Vladimir Lenin was one of the most influential political leaders of the twentieth century. Born into a Russia that still had one foot in the Middle Ages (A.D. 500–c. 1500), he led a political movement that became the revolution that created the Soviet Union. Though many people criticize Lenin as a dictator and a terrorist, it must be acknowledged that he developed the practical theory of modern communism, organized the defeat of one of the most brutal monarchies in the world, and began the process that would make the Soviet Union a modern nation. Lenin dreamed of a world where working people would control their own governments. Though his dream has not been realized yet, his work and ideas did lead to a consciousness of the working class that has resulted in improved conditions for working people worldwide.

A Radical Emerges from the Nobility

Vladimir Lenin was born Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov on April 22, 1870, in Simbirsk, a small town in the western part of Russia. He was the third of seven children, though two of his siblings died as babies. Lenin’s ancestors were serfs (servants
who were bound to the land they worked), but by the time of
Lenin's birth, his family had begun to climb the social ladder.
His father, Ilya, became a teacher and worked his way up to the
position of inspector of schools. A dedicated and principled
man, Ilya Ulyanov later achieved the position of director of
schools, which brought with it the status of nobility. Because
of this, Lenin was born with noble rank and had a fairly shel-
tered childhood. His mother, Maria, taught him the love of lit-
erature and music. From her he learned to play the piano, and
for the rest of his life he would turn to music when he felt torn
and stressed from his political work.

Lenin was a wild and rowdy child, with a tendency
toward meanness and tantrums. He was an excellent student,
but he could be conceited and harsh toward his fellow stu-
dents. He loved his family deeply, especially his older brother,
Alexander, a student and political activist in St. Petersburg.
When Lenin Vladimir was a teenager, two events occurred that
ended his peaceful childhood forever: In 1886, his father died
duddenly of a stroke. A year later Alexander, who had been
plotting with a group of revolutionaries to assassinate Czar
Alexander III (the emperor of Russia), was caught by the police
and hanged.

His brother's death affected Lenin deeply. He was
suddenly the man of the family at age sixteen; he had lost
his father and his adored brother; and because his brother
had been executed as a traitor, Lenin Vladimir was mocked
and insulted by those who assumed he must be a revolu-
tionary too. The headmaster of his school stood by him and
recommended him for acceptance into law school at Kazan
University, but Lenin's university career would not last long.
He joined a group of students who were protesting the clo-
sure of school fraternities and was expelled, mostly because
of his brother's previous political activities. Angered at being
expelled when he had done nothing wrong, and with no
schoolwork to occupy him, Lenin turned to revolutionary
politics himself. He began to read Das Kapital by Karl Marx
(1818–1883), a book that described a radical new system of
government that would divide resources more equally
among members of society—this new system was called
communism.
Exile and Activism

After being expelled from the University of Kazan because of his participation in a political rebellion, Lenin continued to study on his own and earned his law degree in 1891. While practicing law in the town of Samara, near where he had grown up, he met other anticzarist revolutionaries, among whom he continued to develop his political ideas. When a famine struck Samara in 1891 and 1892, Lenin began to display some of the political harshness that would mark his later career. He refused to help those who were suffering from the famine, because he felt that the terrible conditions of the people's lives would speed the revolution; helping people survive the famine would only postpone the needed changes.

By 1893, Lenin had moved to St. Petersburg, where he continued to study and began to write and distribute political pamphlets about socialism (a political and economic theory based on the idea of cooperation and shared resources for the common good), trying to stir up rebellion among the working people. He joined other agitators to form the League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class and was soon arrested for his political activities. From prison in St. Petersburg, he was sent to Siberia from 1897 to 1900. While in Siberia, Lenin met Nadezhda Krupskaya, another child of the nobility who had turned to radical politics. They married on July 22, 1898.

It was around this time that Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov began to write under the name Lenin to disguise his identity from authorities. Once his exile ended, Lenin started a radical newspaper called Iskra (“spark” in Russian). So that he could study, write, and publish Iskra more freely, he left Russia and went to Western Europe, traveling in Germany, England, and France and living in Switzerland, where he met exiled Russian Marxist Georgy Plekhanov. There Lenin wrote What Is to Be Done? (1902), an important work in which Lenin explained his theory that the workers could not create a revolution by themselves, but needed a strong intellectual political party to plan the overthrow of the czar and design the new government. In 1903, Lenin argued with the leadership of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party. The moderates, led by L. Martov (whose real name was Yuly Tsederbaum), wanted to keep the party open to all who agreed with its politics. The radicals, led
by Lenin, insisted that only those truly committed to immediate revolution should be members. The party split between the radical Bolsheviks and the moderate Mensheviks.

**War and Revolution**

It was World War I that speeded revolution in Russia. Lenin was still in Western Europe when the war began in 1914, and he saw the war as an opportunity to advance the international workers’ revolution he had worked for. He wrote and spoke, encouraging workers and soldiers of all countries to refuse to participate in the war. Meanwhile, in Russia, the war was taking not only most of the country’s money, but also most of her men. With half of the workingmen in the army and no bread to feed those at home, the Russian people were desperate. Czar Nicholas II (1868–1918), a weak and confused ruler under the influence of his wife Alexandra (1872–1918) and her corrupt advisor Rasputin (1872?–1916), could not deal with Russia’s problems. On March 8, 1917, a march to demand food turned into a riot with workers and peasants storming the czar’s palace.

In Switzerland, Lenin read the news of the overthrow of the czar. German authorities, anxious to do anything that might destabilize Russia and take her out of the war, helped Lenin return to his country. There he led the Bolsheviks in the overthrow of the provisional (temporary) government. In November 1917, Lenin was named chief commissar (a Communist party official) of Russia. By March 1918, as Russia plunged deeper into civil war, Lenin ordered his negotiator and fellow revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) to sign an armistice (peace treaty) with Germany, ending Russia’s involvement in World War I.

Though the international revolution Lenin had hoped for did not happen, the Russian Revolution was under way, and it was bloody. The White Army, or the soldiers of the old nobility, fought against the Bolsheviks (also called Reds) for control of the country. Although Lenin called for elections for a national assembly, he almost immediately dissolved the elected body and made himself dictator. Lenin felt that he needed to be ruthless and severe to establish his new form of socialism. He established the Cheka, a secret police that arrested or killed those who opposed the new government. By
1921, the Bolsheviks had won the civil war, and Lenin was the established leader of the new Russia. He had survived an assassination attempt in August 1918, and many of his enemies were dead, in prison, or in concentration camps.

Though Lenin continued to work long, stressful hours setting up new political and economic policies in Russia, the endless work of the revolution had taken its toll on his health.
He had a stroke on May 26, 1922, and it permanently weakened him. After two more debilitating strokes, he died of a fourth stroke on January 21, 1924.

After Lenin’s death, his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, pleaded with the Russian people, “Do not let your sorrow be transformed into demonstrations of adoration of Vladimir Ilich’s personality. Do not put up buildings or monuments in his name. When he was alive he set little store by such things; indeed, he actively disliked them,” as quoted in a Time magazine article, “But Can They Repair a Broken Reputation?” Nonetheless, the Russian people were not ready to lose their dynamic leader so soon after the revolution. The name of Lenin’s birthplace, Simbirsk, was changed to Ulyanovsk to honor him, and the name of the ancient city of St. Petersburg was changed to Leningrad. Lenin’s body was embalmed and put on display in a large mausoleum in Moscow’s Red Square, where it gained the status of a national monument. Through the decades, thousands of Russians and foreign tourists have filed by to pay their respects to Lenin’s remains.

With the fall of the Soviet Union and its Communist government in 1991, Lenin’s reputation as a heroic leader has suffered. The name Leningrad was dropped in favor of the city’s former name, St. Petersburg. The statue of Lenin in Red Square was pulled down, and new Russian leaders debate removing his mausoleum as well. Some even suggested burying Lenin next to the recently discovered remains of Czar Nicholas II to symbolize a healing of old conflicts. While they debate about what to do, Lenin’s body remains in Red Square, but he has competition he might never have expected: In 1990, the Moscow McDonald’s surpassed Lenin’s tomb as the most-visited spot in Red Square.

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