

**The History of the Twentieth Century**  
**Episode 188**  
**“1919 – The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”**  
**Transcript**

[music: Fanfare]

The Bolsheviks who led the October Revolution believed theirs was just the first spark of what would soon become a worldwide socialist revolution.

That seemed plausible, for a time, but it soon became apparent that the rest of the world was not ready to follow Russia’s lead. What did that mean for the future of socialism? What did that mean for the future of Russia?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 188. 1919 – The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

This is the thirteenth episode in our 1919 World Tour, and the ninth episode dealing with Russia, or with lands that were part of the Russian Empire in the days before the Great War. As you know, Finland, Poland, and the three Baltic States gained their independence from the violence and chaos that enveloped Russia as a result of first, the Great War, then the Russian Civil War.

In last week’s episode, I talked about the three Caucasus nations of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, three nations that were unable to maintain their independence. At the end of the episode, I announced two pivotal developments that took place after the Civil War: the New Economic Policy and the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Today I want to unpack both of those developments and take a closer look at how they came about, but first I want to consider what they mean in the broader sense of the future of Russia, because they represent a shift in thinking among the new communist Russian leadership.

I’ve said repeatedly that the Bolsheviks expected their revolution would be merely the first in a cascade of revolutions that would sweep away the old world order. In 1919, it was possible to believe that was already happening. Bolshevik-style uprisings took place in Hungary, episode

178, and in Germany—we'll get to that later. The government in Moscow wanted to assist their comrades to the west, but their options were limited, due to the need to combat counterrevolution at home. By 1920, as the Red Army was stamping out the last embers of counterrevolution at home, the revolution abroad was petering out. The Allied powers had failed to overthrow the Russian government, but they had succeeded in restoring the same old mix of medieval aristocracy and bourgeois liberal democracy that had governed Europe before the war.

As the prospects for spreading the revolution beyond the borders of Russia grew dimmer, the sense grew in the Russian government that measures were necessary to protect and preserve Russian socialism until such time as the rest of the world was ripe for revolution once again. If Russia was merely one lonely socialist beacon in the vast darkness of capitalism, so be it. One lonely beacon might still light the way.

That being the case, it was necessary that Russia survive, and not only survive, but thrive. That meant Russia must be able to defend itself against imperialist militaries as well as become a showcase for the social and economic benefits of socialist rule.

Russia had its Red Army now, which numbered five million by 1920, and the Red Army had demonstrated its ability to defend Soviet Russia. It had defeated the White Army and had frightened off the imperialist British, American, French, and Japanese expeditionary forces, so, point made.

The Russian economy, though, was a wreck. No one was going to be boasting about socialist prosperity for a while yet. So that leaves social benefits. And that brings us to the minorities question. You'll recall that just a week after taking power, the Bolsheviks invited minority regions in the old Russian Empire to secede. Ideologically, this was because socialists are anti-imperialist. Pragmatically, it was because the Bolsheviks wanted to break the power of the Russian state. The best way to prevent counterrevolutionaries from seizing control of the state is to dismantle the state. No state, no imperial restoration. After the revolution goes global, nation-states are going to be obsolete anyway.

In hindsight, this might seem naïve and starry eyed, but you know, it worked. During the Civil War, the Whites struggled to win support in Ukraine, in the Baltic States, or from Finland or Poland precisely because the White movement stood for reassembling the now-broken Russian Empire, and these newly independent minorities wanted nothing to do with that project. The minority nationalists opposed the White movement almost as strongly as the Reds did.

When the Bolsheviks first seized power in the October Revolution, they did not at first give a new name to what the Kerensky government had dubbed the Russian Republic. In January 1918, the All-Russian Congress of Soviets renamed the nation the Russian Soviet Republic. In July, the newly enacted Russian Constitution declared the name of what was left of the old Russian Empire to be the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. You can abbreviate that RSFSR.

Note the use of the word “federative.” That’s because the new Russia had by this time already begun designating certain minority regions within its borders to be “autonomous soviet socialist republics.” The first of these were the Turkestan ASSR and the Bashkir ASSR. In the next few years, six more ASSRs were carved out of Russian territory, including the North Caucasus, Dagestan, Kirgizstan, and the Crimea. Russia was no longer an empire. See? Minority nationalities in Russia now manage their own affairs.

Of course, Soviet Russia was still a highly centralized state. As far as the Communist Party were concerned, there was only one way to run a country and that was socialism, and there was only one political party that truly represented socialism, and that was the Communist Party. The Party might have internal debates, but once a decision was reached, everyone in the Party was expected to follow the Party line. Everyone outside the party, too, for that matter. Three years of civil war had gotten the Party leadership *very* accustomed to simply giving orders, and then demoting or punishing anyone who didn’t follow them. The Party was the vanguard, right?

The highest authority within the Communist Party was the Central Committee. But Russia is a large country, and most of the members of the Central Committee were not based in Moscow. This was particularly true during the civil war, when many of them were political commissars supervising Red Army commanders. It wasn’t easy to pull this group together every time a decision had to be made, and so began the Politburo, which is a contraction of the Russian words meaning “political bureau.” The Politburo’s role was to decide the Party position on policy questions between meetings of the Central Committee. This quickly made it the most important body in the new Russia, since once Party policy was set, government officials from Sovnarkom on down were bound by the decision.

The first Politburo had seven members, including Lenin, who chaired it, as well as Trotsky, Stalin, Zinoviev, and three others whose names I won’t trouble you with right now. During the civil war, both Trotsky and Stalin were frequently out in the field, as we have seen, and their input had to be solicited by telegram. We also saw the developing rift between Trotsky and Stalin over organization of the Red Army and conduct of the civil war. This put Lenin in an awkward position, though he had the prestige and the political skill required to keep Trotsky and Stalin and the rest of the Politburo on the same page most of the time.

Once the Civil War was over and the Red Army seized control of Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasian republics, a dispute arose over how they were to be reintegrated into the Russian state. Joseph Stalin, the Commissar for Nationalities, urged that these regions be made into Associated Soviet Socialist Republics within the Russian Federation. But Lenin disagreed. He wanted to create a union of republics, within which Ukraine and Belarus would have equal standing with Russia. The argument over this became quite heated, and led to something of a rift between Lenin and Stalin. Lenin did get his way in the end, which brings us to the formation of the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in December 1922. In Russian it was called *Soyuz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik* and commonly abbreviated SSSR, which written in

Cyrillic letters looks to an English-speaking person like “СССР.” The accepted English abbreviation was USSR, and it was usually called the “Soviet Union” for short.

The three Caucasian states, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan were originally grouped together as the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, with the three states as associated republics within the larger Transcaucasia, so the founding members of the USSR were Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Transcaucasia. In 1936, Transcaucasia was dissolved and the three constituent states each elevated to full republic status.

You might ask at this point what difference any of this makes. If all the important decisions are being made by the Politburo in Moscow, isn't this patchwork of associated and autonomous republics just a sham, meant to disguise the truth that Russia is still an empire and every bit as centralized and autocratic as it was in the days of the czars? And what is there in the fine distinction between an associated republic and a full republic that was worth Lenin and Stalin arguing over?

But it actually did make a difference. Political power was tightly held, but the minority republics were not just permitted but actively encouraged to promote minority languages and culture, in schools, in publishing, in art and music and theatre. This was in marked contrast to the policies of the old Russian Empire, especially its Russification. It was also in contrast to the White movement's advocacy of “Russia, one and indivisible,” which sounded to members of minority nationalities suspiciously like more of the same. An open policy toward minorities did not by itself win the Civil War for the Reds, but it certainly helped. And no minority group was happier than Jewish people, who had been subjected to second-class legal status under the czars, and then violence and persecution from the Whites. The communists boasted that minorities in Russia had more rights than minorities in other European countries, and there was some truth to that.

If there was one ethnic group that didn't benefit from the new pluralism, it was the Russians. Russian language and culture were no longer preeminent everywhere. Ethnic Russians living in the other republics for the first time felt what it was like to be a minority. Russian history was revised so that celebrated Russian emperors and military heroes of times past were now dismissed as crude imperialists. Russian writers who were not properly socialist, like Dostoevsky, no longer got published. The Russian Orthodox Church was suppressed, and dozens of bishops and hundreds of priests killed.

It was no longer especially beneficial to be a Russian or a devout Orthodox churchgoer in the new Russia; it was certainly good, though, to be a Party member. Party membership soared after the October Revolution, doubling in the first year. Even by then, the Party was beginning a process called *chistka* in Russian, a word that you could translate into English as a “cleanup” or a “scrubbing.” But during this period the word will more commonly be rendered into English as “purge.” Lenin's habit of expelling anyone who didn't toe the Party line can be traced back to the Bolshevik-Menshevik split of 1903, and you can interpret these early purges as more of the

same, although in fairness many of the new Party members were opportunists with a questionable commitment to Party goals. Some kind of mechanism would be needed to screen candidates for Party membership and to expel those who were mere opportunists.

[music: Tchaikovsky, “The Sick Doll” from *Children’s Album*]

The Russian Civil War had been brutal. It had inflicted mass suffering upon the country. They say that desperate times call for desperate measures, and the new communist government had certainly resorted to desperate measures to defend itself during the fighting. Measures like mass conscription, confiscation of harvests, and nationalization of all manufacturing. The suppression of all political viewpoints other than the official one. Peasant farmers were getting arrested for bringing their own crops into the towns to sell, which before the Bolsheviks arrived would have been considered as much a part of farming as sticking seeds in the ground.

The Russian economy was a mess. Food was in short supply. Some of this came from the heavy-handed and ideologically-driven policies of the new government; much of it was due to the war. As we saw during the Great War, modern warfare drives all governments, not just socialist governments, to claim an enormous share of their nations’ production. Food shortages were a worldwide phenomenon during the Great War, and it took until at least 1920 for the world food production and distribution network to get back into balance.

So in fairness to the communists, you have to acknowledge that the economic strains Russia was suffering were not that different from what other countries were experiencing at the same time, and were then further exacerbated by the Civil War.

By 1920, though, the Civil War was winding down and the absence of any successful socialist revolutions outside of Russia was becoming painfully apparent. The Russian government had to grapple with the question of how to organize and manage the world’s first socialist economy, and they would have to do it on their own, without any fraternal assistance from the world’s more advanced socialist economies, since there were none of those.

Leon Trotsky, the Commissar for Military Affairs, began floating the idea that after the civil war was over, the entire Russian economy might be organized in a quasi-military fashion. Think about it. The military is really the ultimate socialist economy, isn’t it? Everyone gets issued what they need—food, clothing, a place to live, and some pocket money—in exchange for which, military personnel go where they are told and do what needs to be done. Perhaps after the war, the Red Army could be converted into labor battalions that would do the work of the socialist economy.

But it turns out people don’t much like having their lives run for them. You’ll recall from last time that as the Civil War wound down, the Bolsheviks faced increased discontent from within Great Russia, the Red homeland that had served as their base during the war. These were people willing to fight against the White movement, but once that threat had passed, were unwilling to

accept a Communist Party monopoly on political power. There were strikes in the factories, mutinies in the military, and peasant revolts in the countryside. Hundreds of them.

The Party responded with force, often brutally, as we saw in its response to the Kronstadt Rebellion. But the grievances of the peasants were the most critical problem. Peasant uprisings could be suppressed by the Red Army, but that didn't solve the more fundamental problem that Russian farms simply weren't producing enough food. Agriculture still accounted for around 80% of the Russian economy. Back in the days of the Belle Époque, Russia was a major food exporting country. Now it could hardly feed itself. Something had to be done; if the new socialist economy couldn't feed its own people, it scarcely mattered how productive or equitable the rest of the economy was.

The fundamental problem with agriculture was that the peasants didn't like the confiscations. They didn't like working in the fields all year, only to have the Red Guards come and take most of it. Why bother? So they stopped bothering. They grew enough food to feed their own families, and that was that. Let the Red Guards confiscate the weeds. They had other grievances, too, like being denied their historic right to sell their crops in town markets. They didn't like how the Red Army conscripted their sons. And they didn't like the labor drafts, when peasants were forced to labor for the state, doing work like fixing roads and other public works damaged in the war. But the confiscation of their harvests was what really got under their skins. Exhortations to the peasants to labor for the good of the new socialist state were ineffective. So were threats that failure to work could lead to prosecution.

In February 1920, Leon Trotsky made a bold proposal to the Central Committee. How about if we replace confiscations with a tax in kind? Peasants would be obligated to hand over a certain percentage of their harvest. It would be a large percentage, but they would be allowed to keep something. And since it would be proportional, the harder they worked, the more they could keep. This would create an incentive for the peasants to maximize, rather than minimize, their efforts.

Now, in most times and places, a proposal like this would be seen as a logical, common-sense solution. In the Communist Party Central Committee, it led to angry debate, culminating with Lenin's accusing Trotsky of succumbing to capitalism. Maybe he was just shocked to hear Mr. Labor Battalions come up with such a *laissez-faire* suggestion.

But the 1920 harvest remained disappointing, only about 60% of pre-war levels. And the ongoing peasant uprisings were a cause for concern. The year 1920 saw the biggest one, in the Tambov region, southeast of Moscow. It began as resistance to grain confiscations and exploded into an all-out guerilla war against the Red Army. It was finally put down in 1921, at a cost of tens of thousands killed and comparable numbers arrested and placed in prison camps, many of whom then died of disease. Total deaths from the suppression of the uprising numbered over 100,000. Peasant revolts had been frequent in Russia in times past, but I'm talking seventeenth

and eighteenth century here. Even the czars had managed to keep the peace in rural Russia for the past century.

And so Lenin came around to the view that concessions needed to be made to the peasants. The confiscations should be replaced with a tax-in-kind, as Trotsky had suggested, and the tax should be set at the bare minimum necessary to sustain the state. But that wouldn't be enough. The Party would also have to permit farmers to sell their surpluses in the towns; otherwise, what good was it to let them keep it?

And that led to more reforms. The peasants would need to be able to buy goods with the money they made from the sale of their surpluses, but the state-controlled manufacturing sector couldn't meet the demand for boots and cooking pots and nails and shovels and all the other products peasant farmers would want to buy. The new Russian government had nationalized all manufacturing, large and small, but it would be possible to allow those small workshops and family businesses to revert to their former owners, who would then work to meet the demand, while the state would retain control of the large factories and industrial operations, though even these would be reformed to give their workers more incentive to increase output. Small private shops would be allowed to reopen to facilitate this commerce between the manufacturers and the peasants.

And thus was born the New Economic Policy. The trouble was, it looked an awful lot like, you know, capitalism. Lenin understood it would be a hard sell, so he tried it out first in the Politburo, then the Central Committee, and finally at the Tenth Party Congress in May 1921. Many Party members were shocked. This seemed to them nothing less than a betrayal of the Revolution, and it might not have been approved, were it not for two advantages Lenin had. The first was his reputation as leader of the Revolution, and before that the loudest voice for a pure and unapologetic Marxism since at least 1903. "Please don't try teaching me Marxism," he told the Party Congress.

Lenin's other advantage in this debate was the simple fact, visible all around them, in the strikes, the rebellion at Kronstadt, in Tambov, and elsewhere, that the Party was losing the support of the workers, the soldiers, the peasants, the very people it was supposed to represent and the very people that had won the Revolution and the Civil War for it. If nothing was done to address this discontent, how long could the Party expect to remain in power? If the Party was to dither and paralyze itself with debate and indecision every time a challenge arose, how long could the Party expect to remain in power?

So the Party went along, grudgingly. It still felt like a step backward. Even Lenin thought so, though he tried to put lipstick on the pig by explaining the New Economic Policy was state capitalism, the final and most advanced form of capitalism, under which the state controlled all major industries and heavily regulated everything else. Russia's relative lack of modern development made it necessary to lead the nation through this stage before true socialism could

be implemented. Earlier economic policy was retroactively dubbed “war communism,” made necessary because of the wars, but it had been pushing Russia too hard too fast. Now was time to ease up on the throttle.

So the Party offered the rural farmers the carrot of the New Economic Policy along with the stick of Red Army repression. In early 1922, Lenin came up with another approach to dealing with rural unrest. Most of the leadership of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the ones who hadn’t escaped the country entirely, like party leader Victor Chernov, were now languishing in Soviet prisons. The Socialist Revolutionary Party was known to have deep support among the peasants. Lenin now proposed to put the Socialist Revolutionary Party leadership on trial. The charges would include armed resistance against the Soviet state, acts of violence and terrorism, and treason in the form of coordinating with hostile foreign powers to overthrow the government. The Socialist Revolutionaries were accused of instigating the rural peasant revolts across Russia, as well as triggering the Kronstadt Rebellion.

The defendants were charged under a law passed in June 1922, long after they’d all been arrested, and nothing like proper legal procedures would be followed at the trial. As Lenin put it, these would be “model trials, which will stand model as regards the explanation of their significance to the masses of the people.” In other words, the primary purpose of the trial would not be to gather and study evidence in order to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused. The purpose of the trial would be a propaganda tool the state would use to educate the masses on Party doctrine.

When Western socialists from what was left of the Second International protested, the Russian government invited a team of four of them to come to Moscow, observe the trial, and assist in the defense. These Western socialists eventually walked out of the trial and went home, denouncing the process as a “parody of justice” that they no longer wished to lend credence to through their presence. In the middle of the trial, a mass demonstration numbering in the hundreds of thousands marched through Moscow with banners that read “Death to the Traitors of the Revolution.” Prosecutors led the march. The trial ended with death sentences for every one of the twelve principal defendants, though these were commuted.

Such trials would come to be known as “show trials,” and the Soviet Union would become notorious for them. Other modes of getting the Party message out were few. Radio and motion pictures were just coming into their own, heralding the rise of what we now call “mass media.” The Russian government was interested in those—so was every other government of the time—but Russia’s being a large state with a broken economy meant it would take a while to introduce these new technologies. The Russian Bolshevik and theatre designer Sergei Eisenstein would begin making some very impressive films in a few years, but I should save that topic for another time.



More traditional arts, music, entertainment, and culture were at a standstill. Very little art was made during this period, because only art that promoted the Party ideology was permitted, and there were at this time very few artists who both understood what was required and were willing to produce it. Some of Russia's biggest names in art and culture were hopelessly bourgeois and had fled the country after the October Revolution, like the painter Marc Chagall. Impresario Sergei Diaghilev started up the Ballets Russes again after the war, but he was not even slightly interested in returning to Russia.

In the realm of letters, of books and magazines and newspapers, the state now controlled the publishing industry, meaning if you didn't promote the right ideology, your work didn't get published. It was that simple. Therefore, few novels or stories of interest were making it into print. One particular novel of interest from this period that didn't make it into print was Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We*, an early work of what we would now call science fiction and also one of the first examples of what we now call dystopian fiction. Set hundreds of years in the future, the novel depicts a world totalitarian state in which every aspect of every citizen's life is under state regulation and surveillance. Future citizens have serial numbers instead of names, and even the first person singular pronoun is outlawed, hence the title, *We*.

The novel is clearly a critique of Soviet Russia and it was not published in its home country until 1988. *We* was published in English in 1924 and was a seminal influence on dystopian fiction, including the most famous such novel ever published, *1984*, which George Orwell began writing shortly after reading *We*. Other twentieth century writers whose own works echo themes from *We* include Aldous Huxley, Ayn Rand, Vladimir Nabokov, and Kurt Vonnegut.

By early 1922, at the still relatively young age of 51, Lenin was in poor health. He suffered from chronic headaches and insomnia. It's not clear even today what the problem was. It was thought to be related to the bullets still lodged in his body from that assassination attempt in 1918. The New Economic Policy continued to be a bitter pill for Lenin's Old Bolshevik comrades to swallow. Even Lenin saw it as a temporary expedient; many other Bolsheviks saw it as a dangerous experiment that might produce a new bourgeoisie. Poverty was still rampant, in the cities and among the rural peasants, suggesting that the Party was taking the wrong approach.

One of the most vocal opponents of the New Economic Policy was Leon Trotsky, who was recruiting other Party members into an effort to roll back some of its excesses. Lenin responded with a little lobbying of his own, organizing his closest allies, including Stalin, to oppose Trotsky at the Eleventh Party Congress in March 1922. At that same Congress, Lenin nominated Stalin for the powerful position of General Secretary of the Communist Party, a clear rebuke to Trotsky.

By this time, Lenin was living at the Gorki estate, a luxurious country estate that had been confiscated by the government after the Revolution. He was there at the urging of his Party colleagues who were concerned about his health. The estate was about 35 kilometers outside of

Moscow; Lenin had a telephone line put in so he could remain in touch with government officials. He read *Pravda* regularly and also received regular visits from Stalin, who kept him posted on national and Party affairs and oversaw Lenin's care.

In April, the same month Lenin turned 52, he underwent surgery to have those bullets removed, but the surgery seems to have done nothing to improve his condition. In May, he had his first stroke, which impaired his ability to exercise any further sway over government policy. Over the following months, his relationship with Stalin began to deteriorate. I already mentioned their disagreement over the nationalities question and how the new republics were to be incorporated into the coming USSR. Lenin also disliked the way Stalin ran the Party. Too authoritarian, he thought. And so he began to swing back to Trotsky as his favorite, more often supporting him in opposition to some of the excesses of Stalin's leadership.

Lenin remained engaged in government. He encouraged those model trials of the Socialist Revolutionaries and advocated the death penalty for them, as well as pushing to remove the remaining Mensheviks from Soviet government.

In December 1922, the same month the USSR was officially created, Lenin suffered his second stroke. Now recognizing that his health was deteriorating irretrievably, he began dictating what became known as his testament. This was a document meant to set out his thoughts as a guide to the future of the Party and the nation. It included assessments of major Party figures, including Trotsky and Stalin. No one escaped sharp criticism.

In Lenin's absence, Stalin used his position as General Secretary of the Party to elevate his own supporters and to undermine Trotsky and his supporters. He also took advantage of his role as Lenin's principal caretaker to position himself as Lenin's heir and logical successor in Soviet government. After all, Stalin was a loyal Bolshevik of long standing, as opposed to that Johnny-come-lately Leon Trotsky who had been a Menshevik until just before the October Revolution.

In March 1923, Lenin suffered his third and most serious stroke, which left him unable to read or speak and paralyzed his right side. He hung onto life for another ten months, with his wife and longstanding political comrade Nadezhda Krupskaya attending him closely. The end came on January 21, 1924. Lenin was 53 years old at the time of his death.

It was very much in Stalin's political interest to exalt Lenin, and by implication Stalin's relationship to him. The honors bestowed upon Lenin's name after his death are too numerous for me to recite here. I'll just note the two most obvious ones. First, the city of Petrograd was renamed Leningrad in his honor. Second, instead of a conventional grave or tomb, the Soviet government constructed a granite mausoleum in Red Square in which his embalmed corpse was placed on display inside a glass sarcophagus where it was made available for public viewing. Lenin's corpse remains in the mausoleum and on public display even in our time, nearly a century after his death.

Nadezhda Krupskaya objected vehemently to these and all the honors on the grounds that Lenin himself would not have approved. She was probably right about that, but no one paid her any heed. Comrade Stalin got his way.

So what are we to make of Lenin? It's hard to get a sense of Lenin the man. Lenin himself didn't seem to think he was nearly as important as his ideas. He could be warm and kind on a personal level, but was cold and scathing in his politics and ideology. He was right, you were wrong, and either you accepted that or you revealed yourself to be an enemy. An iron-bound ideological inflexibility and an absolute abhorrence of the slightest whiff of compromise might seem to be drawbacks in a political leader, but Lenin made it work for him in a way that boggles the mind, even now. He imposed his will, first on a political party even at the cost of dividing it, and then on a nation, even at the cost of civil war. And it's hard to blame him, given that it succeeded every step of the way. I mean, why bother compromising if you don't have to?

The USSR, Lenin's creation, will cast a long shadow across the history of the twentieth century. If all Lenin had done was to overthrow the Russian state and replace it with the Soviet Union, that alone would qualify him as the most influential single individual of the era. But he did more than that. Out of his single-minded zeal, he created a whole new form of government: the one-party state, a state which has the trappings of a democratic republic, except that only one political party has the right to operate, and that party follows a strict ideological orthodoxy. Both the one-party state and the revolutionary violence necessary to install it, would become the dominant mechanism for political change for the next half-century. Not only Lenin's ideological comrades, but ironically also some of his most bitter ideological opponents, would follow the path to power that he first blazed.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Frank for his donation, and thank you, Nathan, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep the words flowing and the bits going, so if you'd like to help out, visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show. I also post playlists of the music used on the podcast, along with composer credits and other information, so if you hear a piece of music you'd like to know more about, that's the place to look. Most of the music I use is free and downloadable, and you'll also find links to sites where you can download it, if you like.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to Africa for two episodes. We'll consider recent developments on the continent, and the system of mandates under which control over Germany's African colonies will be reassigned. Africa, in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I talked about the arts and how they were regulated and censored in the new Soviet Union, so I should also take note of a classic Russian novel of the period that somehow got published in spite of its wryly satiric take on life in the new Soviet Union. I'm referring to *The Twelve Chairs*, written by Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov, and published in 1928. Both of those are pen names, by the way.

*The Twelve Chairs* recounts the story of a former minor provincial aristocrat named Ippolit Vorobyandinov, who now works as a humble clerk in a local government office. His mother-in-law confesses to him on her deathbed that when the October Revolution came, she hid her jewelry in the upholstery of one of the twelve chairs in the family dining room set. The house and their personal property were confiscated by the Bolsheviks after the Revolution; now Vorobyandinov embarks on a quest that will take him across Russia tracking down the one special chair that contains a fortune. He quickly meets up with a rakish young con-man named Ostap Bender, who boasts that he knows "four hundred comparatively honest ways of relieving people of their money." Bender forces Vorobyandinov to reveal his secret and take him on as a partner in the quest, and together they hunt for the chair, racing against time and against the village priest, Father Fyodor, who heard the mother-in-law's confession and is now also after the jewels.

I suppose the novel got approved for publication because its three anti-hero main characters are all disreputable types in the new Soviet Russia: an aristocrat, a thief, a priest. Less obvious is the satirical take on life in the new Russia, which must have gone over the censor's head.

I understand the novel reads better in Russian than in translation, though that's a moot point because I have to confess I've never read it myself either way. It has been adapted many times for film and later for television. The version I'm familiar with is the 1970 American film adapted and directed by Mel Brooks, of all people, and starring Ron Moody as Vorobyandinov, Frank Langella as Ostap Bender, and Dom DeLuise as Father Fyodor. It's reasonably faithful to the novel, though Brooks gave the story a happier ending. It seems to be the least well known of the films directed by Mel Brooks, and I don't know why that is; I think it's wonderful. You should definitely check it out.

[music: Closing Theme]