



# HOW THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION CHANGED THE WORLD

One hundred years ago, a peasant uprising toppled an empire, with far-reaching consequences. A look at how it transformed history.

BY VERONICA MAJEROL

It was a defining event of the 20th century.

One hundred years ago, in the fall of 1917, Communists known as Bolsheviks seized power in Russia. Their ascent to power ended 1,100 years of imperial rule in the world's largest nation.

Russia had long been run by despotic czars, and in the early 1900s, peasants began to revolt. Russia's economy, military, and government collapsed under the pressures of World War I (1914-18). This forced Russia's final czar, Nicholas II, to give up his throne in March 1917. That created an opening for the charismatic Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin to take power by November. Shortly after, he established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, also known as the Soviet Union.

Within decades, Soviet rulers transformed the country into a fearsome military power. One

of them, the infamous Joseph Stalin, killed millions of Soviets as part of a political purge. The Soviet Union went on to engage the U.S. in a decades-long struggle for global dominance. This conflict became known as the "Cold War." Their fight was over more than territory; it was about the very survival of Western democracy. For much of the 20th century, the Soviet threat loomed over every aspect of American life. The Soviets affected everything from U.S. politics to technology to pop culture. Their impact came to an end when their government collapsed in 1991.

"To try to understand the 20th century without the Russian Revolution is like one hand clapping," says Lewis Siegelbaum, a Russia expert at Michigan State University.

With that in mind, here's a look at seven ways the Russian Revolution changed the world.

# 1 The Cold War

Though Communism ran contrary to America's values, the U.S. and the Soviet Union joined forces during World War II (1939-45) to defeat Germany. But after the war, it became clear that Moscow was intent on taking over vast sections of Eastern Europe and installing Communist puppet regimes. What followed was the Cold War. This decades-long competition pitted capitalism and democracy, embraced by the U.S. and its allies, against Soviet authoritarianism and Communist rule.

Some countries began to "fall" to Communism, as China did in 1949. The U.S. grew more concerned that it would cause a "domino effect." This was the idea that if one country became Communist, others would follow. There was also fear of infiltration by an "enemy within." U.S. officials' suspicions about foreign spies and American Communists grew. This was heightened by Senator Joseph McCarthy's overheated witch hunts in



**Duck & Cover:** Middle school students in Brooklyn, New York, during a practice drill for a nuclear attack, 1962

the 1950s for alleged Communists in the State Department and Hollywood. Movie stars and others were called before congressional committees and ordered to name colleagues who were Communists. Many suspected of Communist sympathies were "blacklisted" and lost their jobs.

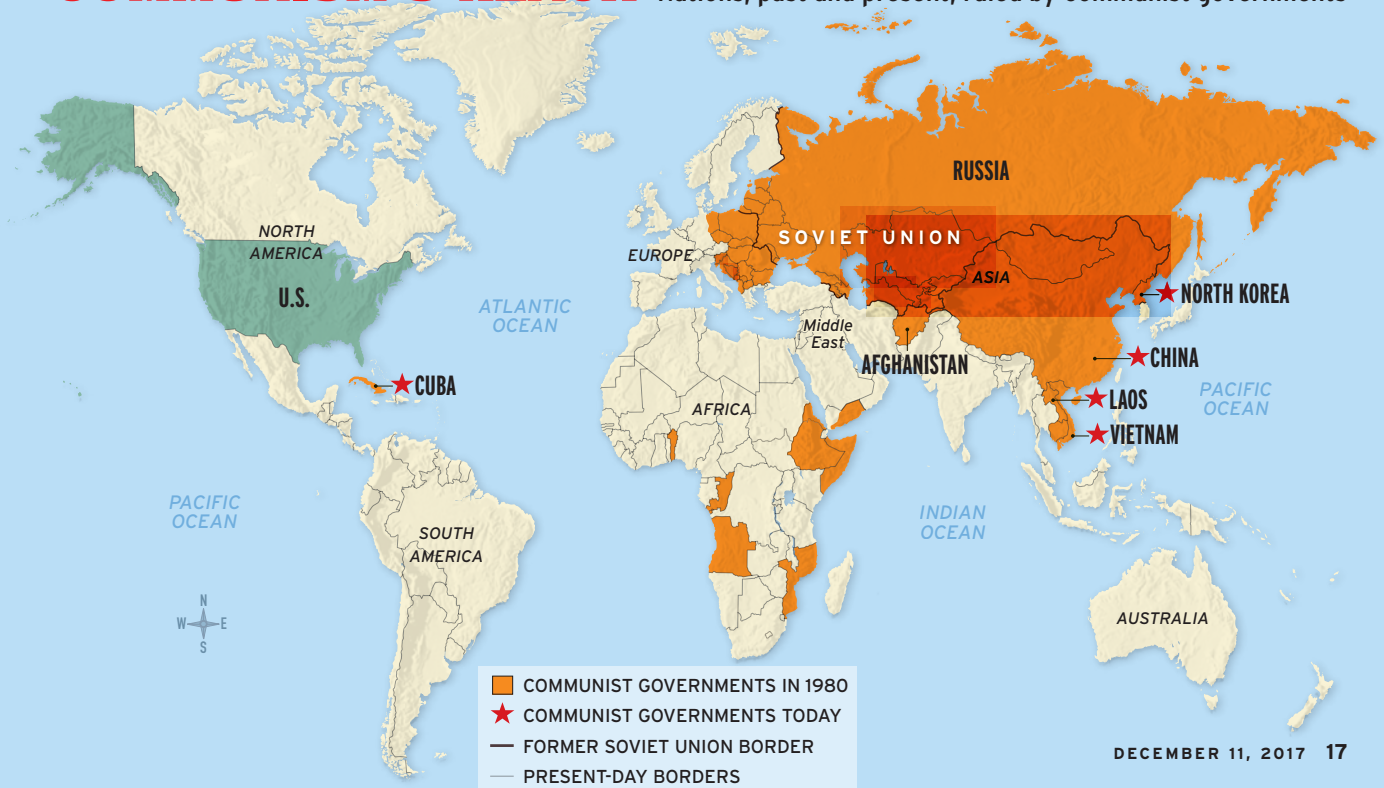
"The idea that actors and some workers could get together and overthrow the United States

government—some people took that seriously," says Andrew Straw, a Russia scholar at the University of Texas at Austin, "because there was a clear example of it in 1917."

# 2 Nuclear Buildup

In 1945, the U.S. became the first country to successfully develop and use a nuclear bomb in war (see "The

## COMMUNISM'S REACH Nations, past and present, ruled by Communist governments



GRAPHICARTS/GETTY IMAGES (DUCK & COVER); JIM MCMAHON (MAP)



*Manhattan Project*,” Nov. 20, 2017). But its nuclear monopoly abruptly ended in 1949. That year, the Soviet Union tested an atom bomb of its own. Thus began the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the U.S., with each side determined to have a bigger and stronger nuclear arsenal.

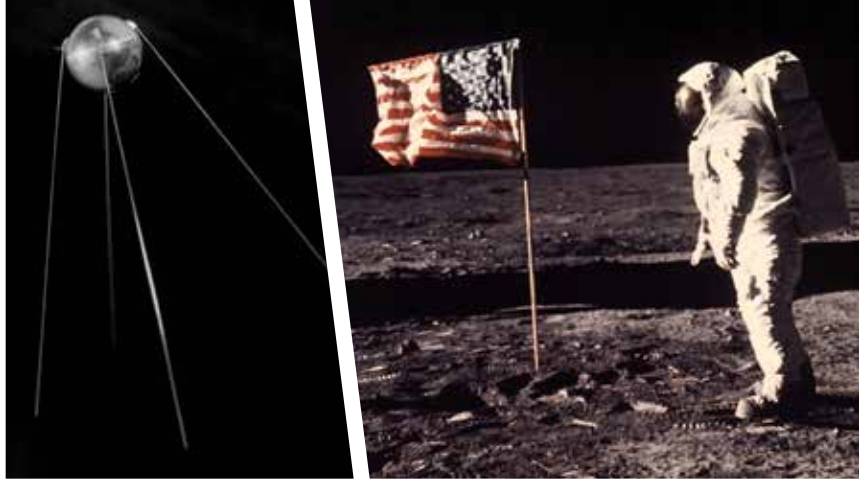
“Duck and cover” drills became standard in schools. Children practiced huddling under their desks in case of a Soviet attack (as if a school desk could shield someone from a nuclear bomb). Ironically, the idea of “mutually assured destruction,” or MAD, kept each side from ever using their nuclear weapons against each other. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union feared being wiped out by the other in retaliation. But the nuclear buildup continued, in these two countries and elsewhere. Today, nine nations have nuclear weapons. This includes North Korea, led by the rogue dictator Kim Jong Un (*see No. 4*).

### 3 Space Race

Though America was the first to develop the nuclear bomb, the Soviet Union soon celebrated its own first. In 1957, the Soviets launched Sputnik, the world’s first unmanned artificial satellite. This ushered in the space age. But it also stunned and frightened the U.S. The next year, America followed suit with its own satellite. President Dwight D. Eisenhower also created NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration), which was dedicated to space exploration. Then, in 1961, the Soviets led the way again. They put a man into space for the first time and returned him home unharmed.

In 1962, in a speech at Rice Stadium in Houston, Texas, President John F. Kennedy declared America’s commitment to being the best and doing something the Soviets hadn’t yet done. “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things [that challenge us], not because they are easy, but because they are hard.”

Kennedy’s promise was fulfilled in



**Sputnik 1**, the first artificial Earth satellite, launched by the Soviet Union in 1957 (left); and American astronaut Buzz Aldrin during the 1969 moon landing (Neil Armstrong held the camera.)

1969. That year, U.S. astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first men to walk on the moon. This gave America the victory in the space race and bragging rights in the Cold War. Today, the spirit of the space race continues, with NASA preparing to send humans to Mars by the 2030s.

### 4 Vietnam & Korean Wars

The U.S. and the Soviet Union never actually engaged in direct combat during the Cold War. But they fought many “proxy wars.” This means they contributed weapons, money, or soldiers to military efforts that aligned with their values.

That was the case during the Korean War (1950-53). The U.S. fought alongside the South against Communist forces in the North, supported by the Soviet Union. America lost 34,000 soldiers in the Korean War, which ended in a stalemate. It also split that country in two: democratic South Korea and Communist North Korea. They signed an armistice, but not a peace agreement, so they technically are still at war. And North Korea remains a totalitarian Communist regime with nuclear weapons that threatens the U.S.

In Vietnam, where civil war broke out in the 1950s, America was also determined to prevent a Communist takeover. The U.S. began sending advisers to help the South Vietnamese. The U.S. escalated its involvement in 1965, when it started sending combat troops into Vietnam.

The war was controversial and tore the U.S. apart. Many Americans, especially teenagers and college students, protested the war and the draft. They questioned America’s presence in the faraway conflict. By the war’s end in 1975, more than 2.5 million Americans had served in Vietnam and 58,000 had died. The Communists won. This was a crushing blow to the U.S. that left it cautious about future military entanglements.

Vietnam remains a Communist country. But, like China, which also remains Communist, it has embraced some free-market reforms and is a vital trading partner of the U.S.



**U.S. troops**  
in Vietnam, 1966

SOVFO/UG VIA GETTY IMAGES (SPUTNIK 1); NEIL A. ARMSTRONG/AP IMAGES (BUZZ ALDRIN); LARRY BURROWS/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES (VIETNAM)

## 5 Pop Culture

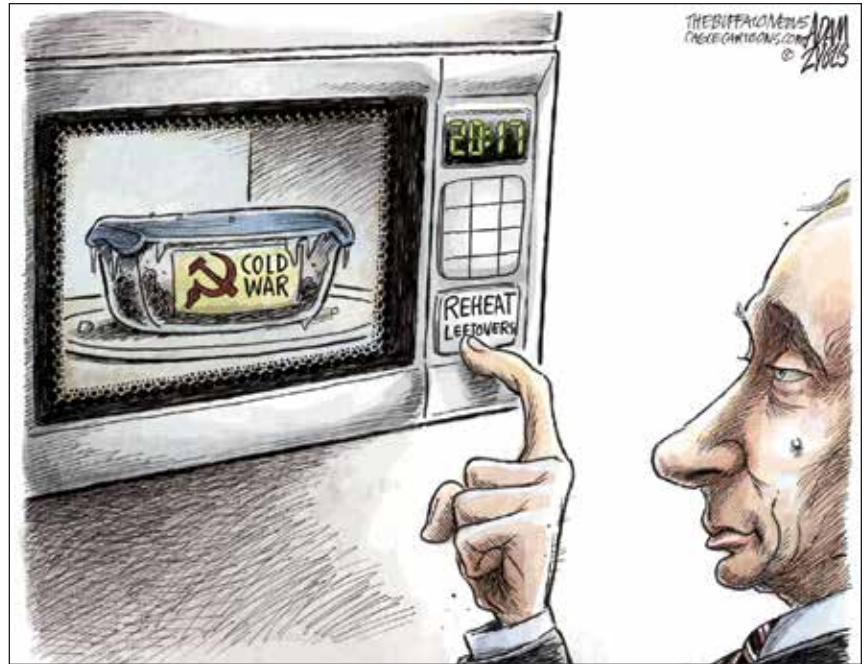
The U.S. and the Soviet Union continued to engage in a battle to win the hearts and minds of the rest of the world. America sought to portray itself as a symbol of freedom and prosperity. One by-product of this was the Barbie doll, created in 1959. The doll was outfitted with dresses, swimsuits, and sunglasses. It represented a sharp contrast to the way of life in the Soviet Union. During that time, the centrally planned Communist economy focused more on agriculture, defense, and housing than it did on consumer goods.

In 1964, a year before U.S. combat troops were sent to Vietnam, American boys got a doll of their own. Equipped with machine guns and bazookas, G.I. Joe grossed \$16.9 million in its first year. Its popularity died out in the latter years of the Vietnam War, however. And George Orwell's *1984*, a book still widely read in U.S. high schools, also grew out of the Cold War. Published in 1949, the novel expressed the British author's anxieties about the U.S. and the Soviet Union's fight for global supremacy. Orwell feared that the competition would lead to totalitarian states around the world, with "Big Brother" controlling our every move.

## 6 Al Qaeda & 9/11

On Christmas Eve in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to rescue a Communist-leaning government under attack by Islamic rebels. These rebels were known as mujahedeen, or "holy warriors." To hurt its Cold War foe, the U.S. began arming the mujahedeen in the 1980s. This helped the rebels secure a stalemate against the Soviet army, which finally pulled out its troops in 1989. With the Soviets gone, factions of mujahedeen battled each other. By 1996, the Taliban, a radical Islamist group, controlled the country.

Among those who'd joined the mujahedeen was Osama bin Laden, a billionaire's son from Saudi Arabia.



Angered by Soviet and American involvement in Middle East affairs, he helped found the terrorist group Al Qaeda. Bin Laden would become the mastermind of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 Americans. The attacks drew America into two wars, in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003.

The U.S. still has roughly 11,000 troops in Afghanistan, making the war there America's longest. Today, part of the U.S. mission there is to weaken the terrorist group ISIS. This terrorist group traces its roots to one of the radical groups that emerged in Iraq following the 2003 American invasion.

## 7 Putin and a New Cold War?

In the end, the Communist model didn't work out for the Soviet Union. It collapsed in 1991, despite efforts by then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to loosen the economy and enact other reforms. The Russian democracy that succeeded his rule was well-meaning but incompetent. In 2000, after a decade of economic chaos, Vladimir Putin took

power in a peaceful transfer of authority. Putin was a veteran of the Soviet Union's spy service, the KGB. When he came into power, he promised stability and cast himself as a democrat.

He has stayed in power ever since and has proved himself an authoritarian. During his rule, political opponents have

been jailed or murdered.

He's also limited free speech. And in 2014, amid political upheaval in neighboring Ukraine, Putin forcibly annexed the territory of Crimea. More recently, U.S. intelligence officials say Putin personally

sought to undermine American democracy by meddling in the 2016 presidential election. Experts say that he sought to boost Donald Trump's chances.

During the czarist era and Soviet years, Russia was a superpower that the U.S. and the rest of the world couldn't ignore. And according to Sean Guillory, a Russia expert at the University of Pittsburgh, Putin wants that again.

"His end goal," says Guillory, "is to bring Russia back to become a major global player." •

With reporting by Michael Wines of *The New York Times*.