

Preparation for learning History at A Level: Russian History 1917-1953

If you are considering taking History at A Level then below are some suggestions for how you might want to prepare for this. This document focuses on the side of the course looking at Russian history 1917-1953. **At the end there are some tasks** you can undertake to direct your reading and research. These are optional, of course, but should help focus any 'wider reading' you do.

Overview of the A Level Course

We study the AQA specification which can be accessed here:

[AQA History Specification](#)

We do units **1C (Tudors)** and **2N (Russia 1917-53)**. The 'NEA' (Coursework) will be on the **Arab-Israeli conflict 1896-2017**. In general, you can use the specification as your guide and research any topics you like! There are also past/specimen exam papers on there.

For the Russia section of the course:

For Russia you can watch the following video as a good starting point. It is called 'Land of the Tsars' and covers the history of Russia from medieval times to 1917. It's in four parts on YouTube and the links for each are below. Obviously just searching 'land of the tsars' will take you there! If you can cope with the American narrator (there is a British version out there somewhere...), this will give you a really good sense of Russia, which was incredibly backwards in so many ways at the start of the 20th century.

Introductory Video

[YouTube - Land of the Tsars Part 1](#)

[YouTube - Land of the Tsars Part 2](#)

[YouTube - Land of the Tsars Part 3](#)

[YouTube - Land of the Tsars Part 4](#)

Wider Research: Articles, Books and Videos

There is a document called '**Russia 1917-1953: Introductory Research Tasks**' in the same folder as this document. It is an excellent place to start your reading and has information and tasks throughout for you to attempt. The tasks on this document do not need submitting but can be used to focus your research and better enable you to complete the tasks at the bottom of this document. There is also a more extensive reading list in the folder cleverly entitled '**Russia – A Level Reading List**'.

No doubt your prowess on the internet will enable you to track down free articles and resources to use for your preparation. However, to get you started some are suggested below.

The following article is very good for giving a summary of Russia before the revolutions of 1917:

[The Russian Revolution before 1917: The Gathering Storm \(Article\)](#)

Quite a good article focussing on the short-term causes of the two revolutions of 1917 and some of its consequences can be found here:

[Overview of the Russian Revolution \(Article\)](#)

There is a 'Crash Course' YouTube video if you can put up with the chap doing it (no 'Oversimplified' version alas). He seems less 'zany' on this video:

[Crash Course - Russian Revolution \(Video\)](#)

There is a short and rather earnest video on the Russian Revolution(s) here:

[Epic History - Russian Revolution \(Video\)](#)

There is a reasonable video explaining Marxism here:

[What is Marxism? \(Video\)](#)

A more challenging article on the subject can be found here:

[What is Marxism? \(Article\)](#)

Books to Buy and Read:

If you want a really good 'extra' A Level textbook in addition to the one we'll issue you with next year then this is excellent:

[Amazon - Communist Russia under Lenin and Stalin](#)

Other good 'student textbooks' are by Michael Lynch. The first one - 'Reaction and Revolution' only covers 1894 to 1924 but is great for giving a sense of Russia on the eve of the Revolutions in 1917 (there were two - one in February which topples Tsar Nicholas II and one in October that puts the Bolsheviks/Communists in power under Lenin... Stalin seizes control in 1929):

[Amazon - Reaction and Revolution: Russia 1894-1924](#)

[Amazon - Bolshevik and Stalinist Russia 1917-64](#)

Most of the course revolves around understanding Joseph Stalin. A really readable book is 'Young Stalin' by Simon Sebag Montefiore. This is his real name. It is not directly related to the events we cover but it is a relatively easy read and interesting. It will also give you an excellent sense of the man Stalin was rather than see him as a one-dimensional figure. 'The Court of the Red Tsar', also by Sebag Montefiore, is incredibly dense but if you fancy a challenge then it's worth a look.

[Amazon - Young Stalin](#)

[Amazon - Court of the Red Tsar](#)

Anything by Robert Service is good - again bear in mind that the course covers 1917 to 1953 specifically. Similarly Orlando Figes' 'A People's Tragedy' is high level but excellent.

[Amazon - Stalin Biography](#)

[Amazon - A People's Tragedy](#)

There are many other books on the 'Russia A Level Reading List' document in the same folder as this on SharePoint.

Preparation Tasks:

If you want a bit more focus to your initial research, try to answer the following. If there are any words or concepts you don't understand then look them up and persevere:

1. Why was Russia so backwards at the start of the 20th century?

- look at the ways it was backwards - they had an absolute autocrat running the show and over 80% were peasants
- Consider why Russia remained so backwards – its geography, scale and cultural diversity

2. What attempts were made to modernise Russia in the 19th and early 20th centuries? How successful were they and what were the consequences?

- How did Russia compare to other European powers in 1815 during the Napoleonic Wars? How did they fair only 40 years later in the Crimean War?
- What did this demonstrate a need for? [Hint: Very similar to the Kaiser at the end of the 19th century...]
- How was modernisation attempted? (emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Sergei Witte and Peter Stolypin)
- What - potentially revolutionary - consequences did this have?

3. What sort of man was Tsar Nicholas II?

- What was Nicholas II's character – was he strong-willed? Astute? What happened to his grandfather? What did this teach him?
- What was the 1905 Revolution – was it really a 'revolution'? What should this have demonstrated to Nicholas II?
- The October Manifesto, Fundamental Laws and Dumas – what were these? What did they show about Nicholas II's attitude to democracy and autocracy? Why might this have potentially revolutionary consequences?

4. What impact did World War I have on Russia?

- How did the war go for Russia militarily – victories, defeats, casualties and desertion!
- How did the Russian people and economy fair – initial enthusiasm, shortages and rationing, demonstrations

5. What caused the February Revolution in 1917?

- Research the events of the February revolution – don't let this mixed up with the October Revolution!
- From all of your research, do you think the February Revolution was the result of Russia's rapid **modernisation**, the actions of **Nicholas II**, the **military failures** and lack of support from the army during World War I or the **economic problems** the conflict caused?

6. Extra Challenge: What was Marxism and Marxism-Leninism?

- Who was Lenin?
- Who were the Bolsheviks?
- Who was Karl Marx (and his sidekick Friedrich Engels who gets largely forgotten)?
- What was Marxism? How is it distinct from communism?
- What was Marxism-Leninism? How was it different to Marxism? What implications did this have for Russia? [Hint: Marxism is a 'bottom up' theory whilst Marxism-Leninism is 'top down'... so one relies on the organic evolution of a 'class consciousness' whilst the other is imposed].

Question five is the first essay we will tackle when we're back. Obviously feel free to ask for further tasks or use the above as a template for looking at other events you encounter in your reading. The next obvious question, for instance, is why the Bolsheviks were able to seize power in the October Revolution of 1917.