On the eve of World War I the Russian Empire faced a profound crisis. Ever-closer contact with the West, industrialization, and socioeconomic mobility resulting from a new railroad network were undermining the traditional foundations of state and society. Peasant unrest was mounting; the new factories had spawned a rebellious working class. The tsar had never trusted the country's intellectuals—too many of them had turned into revolutionaries. Defeat in the war with Japan had led to the revolution of 1905, nearly toppling the tsarist regime. Less than a decade later, as worldwide war approached, conservatives recognized and dreaded the prospect of military collapse followed by revolutionary anarchy. Liberals, less realistically, hoped for a constitutional regime that would let backward Russia catch up to the West. Radicals of utopian vision, like V. I. Lenin, expected the Russian workers to become the vanguard of a revolutionary advance that would bring freedom and justice to oppressed peoples all over the world.

Toward the end of World War I, the conservatives' fears came true. Nicholas II was overthrown in the March revolution of 1917; in the ensuing civic disorganization, the Russian state faced dissolution. The Germans were ready to partition the country. The liberal coalition that had formed a provisional government after the abdication of Nicholas II broke apart in early November. At that point, Lenin's Bolsheviks seized power, supported by the workers and soldiers in the country's capital of Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg and after 1924 called Leningrad). In the civil war that followed, the Bolsheviks proved to be the only force capable of holding together a country faced with defeat, revolution, civil war, foreign intervention, and economic ruin. The government became a socialist dictatorship with Lenin at its head. Soviet Russia was guided by Marxist ideology adapted by Lenin to Russian conditions, and it was run by the professional revolutionaries of the Communist party in the name of elected councils (called Soviets) of workers and peasants. To counter the prevailing anarchy, Lenin preached discipline, the discipline of responsible social cooperation, which in Western countries had become, to a large extent, part of civic routine. Lenin believed that among the raw and violence-prone peoples of Russia discipline had to be enforced by compulsion and even terror. The counterrevolution that threatened the very existence of the Communist regime was for Lenin a pressing reason for employing terror. By the end of the civil war, even the workers and soldiers of Petrograd protested against the Communist dictatorship, and the garrison at the nearby Kronstadt naval base rose in revolt in 1921.

The years after the Kronstadt uprising were relatively calm. Russia regained its prewar standards of productivity, but it did not overcome the weaknesses that had led to catastrophe in World War I. To guard

Soviet Russia against a similar fate was the burning ambition of Joseph Stalin, who in 1929, after a prolonged struggle, took over the leadership role left vacant when Lenin died in 1924. The product of violence and revolutionary agitation since youth, Stalin started a second revolution far more brutal than Lenin's.

Rapid industrialization under successive Five-Year Plans led to appalling confusion, waste, and hardship, yet also to an impressive increase in production. The forcible collectivization of agriculture, designed to crush the spirit of ever-rebellious peasants and to bring agricultural production under the planned economy, proved a savage process. All along, Stalin's revolution was accompanied by well-orchestrated methods of disciplining the country's heterogeneous, stubborn, and willful peoples, and molding them into docile citizens ready for the sacrifices of overly rapid industrialization and driven by patriotic dedication. The second revolution created a sense of citizenship among the peoples of Russia that was unique in the country's history.

Stalin burned to achieve the age-old Russian dream of overcoming the country's backwardness and matching the advanced Western countries in world power and prestige. His program was a desperate effort to create deliberately by compulsion and in the shortest time possible a modern Russian state that would hold its own in a ruthlessly competitive modern world. With harsh and cruel methods, so repulsive to Western values, Stalin transformed the Soviet Union into an industrial and world power, respected and feared for the next half century.

# 1 ❀ Theory and Practice of Bolshevism

As events in 1917 proved, Russian liberals were not capable of ruling the country in times of supreme crisis. The question then became what political system and ideology could overcome anarchy. Could the rebellious peasants and workers—the working class—mount a successful revolution and build a Russian government more effective than that of the tsars? That question had long agitated Russian revolutionary leaders, and the answer would determine not only the fate of the revolution but also the survival of Russia as an independent state.

## V. I. Lenin
## *WHAT IS TO BE DONE?*

Lenin (Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, 1870–1924) believed that on its own, the working class could never achieve a successful revolution; workers without leadership could not rise above petty trade unionism. Throughout his career, Lenin

contrasted ignorant working-class "spontaneity" with revolutionary "consciousness," meaning deliberate action guided by the proper comprehension of the conditions under which revolutionaries must work. Under his leadership, the guiding ideology of the Soviet Union became Marxism-Leninism, that is, Marxist theory as applied by Lenin to the special conditions of Russia.

A seminal document of Marxism-Leninism was Lenin's pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* published in 1902, fifteen years before the tsar's overthrow. In this tract Lenin addressed the big questions facing Russian Marxists (who called themselves Social Democrats after the German Social Democratic party that served as their model). How could they effectively channel the mounting discontent in Russian society and especially in the new industrial working class? How could they prevail against the secret police in the tsarist police state (referred to by Lenin as autocracy)? How could they find Russia's way among the complexities of the modern world and master them? The answers Lenin offered to these difficult questions—found in the following passages—helped shape the Soviet regime.

Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly. . . . Yet, for Russian Social-Democrats the importance of theory is enhanced by three other circumstances, which are often forgotten: first, by the fact that our Party is only in process of formation, its features are only just becoming defined, and it has as yet far from settled accounts with the other trends of revolutionary thought that threaten to divert the movement from the correct path. . . .

Secondly, the Social-Democratic movement is in its very essence an international movement. This means, not only that we must combat national chauvinism, but that an incipient movement in a young country can be successful only if it makes use of the experiences of other countries. In order to make use of these experiences it is not enough merely to be acquainted with them, or simply to copy out the latest resolutions. What is required is the ability to treat these experiences critically and to test them independently. He who realises how enormously the modern working-class movement has grown and branched out will understand what a reserve of theoretical forces and political (as well as revolutionary) experience is required to carry out this task.

[T]he national tasks of Russian Social-Democracy are such as have never confronted any other socialist party in the world. We shall have occasion further on to deal with the political and organisational duties which the task of emancipating the whole people from the yoke of autocracy imposes upon us. At this point, we wish to state only that the *role of vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory.* . . .

We have said that there *could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose altogether

independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia. . . .

Given the ignorance of the working class, said Lenin, revolutionary leadership had to come from a close-knit vanguard of dedicated and disciplined professional revolutionaries as well trained as the tsarist police and always in close touch with the masses. The revolutionary leaders had to raise working-class awareness to a comprehensive understanding of the coming crisis in Russia and the capitalist world generally.

. . . I assert: (1) that no revolutionary movement can endure without a stable organisation of leaders maintaining continuity; (2) that the broader the popular mass drawn spontaneously into the struggle, which forms the basis of the movement and participates in it, the more urgent the need for such an organisation, and the more solid this organisation must be (for it is much easier for all sorts of demagogues to side-track the more backward sections of the masses); (3) that such an organisation must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity; (4) that in an autocratic state, the more we *confine* the membership of such an organisation to people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to unearth the organisation; and (5) the *greater* will be the number of people from the working class and from the other social classes who will be able to join the movement and perform active work in it. . . .

. . . Social-Democracy leads the struggle of the working class, not only for better terms for the sale of labour-power, but for the abolition of the social system that compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich. Social-Democracy represents the working class, not in its relation to a given group of employers alone, but in its relation to all classes of modern society and to the state as an organised political force. Hence, it follows that not only must Social-Democrats not confine themselves exclusively to the economic struggle, but that they must not allow [investigating mismanagement of the economy] to become the predominant part of their activities. We must take up actively the political education of the working class and the development of its political consciousness.

Lenin did not think there was a danger that the secret, tightly centralized revolutionary organization would establish a dictatorship over the proletariat. He trusted that close comradeship and a sense of responsibility would lead to a superior revolutionary "democratism." He looked to the Russian revolutionaries as the vanguard of the international revolutionary movement.

. . . We can never give a mass organisation that degree of secrecy without which there can be no question of persistent and continuous struggle against the government. To concentrate all secret functions in the hands of as small a number of professional revolutionaries as possible does not mean that the latter will "do the thinking for all" and that the rank and file will not take an active part in the *movement.* On the contrary, the membership will promote increasing numbers of the professional revolutionaries from its ranks; for it will know that it is not enough for a few students and for a few working men waging the economic struggle to gather in order to form a "committee," but that it takes years to train oneself to be a professional revolutionary. . . . Centralisation of the most secret functions in an organisation of revolutionaries will not diminish, but rather increase the extent and enhance the quality of the activity of a large number of other organisations, that are intended for a broad public and are therefore as loose and as non-secret

as possible, such as workers' trade unions; workers' self-education circles and circles for reading illegal literature; and socialist, as well as democratic, circles among *all* other sections of the population; etc., etc. We must have such circles, trade unions, and organisations everywhere in *as large a number as possible* and with the widest variety of functions. . . .

. . . The only serious organisational principle for the active workers of our movement should be the strictest secrecy, the strictest selection of members, and the training of professional revolutionaries. Given these qualities, something even more than "democratism" would be guaranteed to us, namely, complete, comradely, mutual confidence among revolutionaries. . . . They have a lively sense of their *responsibility,* knowing as they do from experience that an organisation of real revolutionaries will stop at nothing to rid itself of an unworthy member. . . .

. . . Our worst sin with regard to organisation consists in the fact that *by our primitiveness we have lowered the prestige of revolutionaries in Russia.* A person who is flabby and shaky on questions of theory, who has a narrow outlook, who pleads the spontaneity of the masses as an excuse for his own sluggishness, who resembles a trade-union secretary more than a spokesman of the people, who is unable to conceive of a broad and bold plan that would command the respect even of opponents, and who is inexperienced and clumsy in his own professional art—the art of combating the political police—such a man is not a revolutionary, but a wretched amateur!

### *REVIEW QUESTIONS*

1. According to V. I. Lenin, why did the revolutionary movement in Russia call for an elite of professional revolutionaries?
2. What did Lenin say were the qualities of the revolutionary elite?
3. Does Lenin's prescription for an effective revolution show traces of future Soviet totalitarianism? Does it bear any comparison with Sergei Witte's prescription for Russian industrialization (see page 209)?

## 2 ❁ The Bolshevik Revolution

**In March 1917, in the middle of World War I, Russians were demoralized. The army, poorly trained, inadequately equipped, and incompetently led, had suffered staggering losses; everywhere soldiers were deserting. Food shortages and low wages drove workers to desperation; the loss of fathers and sons at the front embittered peasants. Discontent was keenest in Petrograd, where on March 9, 200,000 striking workers shouting "Down with autocracy!" packed the streets. After some bloodshed, government troops refused to fire on the workers. Faced with a broad and debilitating crisis—violence and anarchy in the capital, breakdown of transport, uncertain food and fuel supplies, and general disorder—Tsar Nicholas II was forced to turn over authority to a provisional government, thereby ending three centuries of tsarist rule under the Romanov dynasty.**

**The Provisional Government, after July 1917 guided by Aleksandr Kerensky (1881–1970), sought to transform Russia into a Western-style liberal state, but the government failed to comprehend the urgency with which the Russian**