LENIN AND THE SOVIET CULTURAL INVASION
In the fall of 1917, after coming to dominate the socialist councils known as soviets, the Bolsheviks seized the reins of power. Signaling that a new era had begun, the Bolsheviks renamed themselves the Russian Communist Party in early 1918.

Civil War

By the time Lenin’s party changed its name to the Communist Party in the spring of 1918, its hold on power seemed tenuous at best. For many, the peace treaty that the Soviet government signed with the Germans was the last straw. It’s hard to imagine that the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk could have been worse for Russia. One-third of Russia’s productive arable lands, one-third of its railway system, and almost 70 percent of its heavy industry were located there.

By the end of spring 1918, monarchists, former tsarist military officers, members of other political parties, and a sundry assortment of other anti-Bolshevik elements believed a civil war preferable to Bolshevik rule. Collectively lumped together as the Whites, they lacked any homogeneity beyond their loathing of the Bolsheviks. For now, these White forces engaged the Bolsheviks—renamed the Communists—in a brutal civil war.

Western democracies that formerly had allied with Russia during World War I were suspicious of the Bolsheviks’ aims for a world revolution and viewed them as a hostile force. Some—including the United States—became involved in the civil conflict that was rippling through Russian society and threatening to undermine Lenin’s government.
American soldiers fought briefly in Russia as part of two different operations from 1918 to 1919, though foreign military intervention was limited and swiftly withdrawn.

Early in Russia’s civil war—which persisted from 1918 to 1920—the Soviets militarized the economy. Industries were nationalized, property was seized, and grain was forcibly requisitioned. Force and compulsion—along with the need for sacrifice on the part of the citizenry—defined this period. Even more, force and compulsion became foundational elements of Soviet culture.

The Red Army swelled to 5 million men over the course of the civil conflict. As these men returned to everyday life after the conflict, military mannerisms and jargon became ubiquitous in party slogans and the speeches of Soviet leaders.

**The Cheka**

The Cheka—the Soviet secret police—was the organization charged with surveilling the populace so that the state could transform it. The Cheka employed some 60,000 people and an extensive network of informants beyond. The power and pervasiveness of the Communists’ security apparatus grew over the course of the civil war. By the end of the conflict, no part of Soviet life fell outside of the Cheka’s interest.

**EVOLUTION OF THE CHEKA**

Originally conceived as a temporary body, the Cheka soon became a permanent feature of the Soviet system. It changed its name and leadership—morphing from the Cheka to the State Political Directorate, or GPU, and then to the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD, under Joseph Stalin. The KGB followed after Stalin’s death in 1953.
With lines blurred between allies and enemies, the Cheka used violence and revolutionary terror to maintain Bolshevik control. The most famous example occurred in a basement room at the Ipatiev house in the Eurasian town of Ekaterinburg, about 880 miles east of Moscow. There, local Bolsheviks executed the former emperor Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra, and their five children early on the morning of July 17, 1918.

The use of violence—even against non-military populations—was now accepted. Even when rumors circulated that the Bolsheviks had murdered the entire family, there was little public comment or discussion, much less outrage.

**Terror and Counterrevolution**

Although the Soviet state now identified terror as a necessary weapon in the fight against counterrevolution, it never defined the elements of counterrevolution. As a result, virtually anyone could be considered a counterrevolutionary, and thus a potential victim of the state crackdown. Arbitrary arrests, imprisonments, and summary executions became common.

The Socialist Revolutionaries—known as the SRs—had also used assassinations and other forms of terrorism against the tsarist state since the first years of the 20th century. They turned their violent attention to the Communists during the civil war.

The SRs’ radical ideology focused on the revolutionary potential of the peasants and the countryside. In late August 1918, one of them murdered Moisei Uritsky, the head of the Cheka in the capital. Hours later, another SR—a woman by the name of Fanny Kaplan—shot Vladimir Lenin three times as he emerged from a factory in Moscow. He was gravely wounded, but he survived, adding to his prestige among the public.

**Propaganda**

Resistance to the Bolsheviks stemmed at least in part from their thoroughness. The Bolsheviks aimed not merely for political change but also to renovate every aspect of life. This seemed quite threatening to ordinary Russians.
A key weapon for Lenin was propaganda. Soon after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks closed bourgeois newspapers, appropriated their presses, and seized more than 1,000 newspaper kiosks in cities and railroad stations across the country. The utility of newspapers was limited by the high levels of illiteracy in the Soviet state. Still, the Soviet government itself distributed a half-million newspapers each week during the civil war through its expropriated kiosks.

The new medium of radio afforded new propaganda possibilities. State-controlled radio broadcasting would begin in the early 1920s. Film offered further opportunities. All of these projects were overseen by the Bolshevik writer Anatoly Lunacharsky.

The Bolsheviks also erected dozens of new monuments to serve as visual aids to legitimize the revolution and educate the urban masses about their history. Early Soviet monuments also celebrated a diverse array of Russian and European radicals, philosophers, and artists, reflecting the Bolshevik conception of the revolution as an international workers’ movement.
Legendary rebels and members of the intelligentsia were immortalized, as were the theorists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

The Bolsheviks realized the power in the names of public spaces, and Lenin believed that the naming process conveyed legitimacy and prestige. Long before the last battle of the civil war, streets, squares, buildings, and cities were renamed. Revolutionary milestones and values became landmarks of Soviet life.

As an example, the Soviets renamed two streets near the spot where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881. These would now be known for the radical lovers, Sofia Perovskaya and Andrei Zhelyabov, leaders of the People’s Will revolutionary group, who’d engineered the tsar’s death in March of 1881.

**Public Adoration**

Public adoration was a visible way for citizens to demonstrate their loyalty to the Soviets and to the revolution in the midst of the civil war. Lenin himself now became the personification of the Soviet state. Public reverence for him revealed each individual’s personal commitment to his values.

Lenin, in turn, responded to the public warmth with ever more of himself. He seemed to be everywhere at ceremonies in Moscow in November 1918. He oversaw parades, popped into theaters to make remarks, and unveiled monuments to the history of the revolution on its one-year anniversary. Lenin’s participation in these ceremonies—so soon after nearly dying—affirmed his resilience and the robustness of the revolution.

Lenin and the Communist Party had realized that they needed to win the hearts and minds of the Soviet people in a very large way. This became a cultural battle the state fought on every front possible. Among the most elaborate public displays of the Soviets’ triumph were public mass commemorations on Red Square. These celebrated important Soviet holidays like the October Revolution, May Day, and—at the conclusion of World War II—Victory Day.
The Cult of Lenin

Lenin recovered quickly from the attempt on his life in 1918, but his overall health declined in 1922 as he suffered the first in a series of strokes. By 1923, his condition no longer permitted public appearances. Over the course of the next year, Lenin’s physical state deteriorated further. He was largely incapacitated, and unable to speak. Even though the extent of the Bolshevik leader’s infirmity was hidden from the general public, his extended illness fueled the cult of Lenin: The less he was able to appear in public, the more he was publicly deified.

During this time, Lenin’s words became requisite mantras at everything from Communist Party meetings to family gatherings and funerals. Further, as the Soviet state increasingly restricted the church and public religiosity, the cult of Lenin filled this devotional vacuum. Lenin’s writings took on the force of dogma in the absence of now-outlawed scriptural texts.

Like Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great before him, Lenin was depicted as just and kind toward his people, and terrible and merciless towards those who dared exploit them. At the same time, unlike Ivan and Peter—who’d had to share the stage with the Russian Orthodox Church—Lenin was concurrently saint, martyr, prophet, and ruler. As a result, the Lenin cult became even more consuming than earlier ruler cults. It was a pervasive part of Soviet culture.

When Lenin at last died in January 1924, the nation engaged in a period of massive, collective, public mourning. Because millions of Russians had perished in the civil war and the ensuing famine of 1921, the scale—and frequency—of death didn’t permit extended displays of grief and mourning for common citizens. Lenin’s death was a mass exception. For three days in the bitter cold, more than a half-million people waited in long lines to pay their respects to the former Soviet leader, who now lay in state in Moscow.
Joseph Stalin, the man destined to be Lenin’s successor, insisted that Lenin’s body be embalmed and permanently placed on display in front of the Kremlin. A noted church architect designed a cube-like structure that infused elements of ancient mausoleums to house his remains.

Lenin lived on in propaganda, literature, culture, and history. His life habits epitomized what it meant to be a good Communist. His words became gospel. In addition, a Lenin naming frenzy began. Schools, farms, libraries, and the former capital of Petrograd now assumed his name, becoming Leningrad.