

HISTORIOGRAPHY

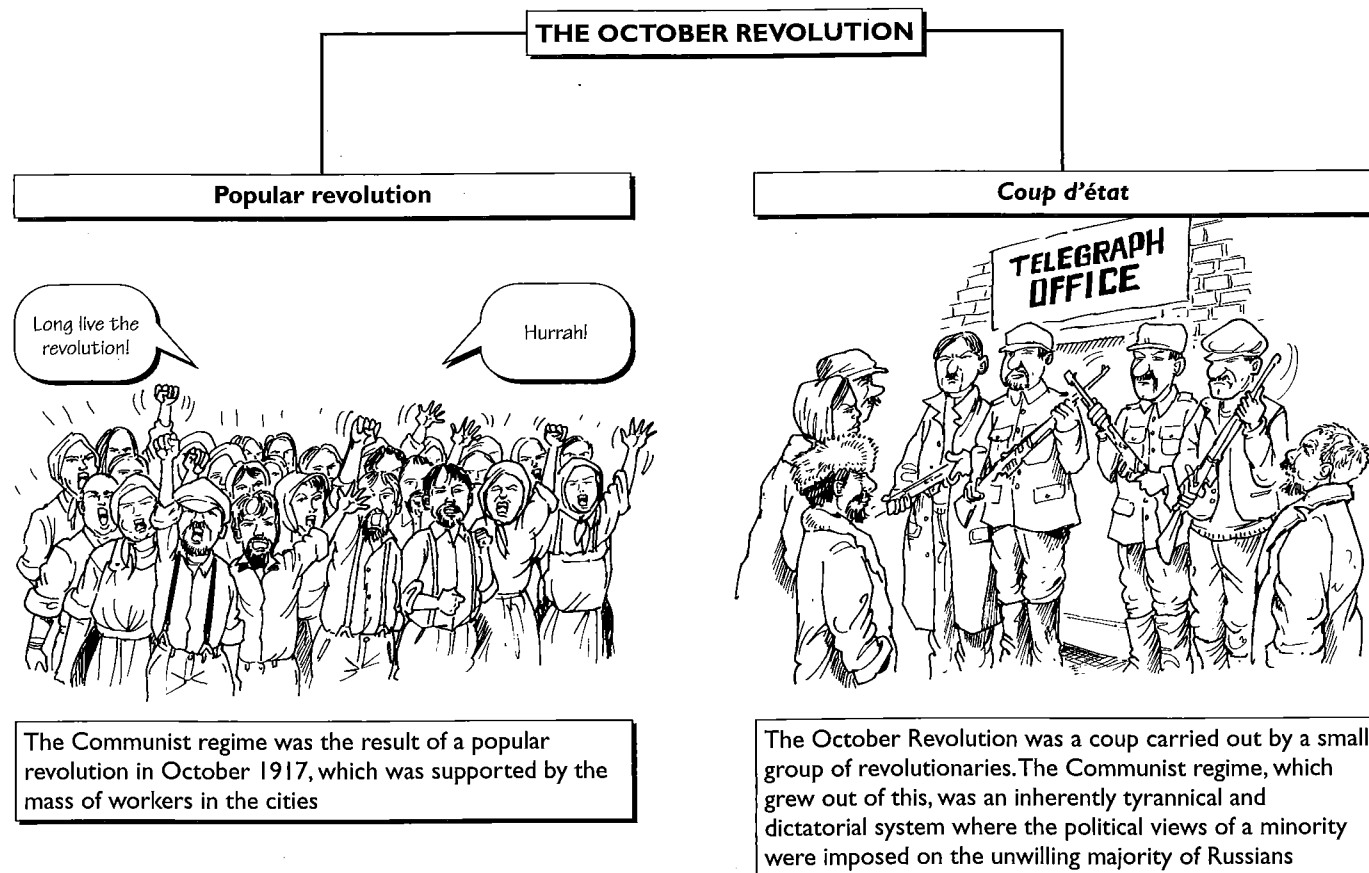
The study of history writing, talking about the different schools of thought on a historical subject, how the circumstances in which history is written affect what historians say about a subject.

D Popular revolution or *coup d'état*?

The HISTORIOGRAPHICAL debate about whether the October Revolution was a popular revolution or a *coup d'état* has often been sharp and caustic. This is because it reflects the political views of historians about whether Communism is a good or an evil system.

The range of interpretations and the shades of difference between the two positions stated in Chart 5C are enormous, but we can establish some broad schools of thought.

■ 5C Views of the nature of the October Revolution



The Soviet view (1917–91)

By the Soviet view here we mean the historians and writers who produced their work in Soviet Russia before its collapse in 1991. This view followed the line laid down by the Soviet leadership and writers were not allowed to deviate from it. The Soviet interpretation claims that the October Revolution was a popular uprising which was led and carried out by the working class, supported by the poorer peasants. According to this view, the working class created the soviets, which acted as the power bases through which the revolution was accomplished. They were able to do this because of the weakness of the bourgeoisie in Russia. The Bolshevik Party played a key role in guiding the working classes to success in October. Lenin is given a key role as the leader who directed the party and had the insight to make crucial decisions.

COLD WAR

Post-1945 hostility between the democratic West and the Soviet Union; war of threats and propaganda, no 'hot' fighting between the two sides.

The predominant Western view after 1945

After the Second World War, the West was engaged in a COLD WAR with the Soviet Union. The USA funded a great deal of historical research (called Sovietology) to understand the enemy. The predominant view amongst large numbers of historians was therefore, not surprisingly, hostile to the USSR. They saw a straight line from Bolshevism to Stalinism and totalitarianism. They identified the October Revolution as the starting point for this process, when a 'tiny minority' seized power in a *coup d'état* and then imposed their evil ideology on an unwilling population. In this view, Lenin controlled a well-organised and disciplined revolutionary party who directed the masses. He had the will, the personality and the clear-cut policies that brought about the revolution; the party operated at his command. In recent years, the most vociferous proponent of these views has been Richard Pipes. Other Western historians who have seen the October Revolution as a disaster are Leonard Schapiro and Robert Conquest. This is also called the 'liberal' view, mainly referring to Western liberal historians who took this line during the Cold War when the West feared the aggressive intentions of the Soviet Union.

The revisionists

In the 1970s, a new generation of historians challenged the 'totalitarian' view of the historians they called 'cold warriors'. Influenced by the Vietnam War, they became more critical of American policies. They suspected that the hostile accounts of the October Revolution were part of the Cold War politics of the post-war period. They looked more closely at the role of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party in the revolution. They also wanted to look at history 'from below' as well as 'from above': to put people back into accounts of the October Revolution. Historians like Stephen Smith (*Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories 1917–18*, 1983) saw a much more active role for the lower ranks of the Bolshevik Party in pushing forward the revolution. They were not just the instruments of Lenin. Indeed, such historians have suggested that Lenin was not so firmly in control and that the Bolsheviks were not so disciplined as Western historians had previously claimed. Sheila Fitzpatrick went further. In *The Russian Revolution 1917–1932* (1994) she suggested that it was people – workers, soldiers and peasants – who created the circumstances in which the Bolsheviks could operate. They formed soviets and committees before the Bolsheviks were on the scene. This veers back towards the popular view of the October Revolution.

■ Learning trouble spot

Pigeon-holing historians

Students sometimes want to put historians into particular camps and then assume that within those camps everyone is saying roughly the same thing. Although it is helpful to identify some broad trends of thought in discussing the historiography of this or other topics on Russia, you must be careful about lumping historians together. Historians may take broadly similar positions but take different lines about particular events or developments, that is, their interpretations are varied. For example, there are many differences in interpretation amongst the historians we have grouped together as 'the revisionists'.

Recent views

Historians in more recent years, such as Robert Service and Chris Read, have acknowledged that there is room to accept the scholarship of the Cold War historians and of the revisionists. They argue that Lenin was a key figure, saying that without his drive and persistence there probably would not have been an October Revolution. They also say that all the hallmarks of a *coup* are present in the way that the Bolsheviks seized power. However, they maintain that there was a lot of independent action at local levels in the party and in the soviets and that the situation greatly facilitated the take-over: the increased radicalism of the workers, soldiers, sailors and peasants cannot be ignored. The extent of their involvement is crucial in assessing whether the events of October 1917 constitute a popular revolution or not.

TALKING POINT

What do you think are the main issues about the nature of the evidence on which the interpretations are based? Could interpretations change in the future?