VCE History: Revolutions Units 3&4 — Russia and China Complete Study Guide

Complete study guide · Units 3&4 · The Russian Revolution (1896–1927) and the Chinese Revolution (1912–1976) · AceGuides

This guide follows the VCAA VCE History Study Design (Revolutions, Units 3 and 4), accredited from 1 January 2022. VCAA's accreditation notices list the History study design as running to 31 December 2026; check the VCAA website for any reaccreditation or new study design before you begin, because the content below (causes and consequences of the Russian and Chinese revolutions) has been stable across study designs and is likely to carry over. The guide covers both Areas of Study for each revolution: Area of Study 1, Causes of revolution, and Area of Study 2, Consequences of revolution. It includes timelines, key individuals and groups, historians' interpretations, source analysis practice, exam technique, model responses, a full practice exam and worked solutions.

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About this guide

How to use it

Revolutions is a subject about argument. You are rewarded for knowing a lot of precise evidence, but only when you use that evidence to answer a specific question. Every section of this guide is therefore built the same way: a timeline, the key knowledge explained in plain English, the people and groups you must know, a short summary of how historians have argued about the topic, model paragraphs, exam tips, common mistakes, and a "Check your understanding" set. Answers to every question are in the Worked solutions section.

Work in this order for each revolution: read the timeline until you can redraw it from memory, then read the explanation sections, then write the practice answers under timed conditions before checking the solutions. Make your own "evidence bank" as you go: for each key event, record a date, a statistic, a short primary source quote and one historian's view.

Exam tip: The VCAA examiners' reports repeatedly say that high-scoring answers use specific evidence: names, dates, laws, slogans, statistics and short quotations. "The peasants were unhappy" earns little. "By 1917 peasant communes in provinces such as Tambov were seizing gentry land without waiting for the Constituent Assembly" earns marks.

What the study design requires

In Units 3 and 4 you study two of the four revolutions in the study design (America, France, Russia, China). Most schools teach one revolution in Unit 3 and the other in Unit 4. This guide covers Russia and China. For each revolution:

Area of Study	Russia	China	What the outcome asks you to do
AoS1 Causes of revolution	1896 (coronation of Nicholas II) to 26 October 1917	1912 (founding of the Republic) to 1 October 1949	Analyse the causes of revolution and evaluate the contribution of ideas, events, individuals and popular movements
AoS2 Consequences of revolution	26 October 1917 to 1927	1 October 1949 to 1976	Analyse the consequences of revolution and

			evaluate the extent of continuity and change in the new society

Across both Areas of Study the study design expects you to use the historical thinking concepts: **causation**, **continuity and change**, **significance**, **perspectives** (how people at the time saw events), **historical interpretations** (how historians later explained them) and **evidence**. It also expects you to analyse and evaluate primary sources and to compare interpretations.

How the subject is assessed

Component	What it covers	Weighting
Unit 3 School-assessed Coursework (SACs)	Revolution 1: AoS1 and AoS2	25%
Unit 4 School-assessed Coursework (SACs)	Revolution 2: AoS1 and AoS2	25%
End-of-year examination	Both revolutions studied, all key knowledge and skills	50%

SAC tasks are chosen by your school from the study design list: typically a historical inquiry, an analysis of primary sources, an evaluation of historical interpretations, and an essay.

The examination (current format)

Feature	Detail
Time	15 minutes reading, 2 hours writing
Total marks	70
Section A (50 marks)	Four questions, one per revolution. Answer the two on the revolutions you studied (25 marks each). Each question is built on a sources book and has four or five parts.
Section B (20 marks)	Four essay questions, one per revolution. Write one essay. The criteria are printed in the exam book.

Materials	A sources book for Section A (written and visual sources). No notes.

The parts of a Section A question have varied from year to year. In the 2022 paper the parts were worth 2, 3, 9, 5 and 6 marks (identify, describe, evaluate, explain, analyse). In the 2025 paper there were four parts, roughly outline (4), evaluate (10), analyse (6) and explain (5). Expect a short source-comprehension question first, then longer questions that ask you to combine the source with your own knowledge, at least one of which covers each Area of Study. Section B essays in recent papers have leaned towards Area of Study 2 (consequences, continuity and change), often asking you to link the old regime with the new one.

Exam tip: 70 marks in 120 minutes is about 1.7 minutes per mark. Spend about 42 minutes on each Section A question and 35 minutes on the essay. Do the essay on the revolution you know better.

The Section B criteria (as printed in recent papers) reward: a coherent and relevant argument that addresses the specific demands of the question; accurate and appropriate knowledge; use of historical thinking concepts such as cause and consequence, continuity and change, and significance; and use of sources as evidence, including primary sources, perspectives and historical interpretations.

Ten-week revision plan

Week	Focus	Tasks
1	Russia AoS1: 1896–1914	Redraw the timeline; learn autocracy, 1905, Dumas, Stolypin
2	Russia AoS1: 1914–October 1917	War, February, Dual Power, April Theses, July Days, Kornilov, October; one Section A part (b) answer
3	Russia AoS2: 1917–1921	Decrees, Constituent Assembly, Brest-Litovsk, Civil War, War Communism, Red Terror
4	Russia AoS2: 1921–1927	Kronstadt, NEP, society and culture, Lenin's death, power struggle; one essay

5	China AoS1: 1912–1937	Republic, warlords, May Fourth, CCP, First United Front, Shanghai 1927, Jiangxi, Long March
6	China AoS1: 1937–1949	War with Japan, Yan'an, Civil War, victory; one Section A part (b) answer
7	China AoS2: 1949–1957	Land reform, Marriage Law, campaigns, Korean War, First Five-Year Plan, Hundred Flowers
8	China AoS2: 1958–1976	Great Leap Forward, famine, Cultural Revolution, Mao's death; one essay
9	Historians and sources	Learn two interpretations per topic; do all Check your understanding sets
10	Full practice exam	Sit the practice exam in this guide under timed conditions; mark it with the solutions

A note on dates

Russia used the Julian ("Old Style") calendar until 1918. In the twentieth century it ran 13 days behind the Western Gregorian calendar. That is why the "February Revolution" began on 23 February (8 March in the West) and the "October Revolution" took place on 25 October (7 November in the West). This guide uses Old Style dates up to January 1918, as VCAA does. The Bolsheviks adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1918: 31 January 1918 was followed by 14 February 1918.

For Chinese names this guide uses pinyin, with older spellings in brackets the first time they appear, for example Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), Sun Yixian (Sun Yat-sen), Guomindang (Kuomintang, GMD or KMT).

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Historical thinking skills for Revolutions

Causation: conditions, triggers and agency

A revolution has more than one cause. Sort causes into three kinds and you will write better arguments.

Type of cause	Meaning	Russian example	Chinese example
Long-term conditions	Structures that made revolution possible	Autocracy, peasant land hunger, harsh factory conditions	Foreign imperialism, warlordism, rural poverty
Ideas	Beliefs that gave discontent a direction	Marxism, Lenin's vanguard party	Three Principles of the People, Marxism-Leninism, Mao's peasant revolution
Short-term triggers and events	Events that turned discontent into action	Bloody Sunday 1905, First World War, bread queues February 1917	Shanghai Massacre 1927, Japanese invasion 1937
Individuals and groups (agency)	Choices that shaped the outcome	Nicholas II, Lenin, Trotsky, Kerensky	Jiang Jieshi, Mao Zedong
Popular movements	Mass action by ordinary people	Soviets, factory committees, soldiers' committees	May Fourth Movement, peasant associations, Red Army

Evaluate means you must judge how important something was, not just describe it. Use the language of weighting: "the most significant", "a necessary but not sufficient condition", "an accelerant rather than a cause", "decisive in the short term".

Continuity and change

In AoS2 you judge how much really changed after the revolution. A strong answer recognises both. For example, the Bolsheviks abolished the tsarist ranks and titles (change) but rebuilt a political police force, the Cheka, that was more powerful than the tsarist Okhrana (continuity). In China the CCP gave land to peasants in 1950 (change) and then took it into collectives from 1953 (a new form of state control over peasants, which some historians see as a continuity with

older imperial patterns of extraction).

Perspectives and historical interpretations

Perspectives are the views of people living through events: a peasant, a worker, a soldier, a noble, a party leader, a foreign diplomat. **Historical interpretations** are the arguments of historians writing afterwards. Do not confuse the two. Lenin's view of October is a perspective. Richard Pipes's view of October is an interpretation.

Historians of Russia are often grouped into schools:

School	Typical argument	Examples
Soviet (Marxist-Leninist)	October was a true workers' revolution led by a farsighted party, the inevitable result of class struggle	Official Soviet histories; Leon Trotsky's own history (1930–32) is a dissident Marxist account
Liberal / "totalitarian"	October was a coup by a small, ruthless party that exploited chaos; authoritarianism was built in from the start	Richard Pipes, Leonard Schapiro, Robert Service
Revisionist / social historians	Popular radicalism from below drove events; the Bolsheviks rode a wave of real mass support in 1917	Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, S.A. Smith, Rex Wade
Post-revisionist / synthesis	Combines both: real popular anger, but also Bolshevik manipulation and violence	Orlando Figes, Christopher Read

For China the debates are similar: was the CCP's victory produced by its social programme for the peasants (Mark Selden), by nationalism released by the Japanese invasion (Chalmers Johnson), by the Guomindang's own failures (Lloyd Eastman), or by the war that weakened Jiang (Rana Mitter, Hans van de Ven)?

> **Common mistake:** Inventing or misattributing quotations. The 2025 examiners' report warned against fabricated quotes and quotes attributed to the wrong historian or revolution. Paraphrasing a historian's argument accurately is better than quoting them inaccurately.

Analysing primary sources

Use the **CODE** checklist for any source:

1. **Content**: what does it say or show? Identify the main idea and key details.
2. **Origin**: who made it, when, where, and for whom?
3. **Deeper context**: what was happening at the time that explains the source?
4. **Evaluation**: what does it reveal, what does it leave out, how reliable and representative is it for this question?

For visual sources (posters, cartoons, photographs) describe specific features: symbols, figures, colours, text, composition. A Soviet poster that shows a giant worker crushing tiny capitalists is using scale to show the power of the proletariat. Say so.

Exam tip: For a source question that says "using the source" or "with reference to the source", you must quote or describe the source and add your own knowledge. The 2025 report advised using the source as a "springboard" and then extending with your own evidence: names, dates, laws, statistics.

Russia AoS1: Causes of revolution (1896 – 26 October 1917)

Timeline

Date (Old Style)	Event	Why it matters
May 1896	Coronation of Nicholas II; crush at Khodynka Field kills over 1,000 people	Ominous start; Nicholas attends a ball that night, damaging his image
1898	Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) founded (Marxist)	Marxist party for the industrial working class
1901–02	Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) formed	Peasant-focused party; uses assassination as a tactic
1902	Lenin publishes What Is to Be Done?	Argues for a disciplined vanguard of professional revolutionaries
1903	RSDLP Second Congress splits into Bolsheviks (Lenin) and Mensheviks (Martov)	Origin of the Bolsheviks
1904–05	Russo-Japanese War; defeats at Port Arthur, Mukden and Tsushima	Humiliation exposes the regime's weakness
9 January 1905	Bloody Sunday: troops fire on Father Gapon's peaceful petition march in St Petersburg	Destroys the myth of the "Little Father"
1905	Strikes, peasant revolts, Potemkin mutiny (June); St Petersburg Soviet (October), Trotsky prominent	First Russian revolution
17 October 1905	October Manifesto promises civil liberties and an elected State Duma	Splits the opposition; liberals satisfied, socialists not

End of free sample

This is 10 of 67 pages.

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