

The Russian Revolution: A Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)

Content Question: **Did Communist leaders use violence to achieve equality for the peasants/working class or to establish their own personal power?**

Two Positions:

“Communist leaders used violence to achieve equality for the peasants/working class”

“Communist leaders used violence to establish their own personal power”

Directions: Read and answers the questions on the primary in preparation for the SAC.

Document #1 - F.F. Raskolnikov: “The Tale of a Lost Day” (1918)

Raskolnikov was a leader in the Red Navy during the Russian Civil War and is regarded as an authentic chronicler of the October Revolution. In this description of the Constituent Assembly meeting of Soviet officials, he retells what Yakov Mikhailovich Sverdlov, the chairman of the Central Executive Committee, had to say about the revolution.

Vocabulary

Constituent Assembly: meeting of Soviet (a type of communist) leaders

Exploit: to take advantage of, to oppress

Lenin, wearing a padded overcoat with a lambskin collar and a big fur hat with earflaps, entered at a brisk pace, nodding to comrades and shaking their hands quickly, and modestly went to his seat.... Yakov Mikhailovich Sverdlov, in a glossy black leather jacket, placed his warm fur hat on the table and declared the meeting open. ...Comrade Sverdlov went on, undisturbed, “The October Revolution has kindled the fire of socialist revolution not only in Russia but in all countries.”

“We do not doubt that sparks from our [revolution] will fly all over the world, and that the day is not far distant when the working classes of all countries will rise up against their exploiters just as in October the Russian working class rose up, followed by the Russian peasantry.”

“We do not doubt,” Sverdlov went on, “that the true representatives of the working people who are sitting here in the Constituent Assembly will help the Soviets to put an end to class privileges. The representatives of the workers and peasants know the rights of the working people to the means of production and ownership, which before the Revolution was controlled by the ruling classes to exploit the working people in every way.” ...

“Long live the Soviet Republic!” Once more the slogan rose from our benches in a unanimous, triumphant shout. And, in our enthusiasm, we fervently clapped our hands.

[Source: F.F. Raskolnikov’s Works - <http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/red-army/1918/raskolnikov/ilyin/index.htm>]

Guiding Questions:

1. Lenin says the peasants have been “exploited” in every way by the “ruling classes”. In what ways do you imagine the peasants and working classes have been exploited?

2. Given your answer to question #1, what “rights” do the Soviet communist leaders want to give to the working people?

3. Based on this quote, do you think the Soviet Communist leaders were using violence to achieve equality for the peasants/working class or to establish their own personal power? Explain.

Document #2 - Marie Sukloff: The Story of an Assassination (1914)

Russia lagged far behind Western Europe in implementing reforms. As each generation of protesters and reformers was repressed, dissent turned more and more radical out of desperation. Marie Sukloff joined an organization, which believed that leaders who oppressed people had to be assassinated. The target on this particular occasion was a governor notorious for leading pogroms (murderous raids of theft and extermination) against Jews. Her vivid account of her own participation in this event brings to life the kind of person who was going to launch the Russian Revolution in 1917.

Vocabulary

Reformers: people trying to create change
Dissent: groups/people against the government
Radical: extreme, often violent
Raids: to go into a place uninvited
Extermination: to kill

It was New-Year's eve...and there was only one thought in my mind: he must die. All doubts had disappeared. I knew. I felt that it was going to happen.

At midnight I carefully removed the tube from the bomb, dried the powder, and reloaded the bomb. I put the four-pound tin box in a fine hand-bag specially bought for the occasion, and again read over the list of the peasants murdered by the governor. I set everything in order, wrote a letter, and left money for the landlady. Then I went to bed.

...I opened my eyes, and the thought of what was going to happen on that day filled my soul....I left my house holding the bag in my hand...A few minutes later I saw Comrade Nicholai walking with slow and careful steps toward me. In his hand he held a box tied with a red ribbon: that was a bomb. He crossed the bridge, and stopped about seventy or eighty feet from me. I knew then that he would throw the bomb from there...I continued to walk back and forth in the direction of the governor's house...

I followed him with my eyes.... The street still remained deserted. Suddenly a mounted policeman appeared, and behind him a carriage. Comrade Nicholai immediately stepped down from the curb, and at that moment the carriage approached him.

He raised his hand, and threw the bomb under the carriage. The bomb fell softly on the snow and did not explode...The carriage stopped for an instant; but then the coachman began to whip the horses and

drove at full gallop straight in my direction. I stepped into the middle of the road, and with all my might hurled the bomb against the carriage window. A terrific force instantly stunned me. I felt that I was lifted into the air.

When I regained consciousness and opened my eyes there was nobody around. I lay on the road amid a heap of debris. Blood was streaming down my face and hands. I tried to lift my head and lost consciousness. . . .

[The governor died; Marie was imprisoned.]

[Source: Marie Sukloff, "The Story of an Assassination," in Paul Briens, ed., *Reading About the World, Volume 2*. New York: Harcourt Brace Custom Publishing, 1999.]

Guiding Questions

1. Why did Marie Sukloff take part in trying to assassinate the governor Comrade Nicholai? What did he do which had made her so angry?
2. Based on what he had done, do you think she had a right to use militancy (violence) in the revolution to assassinate him?
3. Based on this quote, do you think she was using violence to achieve equality for the peasants/working class or to establish their own personal power? Explain.

Document #3 - V. I. Lenin: Hanging Order (1918)

When Lenin tried to organize a Marxist revolutionary party in Russia he faced a dilemma. The ultimate goal of Marxist Communism was absolute freedom; but in his view, the only realistic way to attain that goal was to have a disciplined party without opposition. In this famous letter Lenin orders the hanging of kulaks—a derogatory name for the prosperous landed peasant class who did not want Lenin or the Bolsheviks in power. Like all Marxists, Lenin believed that, in the first period after a revolution, there must be "a dictatorship of the proletariat," when the government, on behalf of its working-class supporters had to take stern and cruel measures against counter-revolutionaries, the forces of the capitalist classes who would try to regain power. He justified the repression outlined here by arguing that a dictatorial Communist government was capable of leading the people for their own good, even if they disagreed.

Vocabulary

Kulaks: wealthy peasants who opposed the Russian Revolution

Proletariat: workers or working-class

Counter-revolutionaries: those opposed to the Russian Revolution

Guiding Question:

1. How did Lenin justify the violence used to accomplish the goals of the Russian Revolution?

November 8, 1918

Send to Penza To Comrades Kuraev, Bosh, Minkin and other Penza communists

Comrades! The revolt by the *kulaks* must be suppressed without mercy. The interest of the entire revolution demands [that we take action in this] decisive battle with the kulaks. We need to set an example.

1. You need to hang (hang without fail, so that the public sees) at least 100 notorious kulaks, the rich, and the bloodsuckers.
2. Publish their names.
3. Take away all of their grain.
4. Execute the hostages.

This needs to be accomplished in such a way that people for hundreds of miles around will see, tremble, know and scream out: let's choke and strangle those blood-sucking kulaks.

Telegraph us to let us know you executed this order.

Yours,
Lenin

P.S. Use your toughest people for this.

[Source: Lenin's Writings - www.ibiblio.org/expo/soviet/exhibit/ad.html]

Guiding Question

1. Do you think Lenin's order in this telegraph matches Marx's idea of revolution? Or does this show that Lenin was just power-hungry? Explain.

Homework Assignment:

Write a 1-paragraph response to the SAC (to be turned in on a separate sheet of paper.)

What is your answer to the content question? Did this activity help you gain a broader understanding of the motives Communist leaders had in organizing the Russian Revolution? Did your group reach a consensus at the end of the SAC? What did you learn from this activity?