emperor was not respected. He was a monarch whose capacity for hard work was not matched by outstanding intelligence. He had no clear vision for Russia’s future and wore himself out with day-to-day political administration. He found contentment only in the company of his family and was thought to be hen-pecked by his spouse Alexandra. In fact he was more independent from her than rumour suggested, but the rumours were believed. Furthermore he surrounded himself with advisors who included a variety of mystics and quacks…Nicholas was out of joint with his times.\textsuperscript{47}

**Orlando Figes**: …when misfortune had put him on the throne he swore to uphold and pass on to his son the autocratic powers which he had inherited from his beloved and much-feared father. He adhered to this coronation oath with dogged narrow-mindedness, as if he were terrified that God (or his wife) would punish him if he failed to rule like Ivan the Terrible. As long as he remained Tsar nothing could divert him from this path. For twenty-two years he had ignored the lessons of history, as well as the pleadings of countless advisors, which all pointed to the fact that the only way to save his throne was to grant a government accountable to the people. His motive was always the same: his ‘conscience’ forbade him to do it…he probably found it easier to abdicate than to turn himself into a constitutional king. That was Nicholas’s tragedy.\textsuperscript{48}

**Pipes**: “Nicholas II fell not because he was hated but because he was held in contempt.”

### The February Revolution, 1917

**Orlando Figes**: Throughout his reign Nicholas gave the impression of being unable to cope with the task of ruling a vast Empire in the grips of a deepening revolutionary crisis. True, only a genius could have coped with it. And Nicholas was certainly no genius.\textsuperscript{49}

**Smith**: “When the February Revolution came, it was not as the result of military defeat, or even war weariness, but as the result of the collapse of public support in the government.”

**W.H. Chamberlin**: The Romanov dynasty, with three centuries of traditional absolutism behind it, fell not as a result of any carefully planned conspiracy or coup d’état, but as a result of an unorganized, almost anarchical popular movement, the success of which was the measure of the inner weakness and decadence of the old order.\textsuperscript{50}

**Pipes**: “Whatever grievances they may have harboured – real and fancified – the ‘masses’ neither needed nor desired a revolution; the only group interested in it was the intelligentsia. Stress on alleged popular discontent and class conflict derives more from ideological preconceptions than
from the facts at hand – namely from the discredited Marxist theory that political developments are always and everywhere driven by class conflict.”

Alan Wood: Despite the disaffection of the military, however, it was neither the high command nor the Duma politicians, still less the revolutionary parties, which finally brought about the downfall of ‘Bloody Nicholas’. It was caused by the spontaneous upsurge of the politically radicalized masses.51

Ronald G. Suny: “The overthrow of the Tsar, accomplished by workers and soldiers in Petrograd, was the product of largely spontaneous action by thousands of hungry, angry, and war weary women and men who had lost all confidence in the government of Nicholas II.”

Tsuyoshi Hasegawa: As wartime reality hit the workers hard, the Bolsheviks’ antiwar propaganda was not incomprehensible to the workers. The Bolsheviks’ insistence on the insurrection of the masses without the help of any other class in society appealed to the workers’ sense of independence and was compatible with their resentment of privileged society.52

Bernard Pares: …the cause of ruin came not at all from below, but from above…The Tsar had many opportunities of putting things right, and several times he was on the point of taking them…far from a dictation of events from below, this passive people went on enduring long after it ought to have ceased to do so; and when the crash came, it had done so little to shape it in any way, that it was left to the last minute of a single regiment to determine the issue.53

Leon Trotsky: To the question, Who led the February revolution? we can answer then definitely enough: Conscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin. But we must here immediately add: This leadership proved sufficient to guarantee the victory of the insurrection, but it was not adequate to transfer immediately into the hands of the proletarian vanguard the leadership of the revolution.54

Bernard Pares: No one made the Russian Revolution, unless it was the autocracy itself…It was a direct result of the utter bankruptcy of the autocracy.55

W.H. Chamberlin: The collapse of the Romanov autocracy in March 1917 was one of the most leaderless, spontaneous, anonymous revolutions of all time.56

James D. White: To say, as Chamberlin does, that the February revolution was spontaneous, leaderless and anonymous implies that the whole episode came by chance, and that the elements of planning and organisation were absent. But in fact the overthrow of tsarism was widely anticipated both by the liberals and by the organised workers, and both of these groups had in their own way planned and prepared for the event. It was mainly the precise timing of the February days that took those involved by surprise.57

Tsuyoshi Hasegawa: The growth of the strike movement was not entirely spontaneous. In fact, it would be impossible to organize “spontaneously” such strikes as happened in August and September 1915, January, March, and October 1916, and January February 1917. These strikes involved many factories in the entire city. Strikes required organizers who planned strategy, agitators who appealed to the workers, orators who spoke at factory rallies, and a network of communication that coordinated activities with other factories. Amorphous grievances of the workers had to be defined in simple slogans. Demonstrations had to be directed to a certain destination through specific routes. Although no single political group could claim exclusive leadership of the workers’ movement and it is
impossible to measure accurately the influence of the underground revolutionary activists, it is certain that it was the underground activists at the factory level who provided the workers’ movement with important leadership and continuity. Although activists who were official members of the revolutionary parties were few, they were assisted by nonparty sympathizers who came to support the hard-core activists. The government’s repressive measures did not eradicate such activists, but created more of them.58

Orlando Figes and Boris Kollonitskii: During the February Days in Petrograd the crowds displayed an extraordinary level of self-organization and solidarity…This apparent cohesion of the crowd raises the question of its organization. If it seemed to act like a single body, were there leaders telling people where to go, or did the crowd just organize itself? What is ‘organized’, what ‘spontaneous’, when it is a question of the revolutionary crowd? The historical debate has never been resolved. The only way to do so is to look at the cultural code by which the crowd self-organized – for that is what is meant by its spontaneity…the crowd had its own mechanisms, its own leaders and cultural codes of protest, which it directed into organized channels.59

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “The revolution was victorious because its vanguard was the working class which headed the movement of millions of peasants clad in soldiers' uniform demanding "peace, bread and liberty." It was the hegemony of the proletariat that determined the success of the revolution…The First Revolution, that of 1905, had prepared the way for the swift success of the Second Revolution, that of 1917…The Revolution of 1905 had shown that the Soviets were organs of armed uprising and at the same time the embryo of a new, revolutionary power. The idea of Soviets lived in the minds of the working-class masses, and they put it into effect as soon as tsardom was overthrown, with this difference, however, that in 1905 it was Soviets only of Workers’ Deputies that were formed, whereas in February 1917, on the initiative of the Bolsheviks, there arose Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.”

Pipes: “The record leaves no doubt that the myth of the Tsar being forced from the throne by rebellious workers and peasants is just that. The Tsar yielded not to a rebellious populace but to generals and politicians, and he did so from a sense of patriotic duty.”

Peter Kenez: No, Pipes is mistaken when he attributes the collapse of tsarism to the superior patriotism and inherent good will of Nicholas II. It is not only that he did not have the brains and character to survive, he also lacked the means.60

Michael Lynch: It was not the demonstrators in Petrograd, but the army high command and the aristocratic members of the duma who advised him to abdicate.61

Mark D. Steinberg: “Only when revolution broke out in the streets of the capital were liberals forced into serious political action.”

E. N. Burdzhalov: The revolution had overthrown Nicholas II, and only afterward was this presented as a voluntary resignation. Nicholas II had not stepped down in the first days of the revolution when he had still intended to drown the unarmed people in blood with the help of troops from the front. The tsar abdicated when the reliability of these units became manifest, when the revolution had spread to Moscow and other cities, when the tsar’s cause had failed and all options had closed. The insurgent people had dethroned Nicholas themselves.62

Edward Acton: “The revolution was not centrally organized but it was consciously willed.”

Bernard Pares: The whole apparatus of administration was crumbling away of itself.63

Leon Trotsky: There were not to be found anywhere in the country any groups of the population, any parties, institutions, or military units which were ready to put up a fight for the old regime.64
Pipes: “The most striking aspect of the February Revolution was the extraordinary rapidity with which the Russian state fell apart. It was if the greatest empire in the world had been an artificial construction, without organic unity. The instant the monarch withdrew, the entire structure collapsed in a heap.”

George Kennan: …what occurred in Russia in February-March 1917 was, precisely, a breakdown of the autocracy under a fortuitous combination of momentary strains – not the overthrow of the existing order by revolutionary forces. In essence, the regime may be said to have collapsed because it was not able to muster sufficient support to enable it to withstand this sudden combination of strains.65

Orlando Figes: Collapse is certainly the right word to use. For the Romanov regime fell under the weight of its own internal contradictions. It was not overthrown.66

Steve Smith: The downfall of Nicholas ‘The Bloody’ filled the workers and soldiers of Petrograd with joy and elation. They had no real sense of this as a ‘bourgeois’ revolution, with all that that implied. Instead they believed that Russia was embarking on a democratic revolution that would bring enormous benefits to the common people.67

The Provisional Government and Dual Power

Leon Trotsky: The country had so radically vomited up the monarchy that it could not ever crawl down the people’s throat again.68

E.N. Burdzhalov: The second revolutionary wave had not achieved its main goal. The bourgeoisie remained in power, a provisional government had been formed, and the basic demands of the minimum programs of the RSDLP did not recede without a trace. It overthrew the tsarist monarchy and strengthened the organ of genuine popular authority – the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, and this was of paramount importance for the revolution’s further development.69

Deutscher: “The February Revolution of 1917 holds its place in history only as the prelude to October.”

Sergei Melgunov: By the will of men, not by the forces of the elements, did October become inevitable…‘October’ was not the realization of ‘February’.70

W.H. Chamberlin: The Provisional Government that replaced the fallen autocracy was weak to the point of impotence. It was conspicuously lacking in all the means by which a state normally enforces its authority. The Tsarist regime was supported on tradition, on a bureaucracy that was often venal and inefficient but that still had required some administrative experience, on the army and police. The Provisional Government not only missed all these old supports of centralized authority, but it failed to create any new ones.71

William Rosenberg: If we understand ‘authority’ to mean legitimated power, however, rather than simply the ability to coerce, and if we understand a principal task of democratic states to be the mediation of contending claims about local boundaries of power and authority, especially those embedded in social relations and cultures, it can be argued that the Russian state lost its capacity to govern in 1917 not because its authority was compromised by the soviets and even less because Miliukov and other initially identified its interests with military victory and imperialism. Rather, the state began to ‘wither’ because it lacked, and indeed never had, the
institutional capacity to mediate contending claims about how power should be exercised locally, and because it was unable to satisfy conflicting claims on its economic, social and cultural resources.72

**Fitzpatrick:** “In February 1917, the autocracy collapsed in the face of popular demonstrations and the withdrawal of elite support for the regime. In the euphoria of revolution, political solutions seemed easy. Russia’s future form of government would, of course, be democratic…Yet within eight months the hopes and expectations of February lay in ruins. ‘Dual power’ proved an illusion, masking something like a power vacuum. The popular revolution became progressively more radical, while the elite revolution moved towards an anxious conservative stance in defense of property and law and order.”

**Boris Kolonitskii:** For the liberals it was excessively radical, cutting across their ideals and developing in a direction which was ‘left of common sense’. The socialists considered it to be a ‘bourgeois’ revolution and looked for a way out of the crisis and its problems by deepening the revolution.73

**Smith:** “The February Revolution gave rise to a short-lived mood of national unity and optimism. Liberty and democracy were the order of the day. Overnight everyone was transformed from a subject to a citizen…Yet from the first, the scope of the revolution was in dispute. For the reluctant revolutionaries of the Provisional Government the overthrow of the tsar was an act of national self-preservation driven by the need to bring victory in war. For the lower classes, liberty and democracy meant nothing short of a social revolution that would bring about the complete destruction on the old structure of authority and the construction of a new life in accordance with the ideas of justice and freedom.”

**Robert Service:** Within months it had become evident that the Romanov dynasty’s collapse would produce yet further disintegration. The times were a-changing, and hopes and fears changed with them.74

**Christopher Read:** “Once tsarism had finally committed suicide there was only the flimsy barrier of the Provisional Government to restrain the deep pressures that had been building up in Russian society for over half a century.”

**A.J.P. Taylor:** “Though called democratic, this government had no popular mandate and little popular support. It simply carried on the old system, just as a hen continues to run around the yard when its head has been cut off. No one knew how to change direction.”

**Bernard Pares:** The change was at the outset wholly destructive, but it was too great to be contained, and now that passions were kindled it made the whole past obsolete in a day…The power then, was now with the mob, and who could curb the mob? Not a Provisional Government, to call it by the modest name which it took. Every day it became more out of date, and from the first day of its agitated existence there was a Soviet representing the revolted armed force of the capital sitting in the Duma’s own debating hall.75

**Alexander Berkman:** “It must always be remembered — and remembered well — that revolution does not mean destruction only. It means destruction plus construction, with the greatest emphasis on the plus.”

**Pipes:** “Russia was governed – or rather misgoverned – by a regime of dual power, under which the soviets subverted the authority of the administration without assuming responsibility for the consequences.”
Michael Lynch: The Provisional Government was thus from the beginning in an impossible and paradoxical situation: in order to survive it had to keep Russia in the war, but in keeping Russia in the war, it destroyed its chances of survival.76

Lenin and the Bolsheviks

Alexander Rabinowitch: The elemental forces unleashed by the February Revolution could not be stopped in mid-stream. Virtually alone among Russia’s political leaders, Lenin quickly understood that.77

Alan Wood: In the fields and factories and at the front, therefore, the population was mobilizing itself for continued revolutionary action as the twin organs of dual power hedged and havered on the two crucial issues of the day – peace and land.78

W.H. Chamberlin: Lenin’s arrival in Russia is a major date in the development of the Revolution. Without his driving, extremist leadership, it is at least conceivable that the explosive mood of the masses would have evaporated in a series of disconnected, local outbursts. In Lenin the masses found a leader after their own mood – not their mood of April, but their mood of October and November. The hard, extreme, dogmatic viewpoint which Lenin enunciated from the moment of his arrival on Russian soil alienated a considerable part of the Social Democratic intelligentsia. But it won for the Bolsheviks the allegiance first of the workers, more slowly of the soldiers.79

Lynch: “He defined the events of February not as a genuine class revolution but as a palace coup which had simply given authority to ex-tsarist aristocrats and the bourgeoisie.”

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “Lenin's April Theses laid down for the Party a brilliant plan of struggle for the transition from the bourgeois-democratic to the Socialist revolution, from the first stage of the revolution to the second stage – the stage of the Socialist revolution. The whole history of the Party had prepared it for this great task.”

Deutscher: “His followers were about to meet the Mensheviks at a unity conference, when Lenin hit them over the head with his Theses.”

Pipes: “…the ‘April Theses’…outlined a program of action that must have appeared to his audiences as totally out of touch with reality, if not positively mad.”

Leonard Schapiro: The impact of Lenin’s arrival on the party was electric.80

Service: “Lenin’s words disconcerted everyone who heard them that night; many listeners – or at least those who were close enough to him – thought he had gone off his head…Just a few colleagues were pleased by what he had said at the Finland Station. Among these were Alexandra Kollontai and Alexander Shlyapnikov. A lot of Bolsheviks of lesser standing in the faction agreed, having been appalled by the agreement of most Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries and indeed many Bolsheviks to lend conditional support to the Provisional Government…The man who stood high on the armored car in the dead of night had not been a lone wolf; he was part of a pack that would get noisier and stronger. Bolshevism was finding its confidence again. A leader had returned to Petrograd who would give clarity to Bolshevik ideas and add resolve to Bolshevik practical campaigns.”

W.H. Chamberlin: Into the formless and inchoate mass which Russian society represented in the first weeks of the Revolution Lenin’s sharp, bitter words cut like a knife, revealing and inspiring class antagonism and class hatred.81
Lynch: “He never allowed the opponents or doubters to sway him. It was this clarity of purpose and determination that enabled Lenin to seize power in the vacuum which developed as the Provincial Government lost control.”

Service: “Indeed very few politicians in the other parties had quite the self-belief of Vladimir Lenin.”

Alan Wood: Lenin’s programme manifestly reflected and articulated the increasingly radical temper of the party rank-and-file and the militant workers and troops. 

Alexander Rabinowitch: Tailoring the Bolshevik programme so that it would reflect popular aspirations was one of Lenin’s most important contributions to the development of the revolution.

Walter Lacquer: “…the revolution was, in the final analysis, the work of one man. Without him the revolution would not have happened…For this reason the attempt to look for social explanations and class analyses is not very helpful.”

P.A. Golub: “He was able swiftly and precisely to evaluate the new situation, to give scientifically-based prognosis of the further development of the class struggle…and to plan the most appropriate methods and means of struggle against the counter-revolution. And again, as at every sudden historical turning-point, the creative power of Lenin’s genius was displayed.”

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “The Bolshevik Party was confronted with the task of explaining to the masses of workers and soldiers, who had been intoxicated by the first successes, that the complete victory of the revolution was still a long way off, that as long as the power was in the hands of the bourgeois Provisional Government, and as long as the Soviets were dominated by the compromisers – the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries – the people would secure neither peace, nor land, nor bread, and that in order to achieve complete victory, one more step had to be taken and the power transferred to the Soviets.”

Richard Pipes: As a rule, the less one knows about the actual course of the Russian Revolution the more inclined one is to attribute a dominant influence to Marxist ideas.

Working-Class Radicalization and Social Conflict

W.H. Chamberlin: …the majority of the active-minded workers in the autumn of 1917 were in favor of the slogan “All power to the Soviets” and supplied the basis of mass support on which every successful revolution must rest….The predestined standard-bearer of the social revolution according to Marx proved to be neither the miserable, half-naked, rice-fed coolie of Shanghai or Bombay nor the skilled mechanic of Essen and Birmingham, but the Petrograd metal worker and the Donetz miner, sufficiently literate to grasp elementary socialist ideas, sufficiently wretched to welcome the first opportunity to pull down the temple of private property.

Steve Smith: …it is clear that, rather than the Bolshevik party, the working class itself was the major factor in Petrograd politics in 1917.

R.G. Suny: “Rather than being dupes of radical intellectuals, workers articulated their own concept of autonomy and lawfulness at the factory level, while peasant soldiers developed a keen sense of what kind of war (and for what regime) they were willing to fight. More convincingly than their political opponents, the Bolsheviks pushed for a government of the lower classes institutionalized in the soviets and advocated workers’ control over industry and a end to the war.”
**John Marot:** For it was the autonomous movement of politics that opened the possibility for the transition to socialism: the direct intervention of the masses over matters of great concern to them, their massive break from the infernal monotony of exploitation, and their difficult and open minded search for political solutions to problems of social existence. In 1917 workers were free to choose which party and programme to follow, and which to reject and, as a rule, they changed their minds and their course of action mainly because, among the competing political formations, one would, through action and rational argument, convince workers of the objective political significance of workers’ revolutionary practice and experience, and thereby attract their support. In times of revolution free political activity – the action of parties – is the determining determination.87

**Robert Service:** …the Bolshevik Central Committee simultaneously manipulated and yet also reflected working-class opinions.88

**Steve Smith:** The workers had very concrete needs and expectations that the Provisional Government failed to meet. They turned to the Bolsheviks because their policies seemed to represent the only viable political alternative...The Bolsheviks won support because their analysis and proposed solutions seemed to make sense.89

**Rex Wade:** Moreover, they provided clear and believable, if often simplistic or even erroneous, explanations for the complex problems and uncertainties of the times. Their explanation that the problems of society grew out of the hostile actions of ‘capitalists’, ‘bourgeoisie’ and other privileged elements was more easily grasped than was the working of complex and often impersonal forces. That some known or unknown ‘they’ threatened the revolution was a popular belief in the unsettled world of 1917; few asserted it more forcefully or effectively than the Bolsheviks. The lesson drawn, of course, was that therefore the problems of society could not be solved as long as the capitalists and bourgeoisie held any share of the power.90

**W.H. Chamberlin:** Indeed it is one of the ironies of Russian history that just the classes which stood to lose the most from a thoroughgoing social revolution obstinately clung to policies which made such an upheaval inevitable. By refusing to give up the utopian formula “War to the victorious end” the Russian propertied and middle classes assured themselves revolution to the bitter end.91

**Orlando Figes:** The social polarization of the summer gave the Bolsheviks their first real mass following as a party which based its main appeal on the plebeian rejection of all subordinate authority.92

**Leonard Schapiro:** The Bolsheviks were determined to destroy the Provisional Government. They were prepared neither to join it, nor to support it. They made uninhibited promises of immediate peace and distribution of land to the peasants and encouraged the growing chaos on the land, in industry and in the army, from which they hoped to reap the reward of power.93

**W.H. Chamberlin:** …especially after the formation of the coalition Government, Petrograd became a seething caldron of Bolshevik agitation. In the large assembly-halls one could hear the outstanding orators of the Party: Trotsky; Lunacharsky, the literary and dramatic critic who was to become Commissar for Education; Alexandra Kollontai, a radical feminist who would be the first woman Commissar and the first woman Ambassador. In the factories and in the barracks the rank-and-file Party agitators held forth on the same themes in simpler language.94

**Fitzpatrick:** “The Bolsheviks’ strength was that they were the only party uncompromised by association with the bourgeoisie and the February regime, and the party most firmly identified with the ideas of workers’ power and armed uprising.”
Alan Wood: The ‘collaboration’ of Menshevik and SR ministers with the bourgeois, pro-war government meant that the Bolsheviks were now the only political faction which pursued an unswervingly anti-war policy.95

Smith: “By summer the discourse of democracy put into circulation by the February Revolution was being overtaken by a discourse of class, a shift symbolized by the increasing use of the word ‘comrade’ instead of ‘citizen’ as the favoured form of address.”

J.P. Nettl: All through the hot summer Petrograd alternatively simmered and boiled.96

Robert Service: Social ‘polarization’ was an all-pervasive fact of life in 1917. The chasm separating the countless poor wretches toiling in the factories and in the field from the rich few had been vast for centuries and become vaster still in 1917. Hatreds quickly acquired an intensity unprecedented even under the Romanovs.97

Steinberg: “Popular distrust and even hatred of the rich and powerful already had a long history by 1917, nurtured by quite tangible social and political inequalities, as well as by decades of radical and socialist agitation and teaching. In 1917, as before, this popular language of class was often much more flexible than the precise notions about social structure that Marxist activists had in mind when speaking of the ‘class enemy’. Although that class designation was sometimes used in a specifically Marxist sense…more often ‘class enemy’ was a less precise and more flexible designation of otherness: a sweeping social pejorative for all who were richer or more powerful, a political label criticizing any who opposed the interests of the common people.”

Boris Kolonitskii: In the mass consciousness of 1917, the ‘bourgeoisie’ was not so much an economic, social or political category; rather, it was an infernal, insidious and powerful force standing in the way of the great and holy resurrection promised by the Revolution.98

W.H. Chamberlin: “Nowhere in the world, perhaps, was there as much class hatred and class envy as in Russia. The overthrow of Tsarism gave reign to these suppressed sentiments; and the Bolsheviks were adept in fanning the flames of class antagonism, in keeping alive and making articulate the sullen dislike which a large part of the of the poor and uneducated majority of the Russian people had always felt for the well-to-do and educated minority.”

William Rosenberg: “Indeed, as Imperial Russia’s state-capitalist structure did begin to crumble, at once cause and consequence of the deprivations of war and revolution, the analytic logic of class difference and conflict became the insidious, ideologized passions of class warfare.”

The Provisional Government in Decline

Robert Service: …it was also a crucial advantage for Lenin that the political and administrative system was in an advanced condition of disintegration. Peasants in most villages across the former Russian Empire governed themselves. The military conscripts intimidated their officers. The workers, even if they were loath to take to the streets, wished to impose their control over the factories and mines. Kerensky had lost authority over all these great social groups. While central power was breaking down in Petrograd, moreover, it had virtually collapsed in the rest of Russia.99

R.G. Suny: “Clearly, to isolate Lenin or his party from this rich and contradictory social context in which they operated not only distorts an understanding of the events of 1917 but may lead to unwarranted conclusions about the artificial, unorganic manipulated nature of October and to the more general view that great revolutions, like more modest acts of political protest, are the creations of outside agitators.”
W.H. Chamberlin: Behind the turbulent panorama of Petrograd was the directing brain of the master strategist of revolution, Vladimir Illich Lenin. There is no period in Lenin’s life when his stature as a leader and his capacity to grasp accurately the basic facts of a new and changing political situation appear so vividly as in the few weeks which elapsed between the Kornilov affair and the Bolshevik stroke for power. 100

Pipes: “Rebellions happen; revolutions are made.”

Martin Malia: From the April Theses on into the autumn, Lenin’s organization built its influence through a drumbeat of agitation for the end of dual power in favor of the class-based soviets. The Bolsheviks refrain was “peace, bread, land, all power to the soviets.” This program was irresponsible and demagogic in the sense that the seizure of power by the soviets would not in fact solve the problems of bread, peace or land, as Lenin’s socialist adversaries constantly pointed out. But this program made great sense as revolutionary politics because it mobilized workers and soldiers angry with an increasingly desperate situation with the purpose of seizing power for the “toilers.” 101

Smith: “But the Bolsheviks themselves did not create popular discontent or revolutionary feeling. This grew out of the masses’ own experience of complex economic and social upheavals and political events.”

R.G. Suny: “…a deep and deepening social polarization between the top and bottom of Russian society undermined the Provisional Government by preventing the consolidation of a political consensus.”

W.H. Chamberlin: During and after the Kornilov affair the economic movement of the workers became largely fused with the political drive for the establishment of the Soviet regime. 102

Martin McCauley: Mensheviks and SRs opposed the slogan ‘All Power to the Soviets’ in the name of democracy. They did not regard soviet power as legitimate since they thought that soviets represented classes and not the nation. As far as they were concerned only the Constituent Assembly would possess full legitimacy. Given these views and in the absence of a Constituent Assembly it is hardly surprising that they lost influence in the second half of 1917. 103

Edward Acton: When the moderate socialists failed to articulate and respond to the demands from below they forfeited their popularity and prominence in trade unions, soldiers’ committees, peasant committees and soviets. The masses sought alternative routes towards their goals, and the Bolshevik party was the main beneficiary. 104

Rex Wade: As the Provisional Government and the Revolutionary Defensist leaders failed to solve the problems of Russia and to meet the aspirations of society, the radical left prospered. The Bolsheviks in particular became the political alternative for the disappointed and the disenchanted, for those looking for new leadership. 105

Leonard Schapiro: The soviets rather than the party attracted the mass allegiance, which the Bolsheviks exploited. 106

Berkman: “Anticipating the measures of the revolutionary government, often even in defiance of the latter, the revolutionary masses by their own initiative began, long before the October days, to put in practice their Social ideals. They took possession of the land, the factories, mines, mills, and the tools of production. They got rid of the more hated and dangerous representatives of government and authority. In their grand revolutionary
outburst they destroyed every form of political and economic oppression. In the deeps of Russia the Social Revolution was raging, when the October change took place in the capitals of Petrograd and Moscow.”

J.P. Nettl: While revolution see-sawed in Petrograd, the country on a whole lapsed into anarchy. Over the next few months effective and centrally controlled government of any sort ceased to exist.  

Alec Nove: “Both in the towns and in the villages the situation was approaching chaos even without the help of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Of course, they tried to make things worse, since they were unconcerned with an orderly land settlement, industrial production or the military situation. They sought to reap the whirlwind. They contributed to the breakdown but did not cause it.”

Rex Wade: The discussion of Bolshevik plans and calls for Soviet power took place within the context of deepening social and economic crisis and the growing popular demand for change. 

John Reed: “Daily the Government seemed to become more and more helpless. Even the Municipal administration broke down. The columns of morning papers were filled with accounts of the most audacious robberies and murders, the criminals went unmolested.”

Lynch: “In October 1917 the Bolsheviks were pushing against an already open door.”

Martin McCauley: Had the Bolsheviks not acted when they did there would still have been a revolution in 1917. Elections to the Constituent Assembly, the new parliament, scheduled for 25 November 1917, were bound to sweep away the Provisional Government and place the SRs in power.

Leon Trotsky: Had we not taken power in October…we would never have taken it. Our strength on the eve of October lay in the fact that the masses were pouring into our party because they believed that it would do what others had failed. If the masses had detected in us the slightest sign of vacillation, of the desire to wait, or of a divergence between our words and our deeds, within two months the tide would have ebbed away just as it ebbed away from the SRs and the Mensheviks. The bourgeoisie would have obtained a respite…the proletarian revolution would have been postponed indefinitely. Lenin understood and sensed this; hence his anxiety and fear, his distrust and the frantic pressure, which saved the Revolution.

Martin Amis: Reading Trotsky, one is often impressed by how much dishonesty he can pack into a paragraph.

W.H. Chamberlin: “It is a general law of revolutionary periods that extremists are always victorious…Russia’s destiny was to be ‘either Lenin or Kolchak’, and not ‘neither Lenin nor Kolchak’…The steady swing to the Left, which set in immediately after the breakdown of the Imperial regime and reached its culmination in the seizure of power by the Bolsheviki seems, in retrospect, logical and inevitable, incredible and outrageous as it must have seemed to the wealthy and middle classes while it was going on.”

Smith: “By successfully relating to the popular movements, the Bolsheviks had, in a sense, already ‘come to power’ even before the overthrow of the Provisional Government.”

Berkman: “Many people still continue to think and to talk of the Russian Revolution and of the Bolsheviks as if the two were identical…The great need of the present is to make clear the difference between that grand social event and the ruling, political party – a difference as fundamental as it has been fatal to the Revolution.”
The October Revolution, 1917

Alan Wood: The Bolsheviks made no secret of their preparations for insurrection, but Kerensky seemed impotent to stop it.\textsuperscript{112}

Martin McCauley: Kerensky, by then heading the third Coalition Government, could be forgiven for taking to his couch in laughter – surely a revolutionary party which proclaimed in the press that it was about to seize power need not be taken seriously.\textsuperscript{113}

Martin Amis: An additional ten IQ points in Kerensky might have saved Russia from Lenin; and a similar elevation in Tsar Nicholas II might have saved Russia from Kerensky.\textsuperscript{114}

Nove: “The authority of the government had virtually collapsed for some weeks before the Bolsheviks seized the Winter Palace with a relatively insignificant group of ill-armed Red Guards.”

Pipes: “The events that led to the overthrow of the Provisional Government were not spontaneous but carefully plotted and staged by a tightly organised conspiracy…October was a classic coup d’etat, the capture of governmental authority by a small band, carried out, in deference to the democratic professions of the age, with a show of mass participation, but with hardly any mass involvement.”

Rex Wade: It began not in response to the demands of Lenin or a Bolshevik plan, but in response to the government’s ill-conceived decision to launch a minor punitive action against the Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{115}

Rabinowitch: “Only in the wake of the government’s direct attack on the Left was an armed uprising of the kind envisioned by Lenin feasible. For…the Petrograd masses, to the extent that they supported the Bolsheviks in the overthrow of the Provisional Government, did so not out of any sympathy for strictly Bolshevik rule but because they believed the revolution and the congress to be in imminent danger.”

Deutscher: “The Provisional Government was so politically isolated and the insurgents enjoyed such overwhelming support that they were able to elbow the Government out of existence by a slight push.”

Adam Ulam: “The Bolsheviks did not seize power, they picked it up.”

Berkman: “It has been asserted by some writers that Bolshevik accession to power in Russia was due to a coup…and doubt has been expressed regarding the social nature of the October change. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of historic fact, the great event known as the October Revolution was in the profoundest sense a social revolution. It was characterized by all the essentials of such a fundamental change. It was accomplished, not by any political party, but by the people themselves, in a manner that radically transformed all the heretofore existing economic, political and social relations. But it did not take place in October. That month witnessed only the formal ‘legal sanction’ of the revolutionary events that had preceded it. For weeks and months prior to it, the actual Revolution had been going on all over Russia: the city proletariat was taking possession of the shops and factories, while the peasants expropriated the big estates and turned the land to their own use.”

Martin McCauley: The Bolsheviks took power on 25 October/7 November 1917 and presented it to the IIInd Congress of Soviets which had a Bolshevik majority. So the October Revolution was a Soviet Revolution. It had overwhelming support throughout the country. It should be underlined, however, that the masses understood that power had passed to soviets at all levels.
They were not making a revolution to usher in the dictatorship of the proletariat and, by extension, of the Communist Party.\textsuperscript{116}

\textbf{G.D. Obichkin}: “In his guidance of the uprising, Lenin’s genius as a leader of the masses, a wise and fearless strategist, who clearly saw what direction the revolution would take, was strikingly revealed.”

\textbf{Michael Lynch}: If Lenin was undeniably the inspiration behind the October Revolution, Trotsky was indisputably the executive figure who organised the actual rising.\textsuperscript{117}

\textbf{Richard Pipes}: October was not a revolution but a classic coup d’etat planned in the dead of night on October 10th, and executed two weeks later…The seizure of power, masterminded by Trotsky, was a model putch…Conceived and carried out in the strictest secrecy, it eschewed barricades and mob actions in favour of surgical strikes against the organ of the state. It was so successfully camouflaged as a transfer of power to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets that virtually no one, including the rank and file of the Bolshevik Party, had any inkling of what had happened.\textsuperscript{118}

\textbf{Deutscher}: “…the organ of the insurrection was no clandestine, self-appointed group or clique of conspirators but a body openly elected by a broad representative institution like the Soviet” (\textit{on the Milrevcom}).

\textbf{B.N. Ponomarev}: “The Great October Revolution is a splendid example of the practical application and implementation of Lenin’s theory of Socialist revolution.”

\textbf{Alan Wood}: It would, however, be incorrect to consider that the Bolsheviks’ planning for revolution was efficient, co-coordinated or thoroughly considered. It succeeded by default rather than design…the events of 24-26 October were marked by confusion, apprehension, uncertainty and opportunism…After hours of indecision and ignored ultimatums punctuated by sporadic and innocuous shell-fire, the Palace was infiltrated (not ’stormed’).\textsuperscript{119}

\textbf{Pipes}: “It was a surreptitious seizure of the nerve centres of the modern state, carried out under false slogans in order to neutralize the population at large, the true purpose of which was revealed only after the new claimants to power were firmly in the saddle.”

\textbf{Smith}: “The seizure of power is often presented as a conspiratorial coup against a democratic government. It had all the elements of a coup – albeit one much advertised in the press – except for the fact that a coup implies the seizure of a functioning state machine. Arguably, Russia had not had this since February.”

\textbf{Pipes}: “Lenin, Trotsky, and their associates seized power by force, overthrowing an ineffective but democratic government. The government they founded, in other words, derives from a violent act carried out by a tiny minority.”

\textbf{Service}: “Popular uprisings have never been organised by a people as a whole. Only a minority directly participates. And, by mid-October, Lenin could also argue that soviets in city after city throughout Russia were following the example of Petrograd and Moscow in acquiring Bolshevik majorities.”

\textbf{Beryl Williams}: Relatively few people were actively involved. If it were a coup – and Lenin denied this, calling it an armed uprising of the urban masses – it was one enthusiastically supported by the proletariat and accepted by the peasantry.\textsuperscript{120}
R.G. Suny: “…the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917 with considerable popular support in the largest cities of the empire…What still might be disputed is the degree, consistency, durability and meaning of that support.”

Short History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: “It was triumph of Marxism-Leninism and demonstrated the significance and role of the revolutionary Marxist Party. The working class and all other working people of Russia were led by the Bolshevik Party, which was guided by the revolutionary theory of Marxist-Leninism. The people saw that the Party was devoted to them and provided them with judicious leadership and recognized it as their leader.”

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “The Petrograd workers in those days showed what a splendid schooling they had received under the guidance of the Bolshevik Party. The revolutionary units of the army, prepared for the uprising by the work of the Bolsheviks, carried out fighting orders with precision and fought side by side with the Red Guard. The navy did not lag behind the army. Kronstadt was a stronghold of the Bolshevik Party, and had long since refused to recognize the authority of the Provisional Government. The cruiser Aurora trained its guns on the Winter Palace, and on October 25 their thunder ushered in a new era, the era of the Great Socialist Revolution.”

Christopher Hill: “That in these years the Bolsheviks had evolved a political philosophy and analysis of events more realistic than those of any of their rivals was shown by the ease with which they swept aside all other parties in the revolutionary months of 1917…In Russia in 1917 it was the Bolshevik mastery of fact that was decisive. The party knew exactly what it wanted, what concrete concessions to make to different social groups at any given stage, how to convince the masses of the population by actions, its own and their own. The party’s organisation allowed great flexibility in maneuver, combined with firmness and strength in pursuit of the clearly envisaged ultimate objectives. It was this which won the confidence of a following sufficient to enable the Bolsheviks to seize and retain power whilst the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries discredited themselves by the helplessness of their most eloquent phrases in the face of the rude and stubborn fact.”

Alan Wood: There was clearly much more behind the Bolsheviks’ victory than ideological or organizational superiority over other political forces. The Bolsheviks were simply much more in tune with popular feeling than either the constitutionally-minded liberal politicians or the moderate socialists.121

Acton: “…the October revolution emerges as very much more than a conspiratorial coup d’état. By then the central political issue was that of soviet power. It was popular support for this cause which doomed Kerensky and the Provisional Government and explains the ease with which armed resistance to the new order was overcome, even where (as in Moscow) it was more formidable than in the capital.”

B.N. Ponomarev: “The chief reason for the victory of the October Socialist Revolution was that it was led by the working class of Russia. It was the first of all the classes to create its own party. The working class came forward as the leader in the struggle of the whole people against the autocracy and against the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: What had taken place had not been a classic conspiracy. The Bolsheviks were prepared to seize power by any means – peaceful, conspiratorial, or by mass uprising. Reading the situation correctly, they saw that a conspiracy was not required…What had been a small clutch of illegals in February 1917 had swollen to a mighty force by October.122

Orlando Figes: The October insurrection was a coup d’état, actively supported by a small minority of the population…But it took place amidst a social revolution, which was centered on
the popular realization of Soviet power…The slogan ‘All Power to the Soviets!’ was a useful tool, a banner of popular legitimation covering the nakedness of Lenin’s ambition.\textsuperscript{123}

**Lynch:** “His objective had not been to win mass support but to create a party capable of seizing power when the political circumstances permitted.”

**Peter Kenez:** Historians have asked whether the Bolshevik seizure of power in October was a coup d’état, carried out by the impetuous Bolsheviks, or a true revolution, the work of the radical workers and soldiers of Petrograd. But perhaps the most striking aspect of events was neither the Bolsheviks daring, nor the behaviour of the workers, but the complete disintegration of governmental authority. Every politically aware person in Petrograd knew the Bolsheviks were about to act, but the government could not defend itself. Under the circumstances one could hardly speak of a coup d’état, much less a conspiracy. The Bolsheviks seized power because the country was in the throes of anarchy.\textsuperscript{124}

**Smith:** “…the overthrow of Kerensky was indeed a well-organised coup carried out by the Bolshevik party at the behest of Lenin: To that extent, the October Revolution was quite unlike the February Revolution, when the masses themselves had directly precipitated the final crisis of the ancien regime. But to depict the October insurrection as a coup pure and simple is to fail to plumb its essence.”

**William Rosenberg:** If ‘coup’ is used conceptually to emphasize the sudden, swift and forceful manner in which Bolshevik leaders seized state institutions on 25 October, clearly October was a coup d’état whether or not it had popular support. But in so far as ‘coup’ connotes the ‘usurpation’ of power by a narrow band of dedicated revolutionaries socially rooted in the radical intelligentsia, who artificially cloaked their own political ambitions with a self-styled defence of popular interests, as the notion is now frequently deployed, the essential linkages between Russia’s revolution and October are lost, along with its world historical meaning…the notion of the party as a disciplined conspiratorial block determined from the start to seize power is and has always been a distorting caricature.\textsuperscript{125}

**Leonard Shapiro:** In the last resort, Bolshevism proved less a doctrine, than a technique of action for the seizing and holding of power by the Bolshevik party.\textsuperscript{126}

**Pipes:** “Communism thus did not come to Russia as a result of a popular uprising: it was imposed on her from above by a small minority hiding behind democratic slogans.”

**Michael Melancon:** As everyone knew, the Second Congress of Soviets fully intended in its majority to end the Provisional Government. That would have been legitimate soviet power, with all significances intact. People in Russia at the time did not equate soviet power with Bolshevik power. Even half the Bolshevik leadership, not to mention numerous local party cadres, and the Left SRs, Left Mensheviks, and many others who cared about the revolution, considered Leninist unilateral actions to have violated revolutionary ideals…The idea of soviets, of soviet power, and even the slogan “all power to the soviets” were not of Bolshevik provenance. During 1917 Bolsheviks did a lot to promote the idea and then promptly betrayed the ideal.\textsuperscript{127}

**Robert Service:** Lenin was not the entire Bolshevik party; and it is possible that, like the workers, Bolshevik activists in the party as a whole wanted a socialist coalition government to replace the Kerenskii cabinet… The central party leaders’ selectivity was manipulative. Exact and frank as they were about much. They wanted power. They thought that their policies were more adequate to the solution of the country’s woes than were the policies of other parties. They operated in a competitive multi-party environment where votes in the soviet as well as direct action on the street counted; they could not win and hold power merely by conspiracy. Hence they fudged: and they fudged efficiently.\textsuperscript{128}
Rabinowitch: “Yet it is extremely important to note that in 1917, the slogan ‘All Power to the Soviets’ stood not for a Bolshevik dictatorship, but for an end to coalition with the bourgeoisie and for ‘people’s power’ exercised through representative, multi-party soviets. The Bolsheviks also stood for immediate peace, fundamental land reform and ‘workers’ control’ in factories. Amid burgeoning disenchantment with the results of the February revolution, this programme was attractive to workers, peasants and soldiers throughout Russia.”

B.N. Ponomarev: “A decisive circumstance that made the victory of the revolution possible was the fact that at the head of the masses stood the experienced, militant, revolutionary party of the Bolsheviks.”

John Reed: “Instead of being a destructive force, it seems to me that the Bolsheviks were the only party in Russia with a constructive programme and the power to impose it on the country. If they had not succeeded the Government when they did, there is little doubt in my mind that the armies of imperial Germany would have been in Petrograd and Moscow in December, and Russia would again be ridden by a Tsar.”

B.N. Ponomarev: “The insurrection enjoyed such wide support among the masses, and had been so thoroughly planned, that it was carried out with rare speed and success.”

Ulam: “Except for the workers at some factories there was no pro-Bolshevik enthusiasm in the population, only apathy.”

Martin Malia: In October the streets were empty of workers, and the number of victims was around a dozen. These “ten days that shook the world,” therefore, were in reality a coup d’etat, and the prodigious efforts deployed to deny this obvious fact are a classic case where too much is an indirect admission of something to hide.129

Robert Service: …it is inappropriate to suggest that the Bolsheviks had no toe-hold in the mass revolutionary movement of 1917: they could not have come to power without such a toe-hold.130

Smith: “The major factories of Petrograd and the main organisations of labour welcomed the new government. It is true that a minority of workers opposed what they saw as a violent and illegal seizure of power that threatened to engulf Russian in civil war…There is little doubt, however, that the majority of workers were pleased to hear that Kerensky had fled the city.”

Martin McCauley: The skill, self-confidence and iron resolve of Lenin in the end placed victory in the hands of the Bolsheviks, then a very undisciplined party. Kerensky was no match for the Bolshevik leader whose political acumen and polemical gifts set him apart. Nevertheless all the political wizardry in the world would have been in vain had not the popular desire for a Soviet revolution not been so strong. Kerensky single-handedly had discredited the SRs and the Provisional Governments. The masses wanted a complete change and Lenin was there to act on this aspiration.131

R.G. Suny: “The Bolsheviks came to power, not because they were superior manipulators or cynical opportunists, but because their policies, as formulated by Lenin in April and shaped by the events of the following months, placed them at the head of a genuinely popular movement.”

Robert Service: Yet the selectivity of the Bolshevik central leaders in presenting their policies to the public had a manipulative dimension. Indeed Lenin and Trotsky, in arguing for the seizure of power in October, did not make it fully clear even to several of their fellow central leaders that they envisaged a soviet government led by Bolsheviks and devoid of Mensheviks.132
Smith: “In making a final assessment of the October seizure of power one is forced to conclude that the events of October 24-25 were far more than a military coup. They were the political resolution of a long-drawn-out social crisis, the origins of which go back at least as far as 1905. The war released the accumulated tensions within Russian society, and the February Revolution once more opened up a divide between the popular masses and propertied society. The divide ran so deep through society that the possibility of bridging it, even in March 1917, were very limited.”

Pipes: “The Russian Revolution was made neither by the forces of nature nor the anonymous masses but by identifiable men pursuing their own advantages.”

Acton: “To stress the Party’s responsiveness to pressures from below is not to deny the significance of the lead given by Lenin. His prestige within the Party was enormous; his pre-eminence among the leaders was manifest; his ability to combine theory and practice, to bring a Marxist analysis of the class struggle to bear upon choices confronting the Party, was unique. Clearly his personal radicalism played an important part in ensuring that the Party he had done so much to create responded so readily to mass radicalism…whereby in April conditional support for the Provisional Government was withdrawn in favour of outright opposition, reflected rank-and-file radicalism as much as Lenin’s personal authority.”

Wade: “The Bolsheviks, however, were not the only political group advocating sweeping changes and reaping the benefits of popular dissatisfaction with government and Soviet policy. Others shared their criticism of the government and Soviet leaders, offered similar analyses of why things were wrong and held out visions of a better future. The rise of the Bolsheviks was in fact part of a broader phenomenon of the growth of the radical left.”

William Rosenberg: Bolshevik strength grew not only because of the party’s relative organizational strength, but also because of the explanatory content of party views and programs…The complementary tasks of proletarian social and Bolshevik political revolution thus coalesced; so too did workers and party “professionals” in a period of increasingly economic privation and social polarization, when the Bolsheviks (and others) could provide most workers with seemingly clear ideas of an alternative, socialist, mode of production.\(^\text{133}\)

Michael Melancon: Suspicion toward or outright opposition to a bourgeois orientated government or a coalition socialist-bourgeois government did not arise in association with Bolshevik agitation but existed from the outset as part of the outlook of most socialists and their labouring constituencies. Bolshevik agitation’s role was in placing that party in a position to reap organizational benefits from the existing popular attitudes toward the Provisional Government when it failed to live up to what were perceived as minimal demands made upon it and when SR and Menshevik leaders disastrously associated themselves and their parties with it…The Provisional Government did not founder on the rocks of Bolshevism but on the shoals of a socialist and revolutionary popular culture, by no means to be identified with Bolshevism.\(^\text{134}\)

Pipes: “The only explanation that makes sense is that the masses were, as the traditionalists would have it, only marginally involved, mainly as a destructive force, and that October was, indeed, a putsch by a party bent on monopolizing authority.”

Martin Malia: In other words, this “Revolution” was a minority military action, not a mass event like the one in February.\(^\text{135}\)

Service: “…the revolutionary transformation was not monopolized by the political elites but also involved the masses acting in their own interests and through their own organisations…The masses had not taken leave of their senses. War, economic dislocation and administrative breakdown meant that their everyday needs were not being met. The sole alternative was for the
people to preside over their own affairs; and as the situation worsened, so the workers, soldiers, and peasants took to direct political action. The Bolshevik party had the slogans that most nearly corresponded to their wishes. And so the Leninist seizure of power was an easy task: the masses had already completed most of the job for the Bolsheviks.”

**John H. Keep:** “…it is scarcely surprising that to the politically untutored Russian masses this propaganda had strong appeal.”

**W. Bruce Lincoln:** “During the year after the Petrograd crowd had driven the Romanovs from their throne, Russians had reveled in an orgy of proletarian self-indulgence.”

**G.D. Obichkin:** “The leadership given by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, the valiant struggle and heroism of the workers of the Red Guard, the soldiers and sailors, ensured the success of one of the greatest events in world history – the overthrow of the power of the landowners and capitalists.”

**B.N. Ponomarev:** “Under the leadership of the Bolshevik party, the workers and poor peasants overthrew the bourgeoisie and established Soviet power.”

**Smith:** “The October seizure of power generated an exhilarating sense that a new world was in the offing where justice and equality would triumph over arbitrariness and exploitation, where the power of nature would be harnessed to ensure plenty for all.”

**Service:** “Yet what also needs to be understood is that the congruence between Bolshevik policies and mass aspirations was never tight and always doomed.”

**A.J.P. Taylor:** “The Bolshevik revolution was not a fully orchestrated piece with the music already composed. It was compounded, like most other events, of confusions and misunderstandings, of human endeavors and human failures, where the outcome surprised the victors as much as it stunned the defeated.”

**Trotsky:** “A remarkable consecutiveness of stages is to be observed in the development of the Russian Revolution – and this for the very reason that it was an authentic popular revolution, setting in motion tens of millions. Events succeeded each other as though obeying laws of gravitation. The correlation of forces was twice verified at every stage: first the masses would demonstrate the might of their assault, then the possessing classes, attempting revenge, would reveal their isolation the more clearly.”

**Martin Malia:** If the Soviet regime originated in a genuinely popular revolution, then Stalin is an ‘aberration’ from the Leninist norm, and the system has the capacity, despite a temporary detour into horror, to return to a democratic and humane socialism. But if the system was born in a conspiratorial coup, then Stalin is Lenin writ large, and there is no democratic source to return to: Communism therefore cannot be reformed, but must be abolished…What went wrong? When did it go wrong? How can it be set right? But this historiography ignores the possibility that these might be false questions: that nothing went wrong with the Revolution, but that the whole enterprise, quite simply, was wrong from its inception.136

**Trotsky:** Those who lose by a revolution are rarely inclined to call it by its real name.137

**Initial Problems and Challenges of the New Regime**

**R.G. Suny:** “After a relatively easy accession to power, however, the Bolsheviks, never a majority movement in peasant Russia, were faced with the dissolution of political authority, the complete collapse of the economy, and the disintegration of the country along ethnic lines.”
Robert Service: Yet Lenin, backed by Trotsky and Sverdlov, did not flinch. Indeed he seemed to grow in confidence as the difficulties increased. The man was an irrepressible leader.  

John Reed: “So plunged the Bolsheviks ahead, irresistible, overriding hesitation and opposition – the only people in Russia who had a definite programme of action while the others talked for eight long months.”

E.H. Carr: Lenin, for all his fame as a revolutionary leader, was a creator rather than a destroyer. He played no personal part in the events of 1905 or in the February Revolution of 1917; nor were Bolshevik ideas an important contributory factor. What Lenin achieved in October 1917 was not the overthrow of the provisional government – that followed logically from all that had gone before, and was bound to happen – but the construction of something to take its place.

Robert Service: The more we learn about the establishment of the Soviet regime, the more obvious it becomes that Lenin and his colleagues were correct in assuming that power would not fall into and remain in their hands unless they acted decisively and ruthlessly; and that they had to be especially careful to neutralize any possible military counter-coup in the early days of ‘soviet power’.

Orlando Figes: “At the beginning of December, the Bolsheviks had to impose martial law on Petrograd because of the chaos. It wasn't until the new year that Petrograd, perhaps with the biggest hangover in history, finally woke up and got back to some order.”

Adam Ulam: After its October victory, the Communist Party began to grope its way toward totalitarianism…The only problem was what character and philosophy this totalitarianism was to take.

Nove: “No unified plan existed. There was priority for war, and numerous improvisation as the economy staggered from critical shortage to outright breakdown.”

Robert Service: …the provinces had to cope as best they could. Local Bolshevik leaders became mini-Lenins.

Short History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: “The position and role of the Communist Party changed with the triumph of the October revolution. From a Party devoted to the overthrow of the old system it became a Party dedicated to the building of a new society without exploiters, without oppression of man by man.”

Pipes: “Lenin assumed the prerogatives that the tsars enjoyed before October 1905: his will was law.”

Service: “And yet, while Lenin was cunning and untrustworthy, he was also dedicated to the ultimate goal of communism. He enjoyed power; he lusted after it. He yearned to keep his party in power. But he wanted power for a purpose. He was determined that the Bolsheviks should initiate the achievement of a world without exploitation and oppression.”

Deutscher: “In the circumstances as they were, ‘proletarian dictatorship’, ‘Soviet democracy’, ‘workers’ control of industry’ were almost empty slogans, into which no one could breathe any content. The idea of Soviet democracy, as Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin had expounded it, presupposed the existence of an active, eternally vigilant, working class, asserting itself not only against the ancien regime but also against any new bureaucracy that might abuse or usurp power. As the working class was bodily not there, the Bolsheviks decided to act as its locum tenens and trustees until such a time as life would become more normal and a new
working class would come into being. Meanwhile, they considered it their duty to exercise the ‘proletarian dictatorship’ on behalf of a non-existent, or almost non-existent, proletariat. That way lay bureaucratic dictatorship, uncontrolled power, and corruption by power.”

**Smith:** “As the Bolsheviks metamorphosed from a party of insurrection into a party of government, their perspective on reality changed.”

**Nove:** “All they could do in the first years was to try to keep themselves from being swept away.”

**E.H. Carr:** Harsh necessity forced the Soviet administration into the traditional State mould which Lenin had never intended for it.143

**Berkman:** “It was apparent that the only right and wholesome solution – which could save the Revolution from its external enemies, free it from the inner strife which rent the country, broaden and deepen the Revolution itself – lay in the direct, creative initiative of the toiling masses.”

**R.G. Suny:** “As Russia slid into civil war, the Bolsheviks embarked on a program of regenerating state power that involved economic centralization and the use of violence and terror against their opponents.”

**W. Bruce Lincoln:** “Discipline imposed from above had always distinguished the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary organisation from its rivals. Now it became a key element in their struggle against the chaos of 1917.”

**John Reed:** “Not by compromise with the propertied classes, or with other political leaders; not by conciliating the old Government mechanism, did the Bolsheviki conquer the power. Nor by the organized violence of a small clique. If the masses all over Russia had not been ready for insurrection it must have failed. The only reason for the Bolshevik success lay in their accomplishing the vast and simple desires of the most profound strata of the people, calling them to the work of tearing down and destroying the old, and afterwards, in the smoke of falling ruins, cooperating with them to erect the framework of the new.”

**Pipes:** “The system of legislation the Bolsheviks set in place within two weeks of the October coup, for all its revolutionary rhetoric, marked a reversion to the autocratic practices of tsarist Russia before the October Manifesto of October 17, 1905. They simply wiped out the eleven intervening years of constitutionalism.”

**Robert Service:** Sovnarkom decrees did not lay down a legal framework. Law meant infinitely less to Lenin, a former lawyer, than the cause of the Revolution. Sovnarkom was offering only broad guidelines for action to workers, soldiers and peasants. The aim was to inform, energize, excite and activate ‘the masses’. It did not matter if mistakes were made. The only way to avoid a blunder was to avoid doing anything.144

**Richard Pipes:** By imposing on the country minority rule and refusing to consider yielding or even sharing power, they laid the foundations of totalitarianism.145

**Martin Malia:** For in the world created by October we were never dealing in the first instance with a *society*; rather, we were always dealing with an ideocratic *regime*.146

**Political Repression and Economic breakdown**

**E.H. Carr:** The Bolshevik revolution, like other revolutions, began in an atmosphere of idealism which bordered on Utopia. But soon opposition from within and from without provoke repression, and violence bred violence.147
Martin McCauley: The Bolshevik regime was fashioned by the exigencies of Civil War. Half measures are of little value in such times of crisis and some men accept that the end justifies the means.148

Deutscher: “Besieged fortresses are hardly ever ruled in a democratic manner.”

E.H. Carr: “Almost every step taken by them was either a reaction to some pressing emergency or a reprisal for some action against them. In seeking to ride the storm were they themselves driven before it?”

Nove: “The fact that the Bolsheviks took charge of a disintegrating society because it was disintegrating is a fact of great importance, which must be borne in mind in analyzing their subsequent actions.”

Service: “Centralism, hierarchy and discipline were aims, but they were aims underpinned by an irresistible commitment to action, action, action.”

W. Bruce Lincoln: “That some form of the stern authority to which the Russians had been accustomed to respond throughout their history must be restored thus was only too clear to Lenin and his Bolsheviks from the moment they overthrew Kerensky’s crumbling Provisional Government.”

Rosenberg: “One of the most salient features of revolutionary Russia in the eight months or so after October 1917 is that nothing seemed to have changed for the better. This realization, and the even more precarious, uncertain conditions that soon emerged, disturbed and angered broad groups of workers.”

Deutscher: “The new revolutionary state formed itself less under the influence of ideas preached by the Bolsheviks when they seized power than under the harsh exigencies of civil war. Events compelled the party of the revolution to give up some of its aspirations, hopes, and illusions in order to save the essential framework of the revolution.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: Of course a regime subjected at its inception to the pressures of a civil war such as that faced by the Bolsheviks will seek and find rationalizations for its harsh policies. The question is, how clearly did Lenin and his followers distinguish, in their own minds, between the force and coercion required to combat their armed enemies, and that which they used against their purely political foes, real and potential? The promise to create a new society without oppression, police rule and terror…was swallowed up by the imperatives of Bolshevik survival and never retrieved.149

Robert Service: Nor, however, were they simply deceivers. For they had convinced themselves that the revolution would be easier than it turned out to be. If they deceived others, it was partly because they had already deceived themselves. Even Lenin, as hard-boiled a pragmatist as the Bolsheviks possessed, was sure that things would turn out alright upon the assumption of power under Bolshevik guidance.150

Deutscher: “The single-party system became for the Bolsheviks an inescapable necessity. Their own survival, and no doubt the survival of the revolution, depended on it. They had not aimed at it with any premeditation. They established it with misgivings as a temporary expedient. The single-party system went against the inclinations, the logic, and the ideas of Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Bukharin, Lunacharsky, Rykov, and so many others. But the logic of the situation took over and ran roughshod over their ideas and scruples. The temporary expedient became the norm.”
W. Bruce Lincoln: “Repeatedly, Lenin urged the Bolsheviks to accommodate their ideals of 1917 to the hard realities of 1918.”

Service: “Certainly Lenin was the founder of the one-party, mono-ideological state. But his sketches had been vague on crucial practicalities. What he articulated was really a set of basic assumptions. He praised leadership and professed a capacity for infallible policies; he also believed in the need for a vanguard party. This was not yet a prescription for the Bolshevik party to become the supreme organ of the Soviet state. But the pressure of events pushed Lenin and his comrades to elaborate their assumptions and move toward this institutional invention within a year or so of the October Revolution.”

Rosenberg: “At the risk of emphasizing the obvious, let me stress, first the importance of remembering that whereas the Bolsheviks came to power reflecting politically the perceived interests and will of a great number of Russia’s fifteen to eighteen million workers, they did so only as part of a vast social upheaval over which they had, in fact, very little control…the overthrow of the old order involved, simultaneously, a massive, and ultimately for the Bolsheviks, problematic assault on a wide array of social relationships and values that reflected Russia’s social institutions.”

W. Bruce Lincoln: “The orgy of intoxication, robbery confiscation, expropriation, and murder that filled the last days of 1917 left no doubt among Petrograd’s former well-to-do that the old days would never return so long as the Bolsheviks ruled Russia. But the floods of decrees calculated to make life wretched for the men and women who had stood at the pinnacle of the old order did nothing to relieve the misery of the proletarians whose interests the new government now claimed to serve.”

E.H. Carr: The vision of a new world – in which men, freed from the oppression of the bourgeois State, would learn to govern themselves and to organize the processes of production and distribution for the common good – was necessary to fire the revolutionary imagination. Lenin inherited the splendid vision from a long line of nineteenth-century socialists. He accepted it, sincerely believed in it, and justified his policies by the prospect of its realization. If, after the first few months of power, the prospect seemed to recede into a remote future and the difficulties of its realization became increasingly apparent, there is no evidence that Lenin ever abandoned his faith in it.

Dmitri Volkogonov: …Lenin wanted earthly happiness for the people, at least those he called ‘the proletariat’. But he regarded it as normal to build this ‘happiness’ on blood, coercion and the denial of freedom.

Hill: “The attempt to overthrow the Bolsheviks after the revolution produced cruelties indeed; but the revolutionary process abolished a regime of despair and created a new world of hope.”

Deutscher: “It took time before the revolution, amid the grueling experience of civil war, wiped away its tears, ceased to trust the pledges of its foes, and learned to act with that fanatical determination which gave it some new and repulsive features, but to which it owed its survival.”

Michael Lynch: It is doubtful whether, even without that threat, Bolshevism could have developed other than as an oppressive system. Its dogmatic Marxist creed made it as intolerant of other political creeds as tsardom had been.
Martin Malia: …if we look closely at what basic socialism means, the obvious answer to the false paradox of good ends and bad results is that the Soviet experiment turned totalitarian not *despite* its being socialist but *because* it was socialist.  

Lev Protasov: …the actions of the Bolshevik leadership in regard to the Constituent Assembly were in fact both logical and consistent, because they were appropriate to the political and ethical principles of the party.

Pipes: “The machine gun became for them the principle instrument of political persuasion. The unrestrained brutality with which they henceforth ruled Russia stemmed in large measure from the knowledge, gained on January 5, that they could use it with impunity.”

**The Cheka and Red Terror**

Richard Pipes: …the ‘Red Terror’ was not a reluctant response the actions of others but a prophylactic measure designed to nip in the bud any thoughts of resistance to the dictatorship.

Dmitri Volkogonov: Threatened by danger, the Bolsheviks resorted to the most repugnant means of saving their state, mass terror against their own people. They kept Lenin’s promise to turn the imperialist war into a civil war.

Orlando Figes: The Red Terror did not come out of the blue. It was implicit in the regime from the start…The Bolsheviks were forced to turn increasingly to terror to silence their political critics and subjugate a society they could not control by other means.

W. Bruce Lincoln: “Their enemies pressing upon them from all sides, the Bolsheviks expected no quarter and gave none.”

Smith: “The belief that the end justified the means served them well, blinding them to the way in which means corrupt ends.”

Orlando Figes: The Bolshevik Terror came up from the depths. It started as a social revolution, a means for the lower classes to exact their own bloody revenge on their former masters and class enemies.

Orlando Figes and Boris Kollonitskii: This hatred of the ‘burzhooi’ was the emotional basis of the Terror, which developed from below as well as above. For, however much one may condemn it, and however hard it may be to admit, there is no doubt that the Terror struck a deep chord in the Russian civil war mentality, and that it was based on a strange mass appeal. The slogan ‘Death to the Bourgeoisie’, which was written on the walls of Cheka interrogation rooms, was also the slogan of the street.

Chris Read: “…during the war, the Red cause in general and the Cheka in particular, was able to mobilize extensive worker, peasant and soldier support…it was not repression alone but a potent combination of repression plus the power to mobilize key areas of support which explain Bolshevik survival.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: Lenin himself was the patron saint of the Cheka…Having seized power, he shrugged off the cape of Social Democrat and donned the cloak of the Jacobin. All his attitudes were now conditioned by one consideration: to cling to power at any cost.
J.P. Nettl: The machinery of counter-terror and repression grew piecemeal but rapidly from each challenge to Bolshevik authority.162

Richard Pipes: The Communist historical establishment and those among Western scholars who share its general outlook have maintained that early Bolshevik terror had been a regrettable but unavoidable response to the “counter-revolutionary” activities of the regime’s opponents. This argument is never persuasive, given that the Cheka, or secret police, the main agency of the “Red Terror,” was established in December 1917, before there was any organized resistance to the new regime.163

Dmitri Volkogonov: Like the sound of a bolt being shot, the two syllables, Che-ka, would stop any conversation.164

Orlando Figes: Under Lenin’s regime – not Stalin’s – the Cheka was to become a vast police state. It had its own leviathan infrastructure, from house committees to the concentration camps, employing more than a quarter of a million people.165

Dmitri Volkogonov: None of us – the present author included – could begin to imagine that the father of domestic Russian terrorism, merciless and totalitarian, was Lenin.166

Robert Service: Lenin, Trotsky and Dzerzhinsky believed that over-killing was better than running the risk of being overthrown.167

Dmitri Volkogonov: As during the French Revolution the knife of the guillotine ceaselessly reaped its doleful harvest, so now the Cheka gunned its way through the population.168

Richard Pipes: With the evidence that is currently available it becomes difficult to deny that Lenin was, not an idealist, but a mass murderer, a man who believed that the best way to solve problems – no matter whether real or imaginary – was to kill off the people who caused them. It was he who originated the practice of political and social extermination that in the twentieth century would claim tens of millions of lives.169

Dmitri Volkogonov: The leaders of the revolution had become priests of terror.170

Smith: “…it is the Bolsheviks’ incapacity to realise their ends, their blindness rather than their vision, that is striking. After they came to power, they faced a huge range of problems for which Marxism-Leninism left them ill-equipped…Policy, therefore, was frequently the outcome of improvisation and pragmatism as much as of the hallowed tenets of ideology. In other words, the relationship between belief and action was complex, influenced by a far larger range of factors.”

Deutscher: “Over and over again emergencies had driven the ruling party to act against its original intentions, to contradict and overreach itself.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: The guillotine of the Russian Revolution was the gun.171

Vladimir Cherniaev: Trotsky bears a great deal of responsibility both for the victory of the Red Army in the civil war, and for the establishment of a one-party authoritarian state with its apparatus for ruthlessly suppressing dissent. As a Jacobin in spirit, he was not frightened by the smell of freshly spilled blood. He was an ideologist and practician of the Red Terror.172

Martin Amis: More basically, Trotsky was a murdering bastard and a fucking liar. And he did it with gusto. He was a nun-killer – they all were.173
Deutscher: “Trotsky had not shrunk from using terror in the civil war; but he can be said to have been as little fond of it as a surgeon is fond of bloodshed.”

Trotsky: “The execution of the Tsar and his family was needed not only to frighten, horrify and instill a sense of hopelessness in the enemy, but also to shake up our own ranks, to show that there was no retreating, that ahead lay total victory or total doom.”

Orlando Figes: It was a declaration of the Terror. It was a statement that from now on individuals would count for nothing in the civil war.174

Dmitri Volkogonov: The extermination of the royal family symbolized the vast tragedy of a great nation which had yielded to class hatred and fratricide.175

War Communism

Nove: “A siege economy with a communist ideology. A partly organised chaos. Sleepless, leather-jacketed commissars working around the clock in a vain effort to replace the free market.”

Bernard Pares: Though the system had been applied during a civil war, this was, and was meant to be, not merely war Communism, such as is appropriate to a besieged city, but militant Communism or rather pure Communism, and its failure was self-evident.176

Pipes: “Their irresponsibility was nowhere more evident than in their obstinate attempts to introduce a money-less economy.”

Martin Malia: War Communism was no aberration, but the crucial episode that first revealed to the Bolsheviks who they in fact were.177

Orlando Figes: …War Communism was not just a response to the civil war; it was also a means of making civil war…the policies of War Communism were seen by the Bolsheviks as an instrument of struggle against their social or ‘internal’ enemies.178

Nove: “Thus the process of grain confiscation went hand in hand with the effort to fan class warfare in the villages.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: Lenin apparently never asked himself why, before 1921, the Bolsheviks were incapable of giving the people anything but chaos, civil war, hunger and terror. The fact is, the Bolsheviks had achieved their goal: the Party had power.179

Martin Amis: Famine belongs to the Communist tetrarchy – the other three elements being terror, slavery and, of course, failure, monotonous and incorrigible failure.180

Nove: “...Lenin drew lessons from the bitter experience of the war-communism period, and in his last years counseled care and moderation.”

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “War Communism had been an attempt to take the fortress of the capitalist elements in town and countryside by assault, by a frontal attack. In this offensive the Party had gone too far ahead, and ran the risk of being cut off from its base. Now Lenin proposed to retire a little, to retreat for a while nearer to the base, to change from an assault of the fortress to the slower method of siege, so as to gather strength and resume the offensive.”

Nove: “In interpreting the events of 1917-21, it is important to bear in mind the following. Firstly, there was a good deal of anarchy, of sheer elemental chaos, in the situation of Russia in those years. Orders by the centre might be obeyed, but quite probably the local authorities, even if
communist-controlled, pleased themselves. Orders were in any case all too often confused and contradictory, though sheer inexperience or because the civil service machine was all too effectively smashed…Therefore much that happened was not due to central orders at all, and many of these orders were due to desperate efforts to cope with confusion and anarchy.”

**Dmitri Volkogonov:** It seems unlikely that the Bolsheviks gave any thought to the fact that giving promise while in opposition is a different thing from fulfilling it in government. On every point – peace, land, liberty, Constituent Assembly, freedom of the press and all the rest – their promises rapidly changed into coercion, limitation, alteration, a different ‘reading’ or an outright denial. Even the land, which they did give, they made undesirable by confiscating everything it produced.181

**The Communist Party and the Influence of Civil War**

**W. Bruce Lincoln:** “More imprisoned by tradition than they cared to admit, the Bolsheviks tried to solve the crisis of daily life by creating more of those instruments of bureaucracy that plagued life in Imperial Russia…Now a massive party, the Bolsheviks ceased to be a party of the masses.”

**Leonard Schapiro:** The civil war left a lasting imprint on the communist party. For three years a small band of men, convinced that they alone were on the side of history, grappled with enemies on all sides and faced incredible hardships. It was true that they themselves helped to create their enemies by defying the vote of the majority of the country and by challenging the whole world. And their own doctrinaire intransigence was responsible for many of the hardships. But they emerged from the civil war with the sense that they had battled alone against considerable odds and won, and with enhanced conviction that their cause was just.182

**Orlando Figes:** Half a million Red Army soldiers joined the Bolshevik Party during the civil war. These were the missionaries of the revolution. They carried Bolshevism, its ideas and its methods, back to their own towns and villages, where they flooded into the Soviet institutions during the early 1920s. The whole Soviet apparatus was thus militarized…The success of the Red Army increasingly led to the application of military methods throughout the Soviet system. Nothing did more to shape the ruling attitudes of the Bolsheviks than the experience of the civil war…The Bolshevism that emerged from the civil war viewed itself as a crusading brotherhood of comrades in arms, conquering Russia and the world with a red pencil in one hand and a gun in the other.183

**W. Bruce Lincoln:** “Fighting in the Civil War, not conspiring against tsarism, became the key experience in forming the views of these men and women, and it bred in them different priorities.”

**W.H. Chamberlin:** “The holding of power by the Bolsheviki was a far greater achievement than the taking of it.”

**Political Repression Post-Civil War, Kronstadt**

**Leonard Schapiro:** Victory in the civil war at the end of 1920 raised anew the whole question of the survival of communist party rule. The peasants were now in open revolt, and among the proletariat discontent began to assume threatening proportions. Party rule was accepted during the civil war, in spite of its unpopularity. The majority of the nation tolerated the party, though less for love of the communists than for fear of the return of the landlords. But now the civil war was over, and any prospect of a restoration of the old order so remote as to be discounted, the basis of communist rule was to be challenged.184
History of the CPSU (b.): “A glaring instance of the new tactics of the class enemy was the counter-revolutionary mutiny in Kronstadt. It began in March 1921, a week before the Tenth Party Congress. Whiteguards, in complicity with Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and representatives of foreign states, assumed leadership of the mutiny. The mutineers at first used a ‘Soviet’ signboard to camouflage their purpose of restoring the power of the capitalists and landlords. They raised the cry: ‘Soviets without Communists!’ The counter-revolutionaries tried to exploit the discontent of the petty bourgeois masses in order to overthrow the power of the Soviets under a pseudo-Soviet slogan.”

Deutscher: “There was a bitter irony in the fact that the scene of the rising was Kronstadt, the Bolshevik stronghold of 1917.”

Christopher Read: The tragic reality it lit up was that Bolshevism was not interested in listening to the political arguments of the ordinary people of Russia and had, irony of ironies, become the executioner of genuine soviet democracy.\textsuperscript{185}

Orlando Figes: The suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion had a shattering effect on the socialists of the world. There could not be a more conclusive proof that the Bolsheviks had turned into tyrants.\textsuperscript{186}

Leonard Schapiro: The revolt of the proletariat against the dictatorship of the proletariat was something for which Marxist doctrine had made no provision. The Tenth Party Congress when it met on 8 March was dominated by the plain evidence of the growing unpopularity of communist rule over those it claimed to represent, of which the Kronstadt revolt was only the culminating proof...The mood of the Congress was one of resentment, disappointment, bewilderment and fear.\textsuperscript{187}

Orlando Figes: Russia in the 1920s remained a society at war with itself – full of unresolved social tensions and resentments just beneath the surface. In this sense, the deepest legacy of the revolution was its failure to eliminate the social inequalities that had brought it about in the first place.\textsuperscript{188}

Deutscher: “The past refracts itself through the innovating work of the revolution, no matter how bold the innovations.”

Lynch: “1917 did not mark a complete break with the past. Rather it was the replacement of one form of state-authoritarianism with another.”

Robert Service: …how new was the world being built by Lenin and Sovnarkom? The RSFSR had facets reminiscent of the tsarist order at its worst. Central power was being asserted in an authoritarian fashion. Ideological intolerance was being asserted and organised dissent repressed. Elective principles were being trampled under foot.\textsuperscript{189}

Nature of the Communist State

Orlando Figes: There was no master plan. When the Bolsheviks came to power they had no set idea – other than the general urge to control and centralize – of how to structure the institutional relationships between the party and the Soviets...Only during the civil war, when they stressed the need for strict centralized control to mobilize the resources of the country, did the Bolsheviks plan the general structure of the party-state.\textsuperscript{190}

Steve Smith: The Bolshevik revolution wrought calamity on a scale commensurate with the transformation in the human condition it sought to achieve. Measured by the benchmarks of contemporary politics, Bolshevik ambition leaves us reeling. But it is easier for us today to appreciate the illusions under which they laboured than the ideals they sought to achieve. Yet we
Robert Service: The soviet order was extremely disorderly for a great deal of the time. Yet the movement towards a centralised, ideocratic dictatorship of a single party had been started. Neither Lenin nor his leading comrades had expressly intended this; they had few clearly elaborated policies and were forever fumbling and improvising. Constantly they found international, political, economic, social and cultural difficulties less tractable than they assumed. And constantly they dipped into their rag-bag of authoritarian concepts to help them survive in power...and they felt that the ruthless measures were being applied in the service of a supreme good.192

Pipes: “So unnatural were the new conditions, they so outraged common sense and decency, that the vast majority of the population viewed the regime responsible for them as a terrible and inexplicable cataclysm which could not be resisted but had to be endured until it would vanish as suddenly and as inextricably as it had come.”

Peter Kenez: Pipes resists the obvious: Russian peasants and workers, for good reasons or bad, preferred the Bolsheviks to their enemies.193

E.H. Carr: “The Russian revolution of 1917 fell far short of its aims which it set for itself, and of the hopes it generated. Its record was flawed and ambiguous. But it has been the source of more profound and more lasting repercussions throughout the world than any other historical event in modern times.”

Smith: “All Bolsheviks – including Stalin – believed in the Marxist vision and it is impossible to comprehend the scale of their ambition, their astounding energy, and their ruthless determination unless one takes the ideas that inspired them seriously.”

Beryl Williams: Ideology matters in an understanding of Lenin and the revolutionary period...an appreciation of the belief, that, whatever the methods used, a Brave New World would result.194

Nove: “We must never for a moment forget that Lenin and his followers, and his opponents too, were operating in an abnormal and desperate situation. Who knows what reforms, policies, remedies, they might have proposed in less troubled times?”

Dmitri Volkogonov: The Russian revolutionaries, including Lenin, rightly exposed the age-old evils of human existence, the exploitation, inequality, lack of freedom. But having acquired the opportunity to abolish these evils, the Leninists established a new, barley disguised form of exploitation to be carried out by the state...In the last analysis, the Leninist promise of great progress turned into great backwardness.195

Robert Service: The basic compound of the Soviet order had been invented by Lenin and his fellow communist leaders within a couple of years of the October Revolution. There had been created a centralized, one-ideology dictatorship of a single party which permitted no challenge to its monopoly of power...Civil war had added to the pressures which had resulted in the creation of the compound. On taking power in 1917, the communist leaders had not possessed a preparatory blueprint. Nevertheless they had come with assumptions and inclinations which had predisposed them towards a high degree of state economic dominance, administrative arbitrariness, ideological intolerance and political violence.196
Dmitri Volkogonov: Dogma deprived the Bolsheviks of common sense.197

Chris Read: “The most important factor underlying Bolshevik initiatives was utopianism, the desire to transform the world.”

Pipes: “The Bolsheviks ceased to be utopians when, once and for all it had become obvious the ideal was unattainable, they persisted in the attempt by resorting to unrestrained violence.”

Robert Service: Despite all the problems, the Soviet regime retained a vision of political, economic and cultural betterment. Many former army conscripts and would-be university students responded enthusiastically. Many parents, too, could remember the social oppressiveness of the pre-revolutionary tsarist regime and gave a welcome to the Bolshevik party’s projects for literacy, numeracy, cultural awareness and administrative facility.198

Orlando Figes: The Russian Revolution launched a vast experiment in social engineering – perhaps the grandest in the history of mankind…The experiment went horribly wrong, not so much because of the malice of its leaders, most of whom had started out with the highest of ideals, but because their ideals were themselves impossible.199

Robert Service: Utopianism itself did not disappear; essentially it, too, became authoritarian. By the close of the civil war it was so prevalent in the party that the wartime economic stringencies were assumed to provide the model for post-war reconstruction.200

Dmitri Volkogonov: …despite the fact that millions of honest people, led by the ‘vanguard of the revolution’, laboured for it, the utopia remained a fairy-tale.201

Martin Malia: The problem was not with the driver but with the vehicle. The Party was not a machine to be harnessed to some peasant nag and drawn for decades through the backward countryside before reaching socialism. The Party had been made to lead and to fight, to charge the class enemy and to force the hand of history. A Brest-Litovsk, whether diplomatic or economic, was only a stratagem to gather strength for a new offensive. And by the end of the twenties the Party had this strength. The great “social” fact of the NEP years was the maturation of Lenin’s Party into an organization of a still newer type: an authentic war machine to complete the conquest of the Russia interrupted by the retreat of 1921.202

Fitzpatrick: “Communists of the 1920s were afraid of class enemies, intolerant of cultural pluralism and uneasy about the lack of unity in the party leadership and the loss of a sense of direction and purpose. They wanted their revolution to transform the world, but it was very clear during the NEP how much of the old world had survived…Many rank-and-file Communists and sympathizers, especially among the young, were becoming disillusioned, inclined to believe that the revolution had reached an impasse…It was a mood of restlessness, dissatisfaction, and barely subdued belligerence and, especially among the party youth, nostalgia for the old heroic days of the Civil War.”

Geoffrey Swain: “The Russian Civil War was also a Red versus Green civil war, a war between the Bolsheviks and their socialist opponents led by the pro-peasant Party of the Social Revolutionaries (SRs), which has started in May 1918 and ended only in June 1922 when the leaders of that party were put on trial. It was this Red versus Green civil war which shaped the Soviet regime, by establishing at the heart of Bolshevik policy a deep-seated antagonism towards the peasantry, something epitomized within less than a decade by Stalin’s policy of forced collectivization of agriculture.”
Orlando Figes: …the fact remained that within the village the Bolsheviks were without real authority. This was the root failure of the NEP. Unable to govern the countryside by peaceable means, the Bolsheviks resorted to terrorizing it, ending up in collectivization. The events of 1918-21 had left a deep scar on peasant-state relations. Although the civil war between them had come to an end, the two sides faced each other with deep suspicion and mistrust during the uneasy truce of the 1920s. Militant Bolsheviks were increasingly afraid that the revolution would degenerate, that it would sink in the ‘kulak’ mud, unless a new civil war was launched to subjugate the village to the town. Here were the roots of Stalin’s civil war against the village, the civil war of collectivization. Without the means to govern the village, let alone transform it on socialist lines, the Bolsheviks sought to abolish it instead.  

Robert Service: Most Bolshevik leaders had never liked the NEP, regarding it as an excrescent boil on the body politic and at worst a malignant cancer.  

Martin McCauley: If War Communism was a leap into socialism then the New Economic Policy (NEP) was a leap out of socialism.  

Christopher Hill: “Lenin always insisted that the New Economic Policy introduced in 1921 was really the old economic policy of 1918, but he never attempted to disguise the fact that it was a large-scale retreat, another breathing-space, a Brest-Litovsk on the economic front.”  

Orlando Figes: Having defeated the Whites, who were backed up by no fewer than eight western powers, the Bolsheviks surrendered to the peasantry.  

Deutscher: “Exhausted and disillusioned, Bolshevik Russia was withdrawing into her national shell, feasting her sore eyes on the vistas of socialism in one country.”  

Martin Malia: In the course of 1928, urgency was fused with exhilaration within the Party at the prospect of a new Socialist Offensive that would at last put an end to the humiliations and compromises of the NEP.  

Fitzpatrick: “…the Right was promising much less in the way of achievement than Stalin; and the party in the late 1920s was hungry for achievement, and it did not have our retrospective knowledge of what it was going to cost. The Right, after all, was promising a moderate, small-gains, low conflict programme to a party that was belligerently revolutionary, felt itself threatened by an array of foreign and domestic enemies, and continued to believe that society could and should be transformed.”  

Nove: “But a sense of coming danger is no excuse for attempting the impossible.”  

W. Bruce Lincoln: “The ideological and political unity of the Bolsheviks during and immediately after the Civil War was an artificial creation in which divergent visions and incompatible personalities had been held firmly within the Party’s ranks by the powerful will of Lenin. Without his firm hand to control it, the Communist Party quickly polarized.”  

The Rise of Stalin  

Lynch: “Trotsky never had control of the political system as it operated in Soviet Russia. Politics is the art of the possible. After 1924 all the possibilities belonged to Stalin.”  

John Reed: “He’s not an intellectual like the other people you will meet…but he know what he wants. He’s got willpower, and he’s going to be top of the pile some day” (on Stalin, 1919).
Simon Sebag Montefiore: “The foundation of Stalin’s power in the Party was not fear: it was charm. Stalin possessed the will among his magnates, but they also found his policies generally congenial…Stalin was not the dreary bureaucrat that Trotsky wanted him to be. It was certainly true that he was a gifted organizer…But the new archives confirm that his real genius was something different – and surprising: ‘he could charm people.’ He was what is now known as a ‘people person’. While incapable of true empathy on one hand, he was a master of friendships on the other.”

Deutscher: “What was striking in the General Secretary was that there was nothing striking about him.”

Lynch: “The grey blur was about to become the Red tsar” (on Stalin’s defeat of the Left and then the Right of the CPSU during the 1920s).

Chris Ward: “Trotsky and Bukharin might win the argument, but Stalin invariably won the vote.”

E.H. Carr: “A triumph not of reason, but of organisation.”

Martin Amis: Stalin was Lenin’s industrious, underbred mascot, his shaggy dog. Five years later, Lenin would sense that the dog had begun to fizz with rabies. Two years earlier, so far as Lenin was concerned, the dog didn’t even have a name.208

Deutscher: “It seemed to Trotsky almost a bad joke that Stalin, the willful and sly but shabby and inarticulate man in the background should be his rival.”

Trotsky: “The leaden rump of the revolution outweighed the head of the party.”

Martin McCauley: Trotsky, the brilliant hare, was outmaneuvered by the pedestrian tortoise.209

Robert Service: Never was a man underestimated so devastatingly.210

Deutscher: “The mask of Bonaparte seemed to fit Trotsky only too well. Indeed, it might have fitted any personality with the exception of Stalin. In this lay part of his strength.”

Simon Sebag Montefiore: “Stalin’s success was not an accident. No one alive was more suited to the conspiratorial intrigues, theoretical rules, murderous dogmatism and inhuman sternness of Lenin’s Party. It is hard to find a better synthesis between a man and a movement than the ideal marriage between Stalin and Bolshevism: he was a mirror image of its virtues and faults.”

Orlando Figes: On the one hand it seems clear that the basic elements of the Stalinist regime – the one-party state, the system of terror and the cult of personality – were all in place by 1924. The party apparatus was, for the most part, an obedient tool in Stalin’s hands. The majority of its provincial bosses had been appointed by Stalin himself, as the head of the Orgburo, in the civil war. They shared his plebian hatred for the specialist and the intelligentsia, were moved by his rhetoric of proletarian solidarity and Russian nationalism, and on most questions of ideology were willing to defer to their Great Leader. After all, they were the former subjects of the tsars…On the other hand, there were fundamental differences between Lenin’s regime and that of Stalin. Fewer people were murdered for a start. And, despite the ban on factions, the party still made room for comradely debate.211

Martin Amis: The differences between the regimes of Lenin and Stalin were quantitative, not qualitative. Stalin’s one true novelty was the discovery of another stratum of society in need of purgation: Bolsheviks.212
Deutscher: “The political metamorphoses of the regime were accompanied by the debasement of the ideas of 1917. People were taught that socialism required not merely national ownership and planning, rapid industrialization, collectivization, and popular education, but somehow the so-called cult of the individual, crude privilege and vehement anti-egalitarianism, and omnipotence of the police were all part and parcel of the new society.”

J.H. Keep: “Any evaluation of this revolution’s place in history must proceed from an awareness of the consequences to which it led: namely, the world’s first experiment in totalitarian rule.”

The USSR under Stalin

Martin McCauley: The goals of the FYP can be likened to utopia, unattainable but nonetheless worth aiming for.213

Lynch: “Essentially the Plan was a huge propaganda project which aimed at convincing the Soviet people that they were engaged in a vast industrial enterprise of their own making”.

Fitzpatrick: “…Moscow’s central politicians and planners were clearly in the grip of ‘gigantomania’, the obsession with hugeness. The Soviet Union must build more and produce more than any other country. Its plants must not only catch up with the West in economic development, but surpass it.”

J.P. Nettl: The real significance of the second revolution of 1928-30 was not so much in what it achieved, as in the radical change in the manner of achieving it.214

Martin Malia: Stalin returned to original Leninism and ordered “full steam ahead” to socialism in five years; and he applied the full measure of coercion necessary to reach, at last, original Marxism’s goal of full noncapitalism…this outcome was by no means a “betrayal.” Rather, it was the fulfillment of the perverse logic of an impossible utopia.215

Isaac Mints: One-sixth of the world turned into a gigantic construction site where the building of a social system, never known to man before, was launched. In the land of the October Revolution a new world was born and the history of the future started.216

Fitzpatrick: “The winter of 1929-30 was a time of frenzy, when the party’s apocalyptic mood and wildly revolutionary rhetoric did indeed recall that of an earlier ‘heroic period’ – the desperate climax of the Civil War and War Communism in 1920.”

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “History had never known industrial construction on such a gigantic scale, such enthusiasm for new development, such labour heroism on the part of the working-class millions…It was a veritable upsurge of labour enthusiasm, produced and stimulated by Socialist emulation.”

Martin McCauley: But Stalinism is more than Stalin. Without willing cohorts in all aspects of human endeavor Stalinism would not have flowered. It was his ability to inspire, respond to ensnare a whole generation that makes Stalin a consummate political actor.217

Lynch: “He stood Marxist theory in its head. Instead of the economy determining the character of the political system, the political system would determine the character of the economy.”

Robert Service: Bolshevik leaders, unlike tsars, strove to identify themselves with ordinary people…central party leaders tried to present themselves as ordinary blokes with un-flamboyant tastes…interest in fine clothes, furniture or interior décor was treated as downright reactionary. A roughness of comportment, speech and dress was fostered.218
Fitzpatrick: “…Cultural Revolution was an iconoclastic and belligerent youth movement, whose activists, like the Red Guards of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, were by no means a docile tool of the party leadership…many of the initiatives taken in the name of Cultural Revolution were spontaneous, they produced some unexpected results.”

Service: “Many of Stalin’s inclinations were shared by many Bolsheviks.”

Martin McCauley: Not all the coercion in the world would have driven the Soviet Union forward had the population not been in sympathy with the goals of the FYPs…Stalinism flowered in the 1930s in a responsive soil. 219

Fitzpatrick: “The policy of ‘promoting’ workers into administrative jobs and sending workers to higher education was not new, but it had never been implemented with such urgency or on such a massive scale as during the Cultural Revolution…For members of this favoured group – ‘sons of the working class’, as they liked to call themselves in later years – the Revolution had indeed fulfilled its promises to give power to the proletariat and turn workers into masters of the state.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: Lenin had transformed the dictatorship of the proletariat into the dictatorship of the Party, and Stalin went further by making the dictatorship of the Party into that of one man. 220

W. Bruce Lincoln: “Not content to see his rivals ruined, Stalin demanded their blood.”

S. Sebag Montefiore: “…this constant struggling against traitors also suited his character and ideology. No political leader was so programmed for this perpetual fight against enemies as Stalin, who regarded himself as history’s lone knight riding out, with weary resignation, on another noble mission, the Bolshevik version of the mysterious cowboy arriving in a corrupt frontier town.”

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “The Party strengthens itself by purging its ranks of opportunist elements – that is one of the maxims of the Bolshevik Party.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: Lenin had created a system which could only tolerate one leader at its summit…Leninist was eating Leninist, the system was remorselessly consuming its creators. 221

Robert Service: Lenin’s ideas on violence, dictatorship, terror, centralism, hierarchy and leadership were integral to Stalin’s thinking…It is hard to imagine Lenin, however, carrying out a terror upon his own party. 222

Dmitri Volkogonov: Stalin finished building Lenin’s totalitarian pyramid. 223

Leonard Schapiro: The purpose of the new cult was clear to all: if Lenin was Allah, then Stalin was his prophet. 224

Dmitri Volkogonov: Stalin was indeed, as the slogan had it, ‘the Lenin of today’. 225

E.H. Carr: The once current slogan, “Stalin is the Lenin of to-day”, did not assert that Stalin was the Lenin of 1917, but that he was performing the function which Lenin himself would have to perform if he had remained leader of the revolution ten years later. 226

Service: “…if Lenin had not given him the map, Stalin would have never had the chance to select the destination.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: The system created by Lenin would have found its Stalin in any event. The country might have been spared the monstrous experiments of Stalinism, but the one-party ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ would inevitably have led to an authoritarian regime. 227
Robert Service: The First Five-Year Plan had intensified state authority beyond precedent. The Politburo under Stalin decided every great aspect of policy in foreign affairs, security, politics, administration, economy, science and the arts...yet somehow the peoples of the USSR had resisted being pummeled into the shape prescribed by the Kremlin.228

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “The sum and substance of the achievements of the First Five-Year Plan was that they had completely emancipated the workers and peasants from exploitation and had opened the way to a prosperous and cultured life for ALL working people in the U.S.S.R.”

Martin Amis: Launched over the later part of 1929, Collectivization was already a clear catastrophe by late February 1930. There were differences, but Stalin had reached Lenin’s impasse of 1921. In the earlier case, Lenin accepted defeat, withdrawal and compromise. In other words, he accepted reality. Stalin did not. The peasantry no longer faced a frigid in intellectual. It faced a passionate lowbrow whose personality was warping and crackling in the heat of power. He would not accept reality. He would break it.229

Dmitri Volkogonov: Collectivisation is essentially a form of serfdom in the 20th century.230

Schapiro: “It was a salutary lesson to the peasants that resistance did not pay.”

Deutscher: “The first purely man-made famine in history.”

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “The Bolshevik Party had helped millions of poor peasants to join the collective farms and to escape from servitude to the kulaks. By joining the collective farms, and having the best lands and the finest instruments of production at their disposal, millions of poor peasants who had formerly lived in penury had now as collective farmers risen to the level of middle peasants, and had attained material security.”

Ward: “What happened between November 1929 and December 1931 cannot be grasped by merely reciting statistics...a socio-economic system in existence for five hundred years vanished forever.”

Deutscher: “Under the ancien regime the Russian countryside was periodically swept by famine...The old system was hardly less cruel towards the peasantry than Stalin’s government, only its cruelty appeared to be a part of the natural order of things, which even the moralist’s sensitive conscience is inclined to take for granted. This cannot excuse or mitigate the crimes of Stalinist policy; but may put the problem into proper perspective. Those who argue that all would have been well if only the muzhiks had been left alone, the idealizers of the old rural way of life and of the peasantry’s individualism, are purveying an idyll which is a figment of their imagination.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: Collectivisation was built upon human bones. So was industrialization.231

Political Purges: The Great Terror

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “Purging and consolidating its ranks, destroying the enemies of the Party and relentlessly combating distortions of the Party line, the Bolshevik Party rallied closer than ever around its Central Committee under whose leadership the Party and the Soviet land now passed to a new stage – the completion of the construction of a classless, Socialist society.”
Robert Service: The thought, practices and institutions of the Civil War had set precedents for the horrors of the late 1930’s…Nonetheless the Great Terror would not have taken place but for Stalin’s personality and ideas. 232

S. Sebag Montefiore: “Stalin was the mastermind but he was far from alone. Indeed, it is neither accurate nor helpful to blame the Terror on one man because systematic murder started soon after Lenin took power in 1917 and never stopped until Stalin’s death. This ‘socials system based on blood-letting’, justified murder now with the prospect of happiness later. The Terror was not just a consequence of Stalin’s monstrosity but it was certainly formed, expanded and accelerated by his uniquely overpowering character, reflecting his malice and vindictiveness…It would not have happened without Stalin. Yet it also reflected the village hatreds of the incestuous Bolshevik sect where jealousies had seethed from the years of exile and war. Stalin and his faction regarded the Civil War as their finest hour.”

Dmitri Volkogonov: To Stalin the aim was supreme; the people meant nothing. 233

Stephen Cohen: “Stalin’s revolution from above in the 1930s was imposed, but it required and found enthusiastic agents below, even if only a relatively small minority of citizens. Zealous officials, intellectuals, workers, and perhaps even some peasants came forward to fight and win on the cultural, industrial, rural, and purge ‘fronts,’ as they were called…Millions of people were victimized, but millions also benefited from Stalinism and thus identified with it – not just the plethora of ‘little Stalin’s’ throughout administrative life, but the multitude of petty officials and workers who gained upward mobility and enhanced or even elite status. 234

Fitzpatrick: “The Great Purges could not have snowballed as they did without popular participation. Self-interested denunciations played a part, as did complaints against bosses that were based on real grievances.”

Robert Service: The Jews and Gypsies exterminated by Hitler knew that they were dying because they were Jews and Gypsies. Stalin’s terror was more chaotic and confusing: thousands went to their deaths shouting out their fervent loyalty to Stalin. 235

Robert Conquest: He carried out a revolution which completely transformed the Party and the whole of society. Far more than the Bolshevik Revolution itself, this period marks the major gulf between modern Russia and the past. 236

G.F. Alexandrov: “Stalin is the brilliant leader and teacher of the Party, the greatest strategist of the Socialist Revolution, military commander, and guide of the Soviet state.”

Trotsky: “Nero too, was a product of his epoch, yet after he perished his statues were smashed and his name was scraped off everything. The vengeance of history is more terrible than the most powerful General Secretary. I venture to think that this is consoling” (on Stalin, 1940).

History of the CPSU (b.) short-course: “The rise in the standard of welfare and culture of the masses was a reflection of the strength, might and invincibility of our Soviet revolution. Revolutions in the past perished because, while giving the people freedom, they were unable to bring about any serious improvement in their material and cultural conditions. Therein lay their chief weakness. Our revolution differs from all other revolutions in that it not only freed the people from tsardom and capitalism, but also brought about a radical improvement in the welfare and cultural condition of the people. Therein lies its strength and invincibility.”

Robert Service: The central authorities aimed at the total penetration of society…however, the Soviet state found it difficult to achieve its goals…groups based on family, wider kinship, friendship, leisure and a common culture were molecules resistant to disintegration into separate atoms…control over people came nearest to perfection in relation to two groups: those at the very bottom and those at the very top. Camp inmates had no rights: their daily routine ensured
compliance with the instruction of their guards on pain of death. Politburo members, too, lacked rights, and their physical proximity to Stalin necessitated an unswerving obedience to the whim of the Leader... But in between there were gradations of non-compliance which were possible and common...the entire structure of public information, surveillance and enforcement was patchy. Such a state and society were clearly not totalitarian if the epithet involves totality in practice as well as intent...Totalitarianism as a term fails to encapsulate the contradictions with this extremely nasty and orderly but also extremely chaotic reality... But the goal was so ambitious that even its half-completion was a dreadful achievement.  

**Martin Malia:** ...if Stalin’s power was called totalitarian, this was because it was indeed as total as state power can be.  

**Outcomes of the Revolution**

**Deutscher:** “Stalin, we should remember, was also the descendant of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Nicholas I, and Alexander III. Indeed, Stalinism may be described as the amalgam of Marxism with Russia’s primordial and savage backwardness. In any case, in Russia the aspirations of the revolution and its realities were far wider apart than anywhere else; and so it took far more blood and far greater hypocrisy to cover up the terrible discrepancy.”

**Orlando Figes:** They were not the victims of the revolution but protagonists in its tragedy... It was the weakness of Russia’s democratic culture which enabled Bolshevism to take root. This was the legacy of Russian history, of centuries of serfdom and autocratic rule, that had kept the common people powerless and passive... To be sure, this was a people’s tragedy but it was a tragedy they helped to make. The Russian people were trapped by the tyranny of their own history... For while the people could destroy the old system, they could not build a new one of their own... By 1921, if not earlier, the revolution had come full circle, and a new autocracy had been imposed on Russia which in many ways resembled the old.

**Lynch:** “Lenin and Stalin were in the tradition of absolutist Tsars.”

**Deutscher:** “Has the Russian revolution fulfilled the hopes it aroused? And what is its significance for our age and generation? I wish I were able to answer the first of these questions with a plain and emphatic yes... Unfortunately, this I cannot do. Yet, a disheartened and pessimistic conclusion would not be justified either. This is still in more than one sense an unfinished revolution... It is compounded of failure and success, of hope frustrated and hope fulfilled – and who can measure the hopes against one another? Where are the scales on which could be weighed the accomplishments and the frustrations of so great an epoch, and their mutual proportions established?”

**Martin Amis:** The enemy of the people was the regime. The dictatorship of the proletariat was a lie; Union was a lie, and Soviet was a lie, and Republics was a lie. Comrade was lie. The Revolution was lie.

**Martin Malia:** Because the Soviet adventure ended in disaster, it trajectory since 1917 can be understood only as tragedy... The initial violence of the Bolshevik seizure of power was multiplied many times over as the regime remolded a recalcitrant Russian reality by constant coercion from above.

**Stephen Cohen:** Relying on some concept of predestination and projecting the Stalinist outcome backward on the Bolshevik past, it tends to Stalinize everything of significance in early Soviet history and politics; to ignore, in favor of a “straight line” back to 1917, the period of 1929-33, when historical Stalinism actually first appeared; and,
throughout, to interpret the Bolshevik or Communist Party ahistorically, as though it acted above society and outside history itself.  

**Alan Wood:** In condemning the political aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, its detractors should be careful not to misinterpret or willfully ignore the misery and degradation, as well as the aspirations and the ideals, of the Russian people which were its driving force.

**Dmitri Volkogonov:** Was there a positive side to socialism? I think that, generally speaking there was. For example, the striving for equality, for care for pensioners, social security, an attempt to include all social groups in running the country, not just those with money. These are positive points, but they were perverted. Socialism, in the Marxist sense, has positive elements, the ones that are about caring for people, but under Stalinism they were perverted in the extreme. All I can say is this: Stalin was a gigantic zig-zag of human history. A horrible, gigantic zig-zag. Stalin showed how it possible to live as parasites off people’s aspirations for happiness. The main reason for the historical failure of Stalinism and Leninism was that any kind of freedom was crushed.

**W. H. Chamberlin:** “Every revolution has its inevitable combination of tragedy and triumph as it destroys, displaces, uproots individuals and whole classes and simultaneously pushes up others which were previously submerged. Whether measured by the misery which it caused some, or by the opportunity which it created for others, or by the fundamental character of the social reorganization which it brought about, the Russian Revolution is the greatest event of its kind in history.”

**Boris Pasternak,** *Doctor Zhivago:* ‘If we survive into the days when chronicles and memoirs of this time are being written, we shall see from reading those recollections that, in these five or ten years, we have experienced more than other people do in a century…Such a huge event cannot be asked for its credentials, it has no need to give dramatic proof of its existence, we’ll take it on trust. It would be mean and petty to try and dig for the causes of titanic happenings.’
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20 Wood, p. 5.
21 Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 34.
22 History of the CPSU (b.) short-course, p. 94.
24 History of the CPSU (b.) short-course, p. 145.
34 Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, p. 284
37 Wood, p. 40.
41 Pipes, 3 whys, pp. 29-30.
42 Chamberlin, P. 67
43 Figes, p. 254.
48 Figes, p. 343.
50 W.H. Chamberlin P. 97 vol 1
51 Wood, p. 41
54 Trotsky, p. 171.
56 Chamberlin, p. 73
59 Orlando Figes and Boris Kollonitskii, Interpreting the Language and Symbols of 1917 (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999), pp. 34 and 36.
64 Trotsky, p. 158.
65 George F. Kennan, excerpt from “The Breakdown of the Tsarist Authority”, cited in Adams (ed.) The Russian Revolution and Bolshevik Victory, p. 3
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80 Shap p. 165
81 W.H. Chamberlin P. 119 vol 1
82 Wood, p. 44.
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135 Malia p. 93.
136 Malia, p. 10.
137 Trotsky P. 155
139 Carr Stud revs p. 134-135
140 Service ed ‘intro’ p. 6
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143 Carr stud revs P. 142
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145 Three whys p. 61
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179 Volkogonov, Lenin, p. 73.
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184 Shap p. 201.
186 Figes, p. 768.
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