The 100-year anniversary of the Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution is an exciting period of Russian history that is always of interest to students. 2017 marks 100 years since the end of Tsardom and the establishment of a communist state in Russia.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Karl Marx’s ideas became popular in Russia. Unlike Britain, where Marx had written his manifesto, Russia had not yet become industrialised. The country was ruled by Tsar Nicholas II, a monarch with absolute power. Most Russians lived in total poverty while the Tsar lived a life of luxury. After learning of Marx’s ideas, a growing number of people in the country called for revolution and the creation of a communist state. The First World War had hit Russia hard and many blamed the Tsar for their suffering. In February 1917, the people revolted and Tsar Nicholas was forced to give up his throne. A new government was formed to replace him. This Provisional Government lasted just a few months, however, and in October 1917 a group of Communists known as the Bolsheviks took control. Under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, the Bolsheviks set about creating the first communist state.

Although they seized power easily, the Bolsheviks did not gain complete control immediately. They were far from popular across the country and a bitter civil war was fought in the years following the revolution. Not wanting to see communism succeed, capitalist powers, including Britain and the USA, sent troops in support of the Bolshevik’ opponents but ultimately it was Lenin who came out on top.

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Making historical links

The Russian Revolution marked the beginning of a series of events that led to the formation of the communist USSR under Stalin. As a turning point in history, the revolution had great impact not just in Russia, but in many other areas of twentieth-century history that students may encounter, such as in the origins of the Second World War and McCarthyism; in 1950s America, a nationwide fear known as the ‘Red Scare’ swept the country – many were frightened that a communist revolution might happen in America like that in Russia in 1917. The Russian Revolution also sparked tensions that eventually led to the Cold War in Asia.

For more information, see Oxford AQA GCSE History: America 1920-1973: Opportunity and Inequality and Conflict and Tension in Asia 1950-1975, publishing Spring 2017. Also, see Oxford AQA History for A Level: Revolution and Dictatorship: Russia 1917-1953.

GCSE links
AQA: Russia, 1894–1945: Tsardom and communism
Edexcel: Russia and the Soviet Union, 1917–41

A Level links
AQA: Revolution and Dictatorship: Russia 1917-1953
OCR: Russia 1894-1941
The above response from a sixth-former was not only insightful, but also pivotal to my research. This comment made me realise I had found the missing link to helping A Level History candidates write better essays!

History is my passion but I have taught other subjects, including Critical Thinking at A Level. I have also contributed to PGCE and Masters courses. I am very aware students find it difficult to write the sophisticated, nuanced argument that is necessary for the highest grades at A Level and for university success, and decided to pursue a PhD to study this issue in-depth.

My research, funded by the University of Exeter, was to investigate the links between spoken and written argumentation in A Level History, and several schools working with the History PGCE team at the University of Bristol were keen to help me. This was a unique opportunity. I wanted to make sure that at the end of my PhD, I had something useful that would help students write more effective responses containing sophisticated argument.

Argue to Think

The key to my research was the recognition that the most successful way to help students write effective essays was to encourage them to explore differences and to argue verbally in order to be able to write nuanced responses that offer far more than the usual two-sided binary thinking. Students can do this by taking part in a series of activities that are designed to improve their verbal argumentation before they work on their written responses.

The first stage of the collaborative research began with an exploratory investigation which involved discussions with History examiners, classroom observations, and interviews with students and teachers about the problems with crafting History essays.

Based on the observations, a classroom intervention was designed and rigorously tested. The most pertinent result was that the students who engaged in the most active exploratory argumentation were the students who were most successful at writing persuasive History essays.

This was not tied to ability either. Those students who were used to engaging in formal debate were actually disadvantaged because they closed the argument down by ‘winning the argument at all costs’ rather than exploring difference and wanting to understand alternative points of view.

Several other schools and sixth form colleges became interested in my research and have incorporated the intervention programme I developed into their A Level classrooms. And so, I founded Argue to Think, an organisation where our main principle is to help people who struggle with crafting complex arguments.
Try it out for yourselves

Here are two activities that are part of the Argue to Think approach:

1. The arguing process – establishing ground rules

Before you run a classroom argument or a more formal debate session with students, ensure that there are ground rules. These rules are best brokered by the students themselves. In my experience, teacher-imposed ground rules are counter-productive.

In groups of 4 or 5, ask your students to come up with the best ground rules for arguing. Not only does this give the students a vested interest in the process, but it also gets them talking together and making decisions for themselves.

Get the students to share the results on the whiteboard, and establish the fact that everyone agrees to these rules before selecting a topic to argue or ‘debate’ about. Then, if the arguing becomes too heated you simply refer to the brokered rules. The students themselves are already aware of what is expected, so ‘heated violent arguments’ won’t occur.

The rules are underpinned by the complete commitment to mutual respect between students, and the realisation that it is the ideas and the ideas alone that are being discussed and argued over. The intention is to explore the space between the two ‘sides’ and to see what else emerges.

That is why ‘arguing to think’ is a positive way of helping students engage in safe classroom interaction and debate.

This does, however, need to be carefully introduced into classroom practice, and we at Argue to Think are happy to help you do this.

2. Don’t argue to win – argue to explore

Arguing to win at all costs is divisive and leads to considerable dissension: think Trump v Clinton or the Brexit Campaign. This is not what you want in your classroom. It is destructive, and destroys self-esteem.

Arguing to explore difference, however, offers the opportunity to engage with difference in a constructive way, and if done carefully leads to cognitive development. This is what makes Argue to Think useful as a learning approach across disciplines, especially in History.

Ask the students to imagine they are policy advisors and get them to watch a particularly heated short piece of Prime Minister’s Question Time or last year’s Trump v Clinton debates online, on a specific topic. Ask them to discuss what they have seen. The comments that should come up are:

- Adversarial
- Dissent
- Do they ever answer each other?
- Lack of resolution
- Personal attacks
- Where’s the evidence?

Then in small groups ask them to write a joint report ‘for their speaker, that discusses the differing opinions and then suggests the best solution. This process can then be developed to encourage individual students to write essays that take different opinions into account whilst encouraging them to argue their own point of view.

I hope you found these ideas useful – I’d love to hear how these activities worked out in your lessons!

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Competition!
This term’s exciting prizes are three books: two on the Russian Revolution, and Revolution and Dictatorship: Russia 1917-1953 from our A Level History series as well as a box of chocolates.

For your chance to win the prizes above, simply email me at rebecca.jackson@oup.com with your answer to the following question by 15th April 2017.

When did Tsar Nicholas abdicate?
- a. 15 February 1917
- b. 15 March 1917
- c. 15 April 1917

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Simply email me at rebecca.jackson@oup.com to request your poster while stocks last!

Congratulations...
…to Kathleen O’Hanlon from Townley Grammar School in Bexleyheath. Kathleen is the winner of a Battle of Hastings clock and mug, and a copy of one of our new GCSE History student books, having answered our last competition question: ‘Who supported William as the next rightful King of England?’ correctly with ‘Pope Alexander II’.

We hope you enjoy them!

Further reading on Russian history

A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891–1924 by Orlando Figes (Longman, 2014). This is a multi-award-winning detailed study of events by a Russian history specialist.

Ten Days That Shook the World by John Reed (Penguin, 2007). Originally published in 1919, this is a classic eyewitness account of the Russian Revolution by an American socialist journalist.

Empire of the Tsars: Romanov Russia presented by Lucy Worsley (BBC, 2016). Episode 3: The Road to Revolution covers the period up until 1918 and can be downloaded from the BBC Store website.