

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- 1 Why did Lenin decide to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk?
- 2 Who supported the Whites during the Civil War and why?
- 3 Why did the Bolsheviks win the Civil War?
- 4 How did the Bolsheviks justify their use of terror during the years 1917–24?

6: War Communism and the NEP: A retreat from an ideological economic policy?

As soon as the Bolsheviks seized power, economic measures were introduced which gave the peasants and industrial workers substantial control over their own affairs. These moves showed some commitment to creating the ideal world to which the Bolsheviks, through their ideology, aspired.

Bolshevik ideology was based on the writings of Marx and Lenin, who had adapted Marxist theory to the situation in Russia. Although the Bolsheviks had written at length about the evils of capitalism, their ideas on what to do when in power were rather vague. To Lenin the party must govern on behalf of 'the people', by which he usually meant the proletariat (industrial workers) but sometimes included the peasants. All land, factories and businesses (the 'means of production') should be seized by the state in the name of 'the people' so that wealth and goods could be redistributed according to need.

Eventually social classes would disappear as greater equality was achieved. How and when this would occur was left unclear and this allowed a degree of flexibility when the Bolsheviks tried to justify their policies by reference to ideology.

INITIAL ECONOMIC POLICY IN 1917

Initially there were some radical moves to meet the demands of Bolshevik Party supporters and their ideology. The Land Decree of 1917 abolished all private ownership without compensation. Land was to be distributed to the peasants by land committees. This, in effect, merely legalised what, in many cases, had already taken place. The trickier issue of state ownership of land was played down at this stage.

KEY PEOPLE

Karl Marx Born in 1818 in the Rhineland of German-Jewish parents. He wrote *The Communist Manifesto* with Friedrich Engels, another socialist, in 1848. In 1849 he fled to London where he developed his ideas on class struggle and the economic laws of capitalism. He was writing at a time of great change due to the Industrial Revolution. His most important book was *Das Kapital*, which was first published in 1867. Although there were other socialist thinkers Marx was to have an enormous influence because he offered a clear programme of action. He believed that capitalism involved the exploitation of workers by factory owners and that this would not be tolerated indefinitely. Thus, according to Marx, capitalism would fall and be replaced first by socialism and finally by communism owing to the 'laws of History'. Marx died in exile in 1883 and is buried in Highgate Cemetery in London.

KEY TERM

Ideology A set of ideas which acts as the basis for an economic and political system.

In other areas workers' control was extended: in factories, the workers were to elect committees which would control industrial enterprises; in the armed forces all ranks were abolished and replaced by elected committees; and in the legal system 'people's courts' elected by the workers were set up.

On the surface, this appeared to offer greater freedom to the workers to control their own affairs, but at the same time government control was also being extended through the Supreme Council of the National Economy. It was unclear how compatible worker self-management was with government control and central planning. The role of the central government was to be greatly increased in the circumstances of civil war.

WAR COMMUNISM

The measures introduced to gear the economy for the war effort were known collectively as War Communism. All industries were nationalised and directed by the central government. Private trade was banned and food was requisitioned from the peasantry to feed the Red Army and ensure supplies for those in vital industries. These measures went along with the long-term aim of the Bolsheviks to abolish private enterprise and could be seen as the application of communist ideology, albeit rather earlier than the Bolsheviks had expected. To some Bolsheviks, the old world had been destroyed by the First World War and this provided an opportunity to build anew on Marxist lines. The collapse of the Russian currency and its replacement by **bartering** was seen by some Bolsheviks as a sign of the liberation from capitalism, when in fact it was caused by raging inflation. The result of this optimism was a radicalisation of policy pushing the Bolshevik leadership towards implementing large-scale nationalisation before it had originally intended to. There were also, of course, practical reasons for introducing War Communism. The Bolsheviks had inherited an economy which was in a state of near collapse and drastic measures were needed if they were to hope to fight and win the Civil War. State direction of the economy had been a feature of many

KEY TERM

Bartering Paying for goods with other goods rather than money. This system of exchange is usually associated with undeveloped economies or where the system of currency has broken down. During War Communism in Russia it was seen by some as a sign of liberation from capitalism but was in fact a result of economic collapse.

European countries during the First World War and it had little to do with ideology. Some of the early ideas of the Bolsheviks for giving control to the workers proved to be idealistic and unworkable, especially during the emergency situation of the Civil War. The abolition of army ranks was reversed and factory managers had to be used to create some order in industry. Thus, there were several factors pushing the government into measures which extended state control.

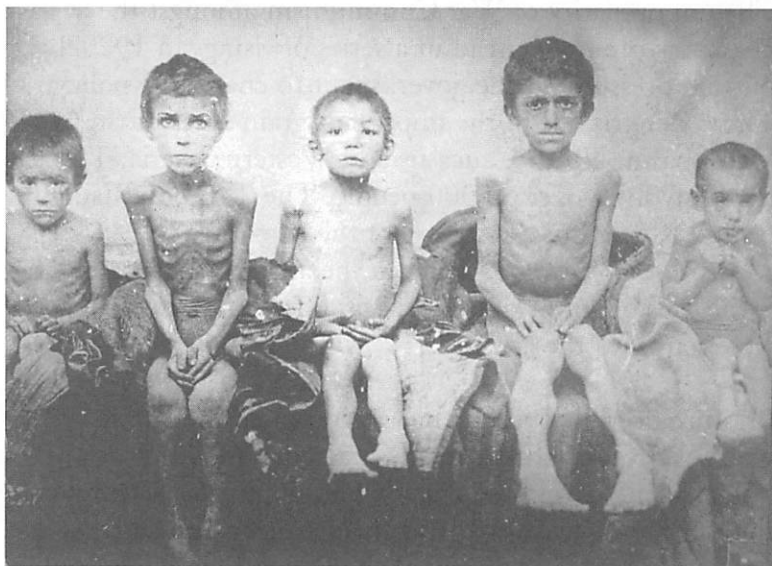
Summary of War Communism

- Nationalisation (i.e. state ownership) of all industry, which would be controlled by the state through the Supreme Council of National Economy.
- The reintroduction of hierarchical structures in the army and industry. In factories the Workers' Councils were replaced by management in order to instil discipline into the workers.
- The forcible requisitioning of food from the peasants in order to feed the army and the towns.
- The introduction of rationing.

Tension between ideology and practical considerations was demonstrated by a range of issues. Government pressure to retain piecework rates in order to raise production for the war effort met with resistance from the workers, who viewed it as unfair. Rationing worked to the advantage of the Red Army and the party – a system that also led to some inequalities. The use of managers in factories (sometimes the former manager or even the owner was used) caused tension. The most unpopular aspects of War Communism were those which affected the peasants. They had little choice over the government's requisitioning of grain and Bolshevik plans to get rid of the *mir*, or village commune, were bitterly resented. The *mir* had been an instrument for exploiting the peasants but after the Revolution it became a genuine peasant organisation which most peasants wanted to retain. The Bolsheviks, with their long-term plans for state control over agricultural

KEY TERM

Mir An organisation made up of village elders which controlled the peasants and their agricultural work.



Victims of the famine of 1921.

production, represented a threat to the peasants. When the Civil War was over these tensions came to the surface and posed a serious problem for the government.

WHY DID THE BOLSHEVIKS CHANGE THEIR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICIES IN 1921?

The year 1921 saw a change in social and economic policies, which indicated a move away from the implementation of communist ideology, as the government struggled to find practical solutions to the grave situation they found themselves in at the end of the Civil War. Industry had ground to a virtual standstill. Production in heavy industry had fallen to 20 per cent of its 1913 level and in some sectors production had stopped altogether. Food production had also fallen, to two thirds of the 1913 figure, and the breakdown in the transport and distribution systems had resulted in widespread famine. Weakened by a lack of food many Russians succumbed to diseases such as typhus and smallpox. Over 20 million were to die from famine and disease. On top of this, army soldiers had to be resettled into civilian life. It was clear that War Communism was not delivering the goods, nor would it be able to cope with the situation post-Civil War.

The unpopularity of War Communism amongst the peasantry came to a head in a series of risings in 1920-1, putting pressure on the government to change its policy. There were risings in the important grain areas of the Volga basin, North Caucasus and Western Siberia. The latter involved over 60,000 people. The **Tambov Rising** in central Russia was a response of the peasantry to requisitioning teams arriving in the area to seize grain. The revolt was only put down after 50,000 Red Army troops were sent into the area.

Pressure on the government was increased in March 1921 when the **Kronstadt Mutiny** occurred. This revolt, by sailors at the naval base outside Petrograd, was alarming to the Bolsheviks because it was this group which had previously been a mainstay of the Revolution. They could not be easily dismissed as 'counter-revolutionaries', although they were labelled as 'White reactionaries' by Bolshevik propaganda. The mutiny was over the increase in power of the party and its officials at the expense of the workers. Its slogan was 'Soviets without Bolsheviks'. Sheila Fitzpatrick has described the mutiny as 'a symbolic parting of the ways between the working class and the Bolshevik Party'. The mutiny was suppressed by Red Army troops led by Tukhachevsky and under Trotsky's orders but the revolt was a shock to the Bolshevik leadership and was a key factor in Lenin's decision to change his economic policy. To Lenin, the Kronstadt revolt had 'lit up reality like a flash of lightning'. This pragmatic approach showed Lenin, once again, to be a realist willing to compromise ideology for the sake of ensuring the survival of the Revolution. As the political screw was turned tighter, concessions were made in economic policy with the introduction of the New Economic Policy.

THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY (NEP)

The NEP was a series of measures which moved away from the tight state control of the economy introduced under War Communism. In agriculture there was to be an end to requisitioning, to be replaced by a system of taxation which allowed the peasants to sell any remaining food at

KEY EVENTS

Tambov Rising (1920-1) A peasant uprising in the Tambov region of central Russia, which was sparked off by the arrival of Bolshevik units to requisition grain for use in the cities and the army. The uprising was largely spontaneous at first but the peasants were able to build on their strength by forming a Green Army and establishing control over a large area. It took over 50,000 Bolshevik troops to put down the revolt. This rising was the most serious of a series of revolts by the peasantry in 1920-1 against the policies of War Communism introduced by the Bolshevik government.

Kronstadt Mutiny (1921) The mutiny was by sailors stationed at the Kronstadt naval base against the imposition of orders from the Bolshevik government on the local soviet. The slogan of the mutineers was 'Soviets without Bolsheviks'. The mutiny was brutally crushed by the Red Army, but the affair was a severe shock to the regime because the sailors had previously been strong supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution.

KEY PEOPLE

Mikhail Tukhachevsky (1893–1937) A marshal of the Red Army and one of the key figures in its formation. Tukhachevsky was in charge of the troops that crushed the Kronstadt Mutiny.

Reasons for the NEP

- To increase food production by giving the peasants an incentive to grow more.
- To get the economy going again after the chaos of the Civil War. An element of private ownership would provide an incentive for small businesses and help increase industrial production and trade.
- To reduce opposition to the Bolsheviks and quell unrest, such as the Tambov Rising and Kronstadt Mutiny.
- To relax economic policies, especially the unpopular measures associated with War Communism.

market for a profit. The Bolsheviks also announced that there would be no forced programme of collectivisation. These measures were clearly a compromise with the peasantry but the Bolsheviks knew that without increased food production the economy would never be able to revive.

In industry the NEP returned small-scale industry to private hands although the state kept control of heavy industry, transport and the banks. This allowed Lenin to claim that the party still held 'the commanding heights of the economy'. In state-owned factories piecework and bonuses were used to try to raise production. To some Bolsheviks these were the techniques of the capitalist. The reintroduction of money was also seen as the re-emergence of capitalism. Yet the legalisation of private trading seemed the logical way of stopping a growing black market, a factor which had already led to some local authorities allowing private trade.

Results

From a communist standpoint, the NEP, with its acceptance of private industry and private trade, represented a retreat back to capitalism. The left-wing Bolsheviks were particularly hostile to this watering down of policy but, to Lenin, the Bolsheviks were in desperate economic circumstances and needed to make compromises

to secure the Revolution. The NEP was seen as a short-term remedy. The economy would have to be restored before moving to socialism, as Lenin stated ‘One step backwards, two steps forward’.

The fears of the Left were soon realised with the development of groups who gained under the NEP – private trade and small businesses led to the growth of the so-called **Nepmen**, those who used the concessions of the NEP to make money. The concessions with the peasantry were seen to encourage the kulaks to make profits from selling surplus grain. These groups were to become detested by the Left as capitalists holding back the development of socialism.

The introduction of the NEP also coincided with the arrest of many Mensheviks and all political parties other than the Bolsheviks were outlawed. Economic compromise clearly did not extend to political relaxation, a factor which persuaded many left-wing Bolsheviks that the NEP could be tolerated in the short term. Bukharin, a left-wing Bolshevik, was to become one of the NEP’s strongest supporters.

Although the NEP was criticised by groups within the Bolshevik Party, it was a policy which enabled the Russian

KEY TERM

Nepmen A term of abuse used by Bolsheviks to describe those private business people and traders who profited from the NEP.

Views of the NEP

The Left Wing of the Bolshevik Party saw the NEP as a betrayal of the communist ideals of the Revolution. They disliked the reintroduction of capitalist elements such as private ownership and private trade and the failure of the government to collectivise agriculture. The NEP could only be tolerated as a short-term measure.

The Right Wing of the Bolshevik Party saw the NEP as a necessary step to ensure that the economy recovered and the Bolshevik Party remained in power. This would have to occur before moving towards a more socialist system. Thus, the Right also saw the NEP as a short-term measure.

Russian production figures, 1913–24.
(Taken from A. Nove, 'An Economic History of the USSR'.)

	1913	1921	1922	1923	1924
Grain (million tons)	81.6	37.6	50.3	56.6	51.4
Pig iron (million tons)	4.2	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.75
Electricity (million Kwh)	1.9	0.5	0.8	1.1	1.5
Steel (million tons)	4.2	0.2	0.4	0.7	1.1
Cotton (million metres)	2582	105	349	691	963

economy to recover gradually (see the table). Under the NEP the peasants were more inclined to grow the much-needed food surpluses and, in industry, incentives encouraged the workforce to increase productivity. The NEP also took away some of the main causes of discontent with the Bolshevik government's policies. As the NEP produced a stabilised economy which started to grind back into action, Lenin was able to deal more effectively with any criticisms from within his own party.

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- 1 What economic measures did the Bolsheviks introduce under War Communism?
- 2 Why was the NEP introduced in 1921?
- 3 Why did some Bolsheviks oppose the NEP?
- 4 How successful was the NEP by 1924?

7: Soviet society and culture under Lenin: Control or tradition?

The Bolshevik government used its position of power to attempt to change society, and so mould attitudes amongst the population and consolidate the Revolution. Russian society in 1917 was already in a state of flux owing to the impact of the First World War but traditional values stemming from Tsarist times were nevertheless deeply embedded.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN AND THE FAMILY

The emancipation of women had been a goal of most Russian radicals since the middle of the nineteenth century and the position of women was one area where the Bolsheviks made significant progress on coming to power. To more radical Bolsheviks the family was an outdated institution which deserved to be swept away. In reality, however, the complete destruction of the traditional family was never a serious policy. This is not to say there were no attacks on the traditional idea of the family. Youth groups were encouraged to attack the ‘capitalist tyranny of parents’ and party sections were set up to educate women members to become more assertive and independent. Wives were encouraged to refuse obedience to their husbands. Led by the Bolshevik **Alexandra Kollontai**, there were calls for greater sexual freedom for women. To young, radical Bolsheviks ‘free love’ was taken to mean casual sex and many considered it to be a right they were entitled to. These attitudes were shocking to older, more traditional Bolsheviks, including Lenin, and attempts were made to impose a more restrained attitude. Other attempts to remould the family consisted of an encouragement for communal spaces in housing blocks. Communal living by several families would break down the traditional family unit.

KEY TERM

Emancipation The process of setting free groups or individuals. In respect to the role of women, Russian laws had given women a position which was subordinate to men. Russian radicals wished to change this by giving women greater rights and equality under the law.

KEY PEOPLE

Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952) A leading Bolshevik figure in the early years of the regime, she was the first woman to be a member of a government in Europe. Kollontai was a feminist and believer in free love, a view which upset some more conservative Bolsheviks. As a member of the Central Committee she was able to exercise an influence on policies towards women, the family and health. Her influence waned after 1921 and some of her measures were reversed.