
The Black Swan of the Russian Revolution

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A black swan is a metaphor for an event that comes as a surprise, has a major effect, and is understood only with the benefit of hindsight. The metaphor fits the Russian Revolution as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Great Depression, and the French Revolution. We cannot anticipate black swans because they require that a confluence of events come together in a particular time and place. The combination of events is so complex and unanticipated that they can be understood only in hindsight.

One hundred years ago Russia experienced two revolutions in the course of a single year—1917. The February Revolution was a popular uprising centered in St. Petersburg that grew out of general strikes and their repression by czarist forces. With surprisingly little resistance, the demonstrators took the Winter Palace, the czar abdicated, and a provisional government was fashioned from a panoply of political parties, including socialists previously aligned with the Bolsheviks. The parties of the Provisional Government agreed to a national election of representatives to a constituent assembly, whose task it would be to draft a constitution to govern a postczarist Russia.

The Bolshevik Party, led by Vladimir Lenin (who arrived in St. Petersburg in April 1917, courtesy of the German secret service), was a relatively small party. At Lenin's insistence, the Bolsheviks had split off from the Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903 to form a party of professional revolutionaries devoted to the goal of socialist revolution. From underground and exile, the Bolsheviks had recruited workers, peasants,

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and soldiers to their side. As word of the February Revolution spread, the leaders of the Bolshevik Party hastened from abroad or from exile within Russia to what was now called Petrograd.

Leftist parties formed an alternative government, the Petrograd Soviet, which competed with the Provisional Government. Some Petrograd Soviet leaders wished to cooperate with the Provisional Government, including some leading Bolsheviks, but the Bolsheviks in general—as the presumptive representatives of workers, peasants, and soldiers— withheld their support from what they considered the “bourgeois” Provisional Government. They instead battled to gain control of the Petrograd Soviet and succeeded. The Provisional Government issued arrest warrants for leading Bolsheviks, who went underground. Lenin fled abroad. As one Provisional Government after another faltered due to bickering and diverse motives, the Bolsheviks saw their opportunity. With a relatively small armed force, they occupied government buildings, routed the defenseless Provisional Government from the Winter Palace, and took power in Petrograd. Armed resistance from the Social Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, and the Kadets in Moscow was greater, but the Bolshevik forces eventually took the Kremlin, and Moscow belonged to them.

Despite objections within the party, Lenin agreed to participate in the election to the Constituent Assembly, expecting an electoral victory based on his platform of land, bread, and withdrawal from World War I. In the elections of November 1917, however, the Bolsheviks took only 24 percent of the seats, far behind the Socialist Revolutionaries, who won a clear majority. The vote showed strongest Bolshevik support in urban centers and from soldiers at the front but little support from the countryside and borderlands.

The Bolsheviks delayed the convocation of the Constituent Assembly until early January 1918 and then, armed, shut down the assembly after one late-night convocation, at which point Lenin and his party ordered it dissolved.

After a bitter internal party struggle, Lenin ordered a capitulatory peace settlement with Germany, which the Bolshevik representative at Brest-Litovsk signed reluctantly in March 1918. The harsh treaty ceded the Baltic states to Germany, recognized the independence of Ukraine, and left the status of Poland unclear.

Although the Bolsheviks had gained control of Russia’s two largest cities, Bolshevik power remained weak throughout the collapsing Russian Empire. The civil war that followed shrunk territories under Bolshevik control, with territorial losses in Ukraine, Crimea, the Urals, and Siberia. Alarmed by the withdrawal of Russian troops from the western front of the world war and fearing a possible alliance between Germany and Bolshevik Russia, Entente nations sent forces into Russia with ill-defined objectives. Japanese forces moved into eastern Siberia to back local warlords fighting against the Red Army. One of the few potent fighting forces in Russia was the thirty-thousand-strong Czech Legion making its way along the Trans-Siberian Railroad to Vladivostok. After a military confrontation in Chelyabinsk, the Czech Legion gained virtual control of the Trans-Siberian.

The beleaguered Red Army, under the command of Commissar Leon Trotsky, recruited peasants by force and urged soldiers returning from the front to kill their commanders and elect Red officers in their place. Lenin dispatched his most trusted deputies to the front, where they led, some less successfully than others, forces loyal to the Bolshevik side.

The collection of Cossack, White Russian, Ukrainian nationalist, interventionist, and other diverse forces outnumbered the Bolsheviks. If they had united under a supreme leader, they could have defeated the beleaguered Red forces, many of them led by military amateurs (among them Joseph Stalin). Each White army fought for its own goals, such as the liberation of Ukraine, the preservation of the Cossack way of life, loyalty to the monarchy, or a buffer state between Japan and the Bolshevik menace. The Whites fought among themselves—for example, in the simmering feud between the “supreme commander” Admiral Alexander Kolchak and the Cossack ataman Grigory Semyonov. The interventionist forces proved impotent. They could not choose among the multiple contenders to succeed the former czarist government, and so in general they sat idle on the sidelines.

Defying the odds, the Red Army won. The last effective resistance ended with the fall of Vladivostok in November 1922. The victorious Bolsheviks were left with the difficult task of ruling a vast territory devastated by war. They were challenged with creating the first Bolshevik state that would be operated according to Marxist principles.

Was the Bolshevik victory over what had appeared to be a stable autocratic regime a black swan, or did it follow Marx’s dialectic of a series of inevitable events grinding toward the unavoidable socialist revolution?

Marxism teaches that socialist revolution will be the inevitable product of organic class struggle. It will be led by a vanguard of revolutionaries, who will follow a predetermined path to victory. Following Marx’s materialistic conception of history, personalities—such as Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin—are not significant to the outcome. The qualitative change from capitalism to socialism will not be the result of historical accident but will be preordained by forces that transcend personalities.

It was not until Stalin’s postpurge consolidation of power in 1939 that he personally edited *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, which provided his official account of how the Bolshevik Party came to power (see Commission of the Central Committee 1939). The *Short Course* used Lenin’s theories of imperialism, uneven development, and capitalist breakdown to explain the inevitability of world war and how war would intensify class struggle and lead to an eventual socialist revolution in the weakest link of the capitalist chain. It emphasized the role of Lenin’s April Theses in laying out the Bolshevik revolutionary strategy and his own role in preventing unfaithful party leaders (Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin, and many others) from sabotaging the socialist revolution. The *Short Course* did not mention that most of these misguided old Bolsheviks had been murdered or would soon be.

Stalin’s *Short Course* presented the civil war as directed by the forces of capitalism—the Entente interventionists, landowners, and capitalists—and explained how they could not match the strength of a workers’ state formed by urban workers,

poor peasants, and soldiers from the front. The Red Army's victory was preordained by organic forces rather than by the lack of organization and confusion of its opponents. By the time *Short Course* was published, the Bolshevik Party's "Central Committee"—that is, Stalin—provided the wise guidance that led to victory. The party and Stalin were now one, and the "cult of personality" had arrived.

The actual Bolshevik victory does not give the impression of preordained events laid out by Marxism, Leninism, or Stalin's *Short Course*. Instead, the role of historical coincidence and accidents seem determinative. The heavy losses at the front in the world war and the Provisional Government's foolhardy pledge to continue Russia's participation in the war made it possible for the Bolsheviks to recruit armed supporters to their side. The normal strains of a war economy created conditions for the worker strikes that led to the February Revolution. The failure of the White forces to coalesce around a central leader dictated that an outgunned Red Army could pick and choose its battles. The interventionist forces' indecision in casting their lot with a particular White army commander meant the squandering of their numerical strength.

The Russian Civil War was one of the bloodiest in history. Both sides engaged in terror, mayhem, and murder, but Lenin opted for centralized terror aimed at both specific and general enemies. His second order as head of the Central Executive Committee was that the Red Terror be carried out by a new form of secret police, the Cheka, headed by a zealot true believer, Felix Dzerzhinsky. In the course of the Red Terror, the Cheka executed, jailed, or exiled suspected regime opponents under a central command structure. Indeed, atrocities were committed on both sides. Few atrocities can compare with Ataman Semyonov's reign of terror in Trans-Baikal, but his atrocities were of a random nature, whereas the Red Terror was directed to achieve specific goals.

Lenin and his inner circle were dedicated Marxists, but they were also pragmatists. The command system of nationalization and requisitioning in the countryside that they had introduced during the civil war was bringing the economy to ruin and threatening a revolt of armed forces allied with the Bolsheviks. Alarmed by an uprising of sailors at the Kronstadt base, Lenin overcame resistance from his Left Communists to return to more normal business relations called the New Economic Policy. Without this one step back in order to take two forward later, the Communist regime might not have survived.

Today, the Putin regime praises its "power vertical"—a political system in which power is centralized under a single leader. As an underground organization, the Bolsheviks were a tight-knit group, which, despite jealousies and infighting, accepted Lenin as being at the top of the power vertical. The recognized leader, he maintained a power base despite increasing physical and mental incapacitation due to strokes. The Bolsheviks also knew each other well, either from their external exile in Europe or from their internal exile in Siberia. They even managed to hold periodic meetings abroad that those sought by the czar's secret police, the Okhrana, attended. In these meetings, they worked out rules of behavior and discipline, and they did not shy away from the use of force, such as bank robberies, to fund their activities, crimes that they later expunged from their party history.

The White opposition lacked such cohesion. It comprised monarchists, constitutional democrats, social revolutionaries (and a radical fringe of Left social revolutionaries), and former officials and generals of the old regime. In some cases, rival White forces were their own worst enemies. From his perch on the Trans-Baikal railroad, Ataman Semyonov confiscated arms and supplies designated for Admiral Kolchak's Urals armies. Semyonov and Kolchak's relations became so strained that Kolchak ordered his fellow White's arrest.

Lenin suffered the first of three strokes in May 1922. He died in January 1924. His family maintained the pretense that he was on the road to recovery and would return to the Kremlin from his sanatorium outside of Moscow. The brutal and bloody succession struggle that followed his passing paralyzed the party leadership for the next five years as Stalin used his control of the Central Committee to neutralize one faction (Trotsky, Bukharin) after another. It was only in 1929 that Stalin gained the power to announce his "Great Break" of forced industrialization, class war against the upper peasantry, and collectivization. If Lenin had suffered his strokes at the height of the civil war, the Bolshevik power vertical would have been broken, with potentially substantial but unknown consequences.

Hindsight turns us all into geniuses, but very few experts anticipated the financial crisis of 2008–9, and bond markets did not anticipate the outbreak of world wars (Ferguson 2008).

The well-funded intelligence community likewise did not foresee the fall of the Soviet Union. Although there is some certainty that Vladimir Putin's regime cannot last, few can put together a scenario that explains how its end will happen. The reasons for the Bolshevik victory in the period 1917–22 seem obvious to us today, but who could have put together at the time the confluence of events that led to this victory? No one is to blame for not foreseeing black swans, nor can we institute procedures to prevent them from happening, nor should we try.

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