

What is a Bolshevik? What is the difference between the Soviet Union and Russia? Who was Vladimir Lenin? Why is Joseph Stalin someone you should know about? These questions and many others are going to be answered in today's episode, part one of the last 100 years in Russia.

Welcome to Wiser World, a podcast for busy people who need a refresher on all things world. Here we explore different regions of the globe, giving you the facts and context you need to think historically about current events. I truly believe that the more we learn about the world, The more we embrace our shared humanity.

I'm your host, Allie Roper. Thanks for being here.

Hello again. Welcome. If you listened to Episodes 1 and 2, you might be a little confused why I'm talking about Russia today instead of the Middle East, as I promised. But I have decided to put those episodes on hold for a short bit, though I'm very excited to talk about them. And instead, I'm going to do a short mini series on the histories of some countries that I think we need to be paying close attention to right now.

Right now I'm planning to cover Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, we'll see what else I come up with, and then we'll go right into season one. Um, but these next few episodes will focus more on, like I said, basic history, less on individual stories, um, but know that those are coming in future episodes, but I think right now what we need is more basic plot.

Backstory. So, as I am recording this, Russia is invading Ukraine and the world is a heavy place. We are watching history happen before our eyes and, man, it is tough to watch from a distance. I can't even imagine experiencing it. This is one of those times when, like I say in Episode 2, like our shared humanity comes out and just feels really close and, uh, It's a very, it's a, it's a really writing on all of our hearts right now.

It's written on all of our hearts right now. As the events unfolded of Russia and Ukraine, I've seen a lot of confused people asking questions about Russia. So having context is so critical here. And in these next two episodes, I want to give you a very brief overview summary of Russia in the last 100 years.

And one day we will dive deeper into this area and tell some really amazing stories because there are a lot of really interesting stories about Russia. But like I said, we're going to keep it to an overview sometimes. Um, I know for myself, when I'm getting lost in the weeds of current events, I sometimes need someone to give me a larger vision of a nation.

And that's what I want to do here. I'm giving you what I see as the most essential names and events so that when you're listening to these current events, you have just this basic foundation to recognize the history and then better understand some of the motivations and what's going on here. So that's my basic goal here.

We're actually going to start in the late 1800s, so a little more than a hundred years ago. Ha ha. So, Russia. From the mid 1500s until 1917, Russia had a monarchy. So they had a king, and the king was called a tsar, T S A R or C Z A R. And it was a family line. otherwise known as a dynasty. So these family dynasties are really fascinating to study.

So we'll talk more about them later. But in 1613, Mikhail Romanov became the czar. And then this Romanov line ruled Russia for the next three centuries. That's why if you've heard the story or watched the animated movie on Anastasia, you might know the last name Romanov. So in the early 1900s, Russia was pretty impoverished.

By this point, Russia was economically very behind the rest of Europe and had an enormous peasant class, a low class. Um, it had industrialized quite a bit later than the rest of Europe and industrialization basically means that they adopted machinery and factory work later. And so they had more of a classic agricultural model of nobles owning land and peasants working the land and that kind of thing.

They had that for longer. than many European countries. And between 1890 and 1910, so this is 100 years ago, roughly, right? A little, little more than 100 years ago, the population in cities in Russia began to skyrocket and these cities became overcrowded. So it, it really has been within the last 110 to 120 years, um, that Russia has been an industrialized nation and Russia fought in some costly wars during this time in, like I said, 1890 to 1910 ish, and there were foods, there were food shortages.

And in 1894, Tsar Nicholas II Romanov, he comes into power. And like I said, you might recognize his name because he had a daughter named Anastasia. And again, their story is fascinating. I'd love to talk about it now, but now's not the time. So Nicholas is an interesting person because he wasn't necessarily stoked to rule.

He resisted calls to reform. He was very focused on his family life. There was some illness in his family. And so In this environment of a weak leader or a resistant leader, there was a lot of growing unrest with the population, overcrowding, late industrialization, just trying to give you the vibe of the situation here, a man named Vladimir Lenin comes onto the scene.

And Lenin is a name to know. Lenin began to read the works of Karl Marx, who we'll talk about soon, but he became a Marxist. And so Lenin basically did not believe in this monarchy or king, these, this dynasty of families, and he was interested in Russia becoming communist. So to define Marxism in Simple terms.

Again, we'll talk about this soon in, in deeper, in a deeper way, but it's basically a political and economic theory where there's this, a society has no classes, so the idea is that each person works for the common good and there's not a lower class struggling to rise up to a, an upper class. That that idea is theoretically gone and in a perfect execution of Marxism, everyone would be in the same.

Class. Now, just a little aside here, Marxism and Communism are really interesting studies. Um, many U. S. citizens actually know very little about it, so soon I'll do a bonus episode to help you understand the theory of Communism versus the practice of Communism. But anyway, that is what Vladimir Lenin believed.

And he became a revolutionary leader, so he got some traction with the Russian people because they were suffering in a nation that then they weren't being heard. So he was actually arrested by the monarchy, by the Romanov family line, and he was exiled to Germany and Switzerland in the late 1800s, and while he was there, He established the Bolshevik Party.

So when you hear the word Bolshevik, I want you to think, okay, Russian communist, early 1900s, late 1800s. So Russian communists. Back in Russia, in January of 1905, so again, we're a little bit more than 100 years ago, a group of workers. Marched on the czar's winter palace in St. Petersburg and essentially they were protesting the lack of support they were receiving and they made their demands and You know what happened the King's soldiers opened fire on the demonstrators and killed and wounded hundreds of people It was a total massacre and this was later called bloody Sunday So the people felt so unheard that strikes and riots broke out across the country and Nicholas promised reform But the massacre had just this effect of pushing more people to Lenin's side as they felt, you know, they tried to show their plight and they were shot down literally.

So sometimes in history we see leaders who are exiled actually get more attention. And this was the case for Lenin. He wrote books and essays on Marxism and with the poverty in Russia and the poor leadership, it was a time when these ideas could really catch fire. Meanwhile, 1914 brings World War I.

Nicholas II is still the Tsar, and Russia joins in the war with the Allies and fights against the Germans. But Russia was no match for Germany because Germany was far more industrialized. And so Russian casualties or deaths were greater than those sustained by any other nation in World War I. And so food and fuel shortages were just plagued this massive country.

And Lenin, meanwhile, is in Germany. And Germany arranges to send him back because they know that he will destabilize the current structure of Russia even more. And so he returned back in April 1917. And like I said, things were already hot. There were strikes over food shortages. And Lenin begins plotting how to overthrow the government.

And he was obviously very anti upper class. By 1917, these Russian peasants are so tired of war. At the time, there was a provisional government. So technically, Nicholas II was the ruler, but it was mostly ruled by a provisional government or a group of leaders from Russia's upper class, capitalist class, um, or people who obviously had more money, I guess I should say.

They ruled and Lenin called for a Soviet government that would be ruled directly by a council of soldiers and peasants and workers. So it's obviously empowering to the lower class to hear

because the upper class, you know, bourgeoisie, very high class, lots of money looked down on the lower class. And in this environment, Lenin decides that this is the moment to seize power.

He secretly organizes factory workers and peasants and soldiers and sailors into what was called the Red Guards, which was basically a voluntary or volunteer military like force. And on November 7th and 8th in 1917, so World War I is still going on, Red Guards capture the provisional government buildings in a bloodless coup.

So basically they took over power and it seems like it wasn't a bloodbath. The Bolsheviks, or again, Russian communists at the time, they seize power of the government. And they proclaim Soviet rule. Uh, which again, it looks like communist rule, making Lenin the leader of the world's first communist state.

That is important to know. Russia had the first communist state. The new Soviet government ended Russian involvement in World War I shortly thereafter. So they pulled out of World War I. Excuse me, I said World War II, I meant World War I. Now, there were a lot of Russians who did not like the Communist Party, so there was a war.

This was called the Russian Revolution or the Bolshevik Revolution. It was a three year civil war. So the Red Army, backed by Lenin's newly formed Russian Communist Party, fought the White Army, which was basically a loose coalition of, you know, of people who are called monarchists or supported having a king, having a monarch, uh, capitalists, people who wanted to have a capitalist economy, anybody who supported democratic ideas or democratic socialism, those people tended to fight with the white army against.

Now, Tsar Nicholas II and his family were murdered by the Bolshevik Red Army in 1918. And again, that is a very fascinating story. But uh, Lenin quickly decided to nationalize all manufacturing and industry throughout Soviet Russia. So this basically means that private enterprise, like a private farm or a private business was no more.

It was owned by the government and everything was theoretically regulated. So, any extra grain from peasant farmers were, was officially, he had official orders to feed the Red Army with that. And these measures proved to be very painful and even disastrous under this new state owned economy, both industrial and agricultural output.

just dropped, it plummeted. So an estimated 5 million Russians died of famine in 1921, and living standards across Russia plunged into, like, complete poverty. So in 1922, a treaty was organized between Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Transcaucasus, which is now the countries of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

And these original countries formed the Union of Soviet Republics, or the USSR. So when you hear Soviet Union or USSR, those are interchangeable. That is the same thing, right? But USSR, or Soviet Union, is different. Then Russia, those are different things because Russia was

a separate entity that joined together with Ukraine, Belarus and the trans Caucasus countries, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan to create the USSR.

So the original USSR did include Ukraine. And this is why it's very interesting when you hear Putin talk in today's he's talks about the original Soviet Union, not the post World War Two Soviet Union necessarily he's talking about the original one. So, Lenin became the first head of the USSR, or Soviet Union, and by that time, his health was actually going downhill.

So between 1922 and his death in 1924, he actually had a bunch of strokes, and this compromised his ability to speak, so he couldn't really govern. And in 1924, he died, and his body is actually still on display in Red Square in Moscow. And let's pause for just a moment here and let's just consider, let's like share our humanity for a second, let's just consider how exhausted The Russian people must have been at this time.

They had just had world war one and then they, and they lost more people than any other European country at that time. Then they had a massive civil war. I just can't even imagine. I mean, we're exhausted after. I, I, I just think it's amazing. And then obviously we know that World War II is like right around the corner.

So I just, I just think it's fascinating. Anyway, let's go back to history for a second. Once Lenin died, Joseph Stalin, a name to know, he was the Communist Party's general secretary and he begins to consolidate power. So ooh, Lenin's gone. I'm going to consolidate power when Lenin had been alive. He had not.

He kind of resented Stalin's growing political power, and he saw power climbing as a threat to the USSR. And so you see this. You see that a panel of peasant working class people did not actually end up ruling the Soviet Union. Instead, a dictatorship arose and Stalin was a dictator. He was the longest ruling dictator of the Soviet Union.

He ruled from 1929 to 1953. He took Russia from a more peasant society. to a military and industrial power. And like I said, he was a totalitarian dictator. So because Lenin wasn't his biggest fan, he became paranoid about anyone that was once loyal to Lenin. And when he took power, he did something called the Great Purge somewhere between 1934 and 1938.

So this is between World War I and World War II. And basically anyone who was perceived as a threat to Stalin. was murdered. So he murdered plenty of his fellow Bolsheviks who didn't like him, even people who were of his same party. It is estimated that around 750, 000 people were killed to eliminate opposition, and more than a million people who were anti communist or perceived as as a threat to his power were sent to forced labor camps called gulags.

Maybe you've heard that word before, but a forced labor camp in Soviet Union. That is a gulag. That's a word worth knowing. Now, Stalin, like I said, led the Soviet Union through World War II. Stalin and Hitler actually signed a non aggression pact in 1939. So right at the beginning when Hitler starts making his moves, he signs this pact, non aggression pact with Stalin.

Now, why would he do that? Well, Communists and Nazis were actually, or communists, Soviet communists and Nazis were not pals. They were not friends, but Hitler wanted the Soviet Union to stay out of the war, so they basically made a deal that they wouldn't fight. But two years later, in 1941, Hitler made a pretty critical mistake, and he invaded the Soviet Union, which obviously angered Stalin, who then joined forces with the Allies.

The U. S., England, and France, and we'll talk about Russia's role in World War II in another episode, but their contribution was significant. Though they were communists, the U. S., England, and France, and other allied nations felt like they needed to work with the Soviet Union because it was the premise of the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

But the relationship was always tense, and while it was an agreement to fight a common enemy, there was always a feeling that if we win this war, we're still gonna have big issues to address. So because we had completely differing views on how economies and governments should be run. We saw that Americans were very wary of Soviet communism and how Stalin was a tyrant or dictator to Americans.

And the Soviets resented how the Americans did not treat the USSR as a legitimate part of the international community. And also, because the U. S. took a long time to enter World War II, The Soviet Union lost way more soldiers like to the tune of tens of millions of soldiers as a result to that late entry and so basically each side had major grievances and there was a lot of mutual distrust going on between these two massive powerhouse nations, despite the fact that they were working for the same cause at the time.

So in February of 1945, so this is a few months before the Allies won the war in Europe, the U. S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Stalin all met for a conference in Yalta, which is in the Crimean Basin. peninsula, so close to the Soviet Union. And the point was to discuss the post war reorganization of Europe.

So basically the idea was like in teen terms, there were all of these countries who had been under Nazi control. If we win this war, what's going to happen to all of these countries? And there were many takeaways for the conference, but a big one is that they agreed that Eastern European nations bordering the Soviet Union should be air quotes friendly to the Soviet regime.

So the Soviets pledged to allow free elections in these territories that were liberated from Nazi Germany. And this didn't happen, but all parties made concessions at the time. And even upon leaving the conference, Britain and the U. S. were still very concerned about communist ideas being spread and the Soviets wanted to grow in power.

So as the war ended, Britain had a lot of issues. Of its own. So one of them was that many of its colonies or countries that had taken over essentially started to revolt and want independence. Same with France. So this left the United States and the Soviet Union, these two countries jockeying for weaker nations to take on their political style.

So basically, England and France were busy. So that got the United States and Soviet Union kind of left. And the idea was, what are these Essentially, governmentally weaker countries who had just been through a massive war. I mean, the horrors of that. Would they accept democracy and free elections or would they accept communism?

And Stalin was determined to control Eastern Europe. And his theory was that if he did that, then another country such as Germany couldn't use Hungary or Poland or any of these Eastern European nations as a staging post. to invade in a future war. That was kind of what he was saying. So you can see how there was just this power push from both sides based on political theories of how people should be involved in government.

And by February 1946, so this is after World War II is officially over, roughly six months after the end of World War II in Japan and roughly nine months after the end of World War II in Europe, Stalin. makes this hostile speech that communism and capitalism cannot coexist. And that's when in 1946, Churchill makes his famous speech that an iron curtain has descended on Europe.

So many Eastern European nations begin to have communist governments that are loyal to the USSR or the Soviet Union, and then their economies become tied to it as well. And police control in those is overseen by the Red Army. You get the idea. Now, during this time, the U. S. believed in something called containment, or as George Kennan wrote, America's only choice was the long term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.

Basically, in shorter words, containment. The U. S. began to support peoples who fought against the Soviets, and thus the Cold War began. So if you've been listening to this and been thinking, wait, what about all of these other countries in the world that haven't been talked about at all? This is when some of those smaller nations or nations that weren't major industrial powers at the time, they start to become a lot more prominent in terms of the large scale world history headlines and major.

industrialized nations. These countries are going to start playing in. So I'm going to stop here, and we're going to keep it to this, but next episode is part two, which is going to cover everything from 1949 until today. And I hope that this, just this back, this back history that I've talked about from, you know, late 1800s until 1949, can give us a better understanding better idea of the mindset of the country up until 1949.

And then we'll, we'll go from there. Thank you so much for listening to Wiser World. I hope that this has been helpful to you. If it has, I would love to hear from you on Instagram. And I also would love to All shares and reviews. As you can see, I'm growing from the ground up. So I am so grateful for all people who are sharing and reviewing the podcast on Spotify, Apple Podcasts.

Those things matter to me. So thank you so much. And let's go out and make the world a little wiser.

