

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Revolution and Counter- Revolution

Paper 2 · Unit 21

Marxism, 1917, Fascism and 1949: 110 marks in four years, and the unit where UPSC most often tests whether you can explain an ideology rather than narrate a regime.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Revolution and counter-revolution: nineteenth century European revolutions; the Russian Revolution of 1917 to 1921; fascist counter-revolution, Italy and Germany; the Chinese Revolution of 1949.

Socialist thought before Marx

The 2025 paper asked about the pre-Marxian socialists directly, which most candidates cannot answer because they start at Marx. Give the utopians their own paragraph and the marks are easy.

- **Henri de Saint-Simon** proposed a society directed by industrialists, engineers and scientists rather than by nobles and priests, and coined the formulation that government of men should give way to the administration of things.
- **Charles Fourier** designed the **phalanstere**, a self-sufficient community of about sixteen hundred people organised so that work matched natural passions, and he is credited by Engels with an early critique of the position of women as a measure of social progress.
- **Robert Owen** was the practical one: he ran **New Lanark** as a model mill with schooling and shorter hours, attempted the **New Harmony** community in Indiana in 1825, and helped found the cooperative and early trade union movement.
- **Louis Blanc** advanced the **social workshop** and the right to work, which the Second Republic conceded in the National Workshops of 1848 and then abandoned, triggering the June Days.
- **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**, author of the formula that property is theft, is properly an anarchist and mutualist rather than a socialist, and his quarrel with Marx is a useful detail.
- **Louis Auguste Blanqui** contributed the idea of revolution by a disciplined conspiratorial minority, which reaches Lenin more directly than the utopians do.
- In 2025 the quotation, that they envisioned socialist societies without considering the mechanisms for achieving or maintaining them, is essentially **Engels's** own charge in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (1880), and saying so is worth a mark.
- A fair defence, which lifts an answer, is that Owen and Fourier generated real institutions in cooperatives, the trade union movement and educational reform, so the practical legacy was larger than the label utopian suggests.

KEY TERMS

Phalanstere — Fourier's planned community of about sixteen hundred, organised so that labour was matched to individual passion.

Blanquism — Revolution made by a small disciplined conspiratorial group seizing power on behalf of the masses.

Marxian socialism as a theory of history

The 2023 paper asked whether Marxism is a scientific theory capable of explaining human history. That is a question about method, so answer it with the method rather than with a summary of the Manifesto.

- **Historical materialism** holds that the mode of production of material life conditions social, political and intellectual life, stated most compactly in the **1859 Preface** to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

- Its architecture sets **forces of production** against **relations of production** forming the base, with a legal and political superstructure, and revolution occurring when the relations become fetters on the forces.
- Marx's proposed sequence runs from primitive communism, ancient slave society, feudalism, capitalism and communism, with the **Asiatic mode of production** as a much disputed additional category that shaped early Marxist writing on India.
- **Class struggle** is the motor, **surplus value** the mechanism of exploitation set out in *Capital* (1867), and **alienation** the account of what wage labour does to the worker, developed in the 1844 manuscripts.
- Any claim to be scientific rests on prediction and on law-like tendencies, and this is where the 2023 question bites: capitalism did not collapse, revolution came first in agrarian Russia rather than industrial Britain, and living standards rose.
- **Engels's letter to Joseph Bloch, 1890**, concedes that the economic is determining only in the last instance and that political and ideological factors have their own effect, which is the standard defence against crude determinism.
- Later developments to name: **Bernstein's** revisionism arguing for gradual parliamentary advance, **Kautsky's** orthodoxy, **Lenin's** theory of the party and of imperialism, and **Gramsci's** hegemony, which explains why revolution did not occur in the west.
- On balance, Marxism is more powerful as an analytical method for studying class, ideology and the state than as a predictive science, and the historiography of India, from D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma to Irfan Habib, is evidence of that analytical fertility.

Russia to 1917

Do not begin in February 1917. The examinable causation runs back at least to 1861, and the failure of reform from above is what makes revolution from below intelligible.

- **Emancipation of the serfs in 1861** under Alexander II freed the peasantry but saddled them with redemption payments and left them tied to the **mir**, the village commune, with insufficient land.
- Late and state-driven industrialisation under **Sergei Witte** in the 1890s, financed by French loans and the gold standard, created a concentrated industrial proletariat in Petersburg and Moscow without any legal outlet for grievance.
- Triggered by defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, the **Revolution of 1905** and by **Bloody Sunday in January**, produced the **October Manifesto**, the **Duma** and the first **soviets**, and Lenin later called it the dress rehearsal.
- **Stolypin's** agrarian reform after 1906 tried to create a class of individual peasant proprietors by dissolving the commune, was making progress, and was cut short by his assassination in 1911 and then by the war.
- War proved decisive after 1914, bringing catastrophic casualties, transport breakdown, urban food shortage, and the discrediting of the monarchy by the Tsar's assumption of command in 1915 and by the Rasputin scandal.
- Women textile workers began the **February Revolution of 1917** on International Women's Day, produced the abdication of Nicholas II, and left **dual power** between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet.

- Its fatal decision was to continue the war, and **Order Number One** of the Petrograd Soviet had already removed its control of the army.
- **Lenin's April Theses** on his return demanded no support for the Provisional Government, all power to the soviets, and peace, land and bread, which reoriented the Bolsheviks against the gradualist consensus.
- In August the **Kornilov affair** discredited the right and armed the Bolsheviks, and the **October Revolution of 25 October, old style**, was a comparatively bloodless seizure of key points in Petrograd by the Military Revolutionary Committee under Trotsky.

KEY TERMS

Mir — The Russian village commune holding land collectively and redistributing strips, which Stolypin sought to dissolve.

Dual power — Lenin's term for the coexistence of the Provisional Government and the soviets between February and October 1917.

Bolshevik consolidation, 1917 to 1921

The syllabus runs to 1921 rather than 1917, so the civil war and War Communism are inside the question, not outside it. The 2026 paper's question on Lenin as strategist lives here.

- First decrees on **land** and **peace** delivered the two demands that had destroyed the Provisional Government, and the land decree in effect ratified peasant seizures already under way.
- Elected in November 1917 with a Socialist Revolutionary majority, the **Constituent Assembly**, met once in January 1918 and was dispersed, which is the moment the regime's democratic legitimacy was abandoned.
- Signed in March 1918, the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** surrendered Poland, the Baltic provinces, Finland and Ukraine, and Lenin forced it through against Bukharin and Trotsky on the argument that survival outranked territory.
- Reds fought Whites with Allied intervention in the **Civil War of 1918 to 1921**, and with Allied intervention, and **Trotsky's** creation of the Red Army, using former Tsarist officers under political commissars, is the decisive organisational achievement.
- **War Communism** requisitioned grain, nationalised industry and abolished markets, and it kept the cities fed at the cost of catastrophic agricultural collapse and the famine of 1921.
- The **Kronstadt rebellion of March 1921**, by sailors who had been the revolution's most reliable supporters, forced the change of course, and Lenin called it the flash that lit up reality.
- The **New Economic Policy** from 1921 restored small private trade and a tax in kind, which Lenin defended as a strategic retreat, and this is the strongest single piece of evidence for the 2026 question about him as a strategist.
- For that question, the argument is that Lenin's distinction was tactical flexibility inside doctrinal firmness: April Theses, the timing of October, Brest-Litovsk and the NEP are four reversals of expectation, each defended in Marxist terms.
- The counter-case to acknowledge: the suppression of the Constituent Assembly, of Kronstadt and of factions inside the party in 1921 built the machinery Stalin later used, so strategist and authoritarian are not alternative descriptions.

Fascism in Italy

The 2026 paper asked about the Acerbo Law specifically, which tells you UPSC wants the mechanics of the legal seizure of power, not the march on Rome as theatre.

- Italy emerged from the war with the grievance of the **mutilated victory**, since the Treaty of London promises were not honoured at Paris, and with **Biennio Rosso**, the two red years of 1919 to 1920 of factory occupations and land seizures.
- **Mussolini**, formerly a socialist editor expelled for supporting intervention, founded the **Fasci di Combattimento** in March 1919 and built the **squadristi**, whose violence against socialist organisations won the support of landowners and industrialists.
- The **March on Rome in October 1922** was a bluff that worked because **King Victor Emmanuel III** refused to sign a decree of martial law, and Mussolini arrived by train as invited prime minister.
- The **Acerbo Law of 1923** is the mechanism the 2026 question asks about: any party winning the largest share with at least twenty five per cent of votes would receive two thirds of the seats in the Chamber.
- Applied at the April 1924 election, accompanied by squadristi intimidation, it converted a plurality into an unassailable majority and destroyed parliamentary opposition without formally abolishing parliament, which is the essence of the answer.
- The **murder of Giacomo Matteotti** in June 1924, after he denounced the election, provoked the Aventine Secession by the opposition, and Mussolini's January 1925 speech accepting responsibility marks the transition to open dictatorship.
- Legislation completed the work, since the **Leggi Fascistissime** of 1925 and 1926 abolished other parties, established the special tribunal and the secret police, and the **Charter of Labour of 1927** created the corporate state in which syndicates replaced free trade unions.
- The **Lateran Treaty of 1929** with the papacy secured Catholic acquiescence and is the single most effective legitimating act of the regime.
- Fascist ideology, expressed in Giovanni Gentile's contribution to the **Doctrine of Fascism**, subordinated the individual to the state, glorified war and hierarchy, and defined itself against both liberalism and Marxism.

KEY TERMS

Acerbo Law — The 1923 Italian electoral law awarding two thirds of seats to the leading list polling at least twenty five per cent.

Corporate state — The fascist arrangement replacing free unions with state-supervised syndicates of employers and workers by sector.

Nazism in Germany

Asked in 2024 on the post-war landscape and in 2025 on the 1932 elections and the ruling classes. Both want the conditions of the seizure, so keep Weimar's failure and the elite miscalculation together.

- The **Weimar Republic** carried the **stab in the back myth**, the humiliation of Versailles with Article 231 and reparations, and a constitution whose **Article 48** allowed rule by emergency decree.

- Proportional representation produced fragmented coalitions, and the **hyperinflation of 1923** destroyed middle class savings while the **Great Depression from 1929** produced six million unemployed by 1932.
- Nazi electoral growth tracks the Depression exactly: about 2.6 per cent in 1928, 18.3 per cent in September 1930, 37.3 per cent in July 1932, then a fall to 33.1 per cent in November 1932.
- That fall is the crux of the 2025 question. The Nazis were past their electoral peak when **Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor on 30 January 1933**, on the advice of **Papen** and conservative elites who believed they could contain him in a cabinet with only three Nazi ministers.
- The class analysis to deploy: heavy industry and agrarian elites feared communism more than they feared Hitler, and the November 1932 gains of the Communists sharpened that calculation, so the appointment was an elite decision rather than an electoral verdict.
- Legal consolidation followed fast: the **Reichstag Fire Decree of 28 February 1933** suspending civil liberties, and the **Enabling Act of 23 March 1933** which gave the cabinet legislative power and required a two thirds majority obtained by excluding Communist deputies and coercing the Centre.
- The **Night of the Long Knives in June 1934** destroyed the SA leadership and reassured the army, and Hindenburg's death in August allowed Hitler to merge the offices of president and chancellor.
- Ideologically Nazism differed from Italian fascism in placing **race and Lebensraum** at the centre rather than the state, which is why the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and the eventual genocide follow from the doctrine rather than merely accompanying it.
- The comparison examiners like: both regimes used legal means to destroy legality, both rested on elite accommodation rather than pure insurrection, and both defined themselves against Marxism, but their core doctrines, statist and racial respectively, were not the same.

	Italy	Germany
Entry to power	Invited as PM, October 1922	Appointed chancellor, 30 January 1933
Legal instrument	Acerbo Law 1923, Leggi Fascistissime 1925-26	Reichstag Fire Decree and Enabling Act 1933
Doctrinal core	The state, corporatism	Race, Lebensraum
Accommodation with church	Lateran Treaty 1929	Concordat 1933

Italy and Germany compared. Note that both seizures were legal in form.

The Chinese Revolution of 1949

Named in the syllabus and asked in 2024 through the land redistribution question. The examinable distinction is between the Leninist and the Maoist route to power.

- The **Chinese Communist Party** was founded in 1921, allied with the Guomindang in the First United Front, and was nearly destroyed in **Chiang Kai-shek's Shanghai massacre of April 1927**.
- That catastrophe forced the strategic innovation: **Mao's** turn to the **peasantry** as the revolutionary class, set out in the Hunan report of 1927, against the orthodox Leninist reliance on an urban proletariat.

- The **Jiangxi Soviet** and then the **Long March of 1934 to 1935** established Mao's leadership at the Zunyi conference and created the Yan'an base, where the party developed guerrilla warfare, land reform and the mass line.
- The **Japanese invasion from 1937** was decisive: the Communists' record of resistance in the countryside built the nationalist legitimacy that the Guomindang, weakened by corruption and hyperinflation, forfeited.
- **Chalmers Johnson** argued that peasant nationalism generated by the Japanese occupation explains Communist success, while **Mark Selden** emphasised the Yan'an social and economic programme; naming this disagreement is worth a mark.
- Victory in the civil war brought the **People's Republic on 1 October 1949**, and the **Agrarian Reform Law of 1950** carried out the land redistribution the 2024 question describes.
- That redistribution was genuinely wholesale and genuinely violent, with landlord classification, struggle sessions and a death toll usually estimated in the low millions, so the 2024 phrasing about swiftness and ruthlessness is accurate and should be engaged rather than softened.
- Collectivisation followed within a few years, so the peasants who received land held it briefly, which is the irony worth stating in an answer on the subject.
- The comparison with Russia to carry: urban insurrection against a collapsing state in 1917 versus protracted rural guerrilla war and base-building over twenty two years in China, which is why Maoism became the template for anti-colonial movements from Vietnam to Peru.

Revolution and counter-revolution as a pattern

Close by answering the question the unit title poses. Examiners give credit for treating the four cases as one analytical problem.

- Every revolution here provoked a counter-revolution, and in Italy and Germany the counter-revolution came to power on the fear of the revolution rather than on its defeat.
- **Crane Brinton's** *Anatomy of Revolution* supplies the classic phase model of moderate rule, radical seizure, terror and Thermidorian reaction, and it fits France, Russia and to a degree China.
- The **war and revolution** link is the strongest empirical regularity in the unit: 1917 follows the world war, 1949 follows the Japanese occupation, and the fascist seizures follow the dislocations of 1918.
- **State breakdown** rather than mass misery is the better predictor. Theda Skocpol's argument that revolutions occur when states fail under international pressure applies to France, Russia and China alike.
- The **agrarian question** decides outcomes: whoever solved the peasant's land problem won, in Russia by ratifying seizures, in China by redistribution, and the Guomindang's failure to do so is the clearest single cause of its defeat.
- **Timing** distinguishes the successful revolutions from the failed ones: 1848 failed across Europe because the middle classes deserted the workers once property seemed threatened, whereas 1917 and 1949 succeeded where the old state had already been broken by external war.
- Fascism is best treated as a **counter-revolutionary mass movement**, which distinguishes it from mere conservative reaction: it mobilised rather than demobilised, and it used modern propaganda and party organisation borrowed from the left it opposed.

Last-mile revision

- Utopians: Saint-Simon administration of things, Fourier phalanstere, Owen New Lanark and New Harmony, Blanc social workshops, Proudhon mutualism, Blanqui conspiratorial revolution.
- Marx: 1859 Preface for base and superstructure, Capital 1867 for surplus value, Engels to Bloch 1890 for last instance.
- Russia: emancipation 1861, 1905 dress rehearsal, February 1917 dual power, April Theses, Kornilov August, October seizure, Brest-Litovsk March 1918, Kronstadt and NEP 1921.
- Italy: Fasci 1919, March on Rome October 1922, Acerbo Law 1923 giving two thirds for twenty five per cent, Matteotti 1924, Lateran Treaty 1929.
- Germany: Nazi vote 37.3 per cent July 1932 then 33.1 per cent November 1932; Hitler appointed 30 January 1933; Reichstag Fire Decree February, Enabling Act March.
- China: CCP 1921, Shanghai 1927, Long March 1934-35, Yan'an, PRC 1 October 1949, Agrarian Reform Law 1950.
- Johnson for peasant nationalism, Selden for the Yan'an programme, Brinton for revolutionary phases, Skocpol for state breakdown.

Common errors to avoid

- Starting the Russian Revolution in 1917. Emancipation 1861, industrialisation under Witte, 1905 and Stolypin are all part of the causation.
- Saying the Nazis won power in an election. Their vote fell in November 1932 and Hitler was appointed, which is precisely what the 2025 question is about.
- Describing the March on Rome as a seizure of power. The King declined to declare martial law and Mussolini was invited to form a government.
- Getting the Acerbo threshold wrong. Twenty five per cent of votes brought two thirds of seats.
- Treating Italian fascism and Nazism as identical. The doctrinal cores, statist and racial, are different and the difference has consequences.
- Presenting Marxism as simply falsified. Engels's last instance qualification and the Gramscian tradition are the standard replies and should be stated before you judge.
- Ending the Chinese land reform story at redistribution. Collectivisation followed within a few years and reversed the peasant's gain.

Mains Practice

Lenin was the brilliant strategist of the socialist revolution. Substantiate.

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

'The Acerbo Law played a crucial role in strengthening Mussolini's hold on power by undermining democratic institutions in Italy.' Examine.

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

“By the time of the 1932 elections, Germany's ruling classes began to feel that the only way to escape a deep economic crisis was to hand over political power to a totalitarian agency.” Explain.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

The social and political landscape of Europe after the First World War was uniquely suited to the rise of Fascism. Discuss.

20 marks · 250 words · 2024

Marxian socialism claims itself to be a scientific socialist theory capable of explaining the history of humankind. Discuss.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

“The pre-Marxian socialist thinkers envisioned socialist societies without fully considering the practical mechanisms for achieving or maintaining them.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2025