

CHAPTER  
**14**

## HISTORYMAKERS

# Vladimir Lenin

## *Russian Revolutionary*

## Section 1

*“There is no other man who is absorbed by the revolution twenty-four hours a day, who has no other thoughts but the thought of revolution, and who even when he sleeps, dreams of nothing but revolution.”—another Communist, speaking of Lenin*

Vladimir Lenin was one of the century’s most important leaders. Unhappy and disillusioned with the Russian monarchy, he led a group called the Bolsheviks in a revolution that gave him control of the largest nation in the world.

Born in 1870, Lenin was raised by two educated parents in a happy family. He showed intelligence and skill with classical languages. While in his teens, two shocks jolted his world. First, his father was threatened with losing his job by the government. Second, Lenin’s older brother was hanged for conspiring against the czar. Within two years, Lenin had read the work of Karl Marx and believed that Russia needed a Communist revolution.

Lenin then began to write and to recruit new followers. He was arrested and served 15 months in prison followed by three years of exile in Siberia. When that ended in 1900, he traveled abroad, where he spent much of the next 17 years. During this time, he sharpened his ideas about Marxism.

Marxism said that industrial workers, called the proletariat, were in a struggle against capitalists, the people that owned businesses. Eventually, Marx said, the workers would overthrow the capitalists and form a new society called communism. However, Russia consisted mainly of peasants and only had a small number of industrial workers. Marxists wondered how a workers’ revolution could occur.

Lenin saw the role of the party as essential, and his group became known as the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks, he said, would lead the people to the revolution they needed. However, many Marxists found it difficult to accept Lenin’s iron rule. In 1912, he forced those who disagreed with him out of the party.

World War I brought another crisis. Communists all over Europe ignored class loyalty and chose to fight for their country instead. They joined their nations’ armies to fight each other—not the capitalists. Lenin said that the war would help capitalists profit while workers suffered. He urged that Communists “transform the imperialist war into a civil war.”

As the war continued, the Russian people suffered terribly. In March 1917, hungry, angry workers and soldiers overthrew the czar. Lenin and his supporters won permission from Germany to travel through German lands back to Russia.

Lenin accepted the new temporary government but said that it was not revolutionary enough. He urged that power go to the soviets, which were councils of workers set up in many cities. His position grew dangerous. He was branded a German agent and was forced to live in hiding in Finland. From that base, he issued a stream of writings urging immediate Russian withdrawal from the war and for the government to give land and bread to the people. These cries gained popularity. In late October, he returned to Russia, disguised for his safety. He persuaded the party’s leaders that it was time to overthrow the provisional government but watched with alarm as no steps were taken. Finally, on November 7, 1917, the Bolsheviks overthrew the temporary government. The soviets chose the 47-year-old Lenin as their leader.

Lenin quickly made peace with Germany, giving up large chunks of Russian territory. A civil war, though, still raged in Russia between the Bolsheviks and their opponents. However, Lenin’s leadership ensured that the new government would survive.

With peace came the question of how to rule the new state. The country was named the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the Bolsheviks renamed themselves the Communist Party. In Lenin’s last years, he struggled to prevent Stalin from gaining power. Lenin became ill and died in 1924.

## Questions

1. **Drawing Conclusions** What is the danger of Lenin’s idea of party leadership?
2. **Making Inferences** Why did the Germans allow Lenin and his associates to return to Russia?
3. **Recognizing Facts and Details** What obstacles did Lenin have to overcome to achieve his revolution?