

Teaching notes

This resource is one of a sequence of eight resources, originally planned for Edexcel's Paper 1 Option: Russia, 1917-91: from Lenin to Yeltsin. The sequence focuses on the theme 'Industrial and agricultural change, 1917-85'. Although the content of the resources is drawn from this particular specification, there is no reason why they couldn't be used to support the teaching of other similar courses, perhaps with some adaptation of the suggested activities.

The eight resources in the sequence are:

1. **War Communism (this resource)**
2. The New Economic Policy (search '25199' to find it on [Teachit History](#))
3. The First Five-Year Plan (search '25200')
4. Collectivisation (search '25201')
5. Soviet Industry and Agriculture in WW2 (search '25202')
6. Virgin Lands (search '25203')
7. Stagnation and the Brezhnev era (search '25204')
8. Reform under Gorbachev (search '25205')

Each resource contains a section of reading followed by some suggested tasks. These could be completed in class or as independent homework tasks.

Introduction

When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 they inherited a country that had failed to develop widespread modern farming techniques and was only lightly industrialised considering its great size. By the end of the soviet era, both agriculture and industry had been dramatically transformed through the use of massive state power. The Bolsheviks believed that following a successful socialist revolution, the next step would be to 'build socialism' in Russia. This meant the process of industrialisation and the development of a modern society and infrastructure out of the backwardness of Tsarist feudalism.

Karl Marx had argued that Russia's level of development, with a large peasantry and a small proletariat, meant that the country was unsuited to a socialist revolution beginning there. Far better, Marx argued, was for socialism to begin in Germany, which was technologically and industrially advanced enough for a socialist society to be built swiftly after the revolution. Whilst he was still in the Menshevik Party, Leon Trotsky presented a different argument. He wrote about the theory of 'combined and uneven development', which claimed that a backward country like Russia did not need to pass through the phases of economic and social development that Marx had predicted. Instead, Russia could skip a phase of development and leap straight from feudalism to socialism.



Russian house and occupants

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Some members of the Bolsheviks had initially questioned the extent to which the state should have any role at all. By 1921, however, Trotsky decisively responded. He wrote that: 'It would be absurd to suppose that it is only necessary for the proletariat to take power and then by passing a few decrees to substitute socialism for capitalism.' The previous year, Lenin had said succinctly that: 'Socialism is soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country.' In reality, he meant that socialism was *state* power plus electrification. Both Lenin and Trotsky, and later Stalin would find that the Russian Civil War would have an enormous distorting effect on the plans of the Bolsheviks to modernise Russia. More significantly, it would have an immense impact on the lives of the peasantry and the industrial workers, both during and after the conflict, and the economic, agricultural and industrial legacy of the war would linger on long after Lenin's death.

War Communism

By May 1918, when the policies that comprised War Communism were introduced, Russia was in the midst of a bloody civil war. The Bolsheviks, who had seized power in October 1917, controlled the industrial and agricultural heartlands of Russia. Their opponents, the White Armies, comprising of former Tsarist generals, nationalist independence movements and the Social Revolutionaries, existed at the periphery of Bolshevik territory. One of the most pressing challenges that the Bolsheviks faced was being able to control enough resources to prevent their new regime from collapsing. Russians in Bolshevik occupied territory were facing starvation and the Red Army was struggling to arm and equip itself because Russian heavy industry was in chaos following the two revolutions of 1917.

Both the Tsarist regime and the Provisional Government had made attempts to control the supply of grain in Russia from 1916 onwards. Despite good harvests, Russia experienced serious food problems in 1916 due to:

- the collapse of the transport network
- the fact that the government fixed grain prices artificially low
- rising inflation ate into any profits the peasantry might make.

This encouraged the peasants to simply hoard their grain instead of selling it to the state. The Government introduced a policy called *razvyorstka*, making the hoarding of grain illegal and giving the government the right to collect surpluses. The Provisional Government continued with this policy as did the Bolsheviks when they seized power. The size of the Red Army during the Civil War placed immense pressures on the peasants. By 1920 it had swelled to over 3 million men, all of whom needed to be fed and clothed. The Red Army, like the Tsar's Army before it, also needed to requisition as many horses as possible (essential for ploughing fields), and conscript large numbers of peasants who would otherwise be harvesting their crops. This meant that an already overburdened food economy came under even greater strain. By 1918 Russia's cities were beginning to starve as the peasants were reluctant to sell their produce, rightly believing that the ruble was losing its value due to inflation. This and a collapsing rail network caused mass hunger and led to 70 percent of Petrograd's population and 50 percent of Moscow's leaving the city for the countryside.

Bagmen

As the cities starved hundreds of thousands of urban men and women travelled to the countryside to sell their belongings for food. Some stole items from the factories where they worked then traded these for food in the villages. These small traders were called Bagmen and they traded primarily to eat, very few were able to make a profit. They were one of main sources of food supplies to the starving cities, but as tens of thousands of Bagmen poured on to trains to the countryside every day, the already weakened railway system came close to collapse.

Vesenkha

The Vesenkha was the soviet supreme economic council, established in December 1917. It became part of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom). It was headed by Valerian Osinski and Alexei Rykov during the civil war and wielded immense power. When the Bolshevik government took most industries under state control, the Vesenkha directed their work and output. It also had the power to seize any assets (such as houses and businesses) from their owners. The Vesenkha was one of the main organisations through which War Communism was established in Russia.

Lenin's policies

Grain requisition was just one of a series of measures announced by Lenin during the period of War Communism. As the Bolshevik regime faced total collapse in May 1918, martial law was imposed across central Russia by the Bolsheviks and the following measures were announced:

Bolshevik decrees	
May 1918: Grain Monopoly	All grain was declared state property and the peasants were required to hand over any surpluses.
June 1918: Nationalisation Decree	The factories that had been taken over by the workers during 1917 were made the property of the state.

Lenin's motivations

Historians have been divided over Lenin's intentions in creating the policies of War Communism. There are several competing explanations:

desperation	Historians sympathetic to Lenin and his beliefs have argued that he did not originally envisage extending state control over the entire economy. The pressures of the civil war forced Lenin to establish a grain monopoly and abolish private trade; policies he revoked at the end of the civil war when he created the NEP. However, if Lenin had created the policies of War Communism in order to win the war, they were enormously counterproductive. By abolishing private trade the cities were pushed closer to starvation and the Bolsheviks were forced to send thousands of soldiers to procure grain from the peasants instead of fighting at the front.
class war	Some historians argue that War Communism was an opportunity for Lenin to eliminate 'enemy' social classes. The bourgeoisie and the former nobility either starved or were reduced to such penury that they no longer wielded any social power or privilege. Workers who supported the Mensheviks or the Social Revolutionaries were also able controlled through hunger and over work. The peasants, of whom Lenin was particularly suspicious, were subjected to immense brutality, especially wealthier peasants, the Kulaks.
creating a socialist economy	Other historians have argued that War Communism was an opportunity for Lenin to create an economy that eliminated private trade. <i>However</i> , the party was far from united on completely dismantling capitalism. The left of the Bolsheviks wanted an immediate switch to a socialist economy where there was no private trade, but many Bolsheviks, including Lenin, did not believe in the short term that this was possible.

Impact on the Peasants

The policies of War Communism had a catastrophic impact on Russia's peasants. Once the grain monopoly had been ordered, possession of grain surpluses by the peasants was treated as hoarding and speculation. Many peasants had abandoned the money economy and either bartered or hung on to their grain. Some distilled vodka with excess grain and others fed it to their horses and livestock. Since the October Revolution, the governing bodies within many peasant villages, the *Obschina* (led by the village elders), had been replaced by a village soviet. The soviet was notionally loyal to the new Bolshevik government, but because of the chaos in Russia was able to operate relatively independently and so did not readily comply with policies that were not in the interests of its peasant constituents.

When the Bolsheviks sent armed detachments to the villages to seize grain that now legally belonged to the government, they also attempted to sow division into the villages by establishing Poor Peasants Committees. Resentments over land ownership and the relative success of some peasant farmers compared to their poorer neighbours existed to some degree in nearly every village in Russia. The Bolsheviks empowered poorer peasants with these committees and set them against their wealthier kulak neighbours. The committees were put in charge of grain requisitioning in villages. Each village was given a quota to fulfill and the poor peasants were encouraged to place the burden of the quotas on their better off neighbours. Often the committees were filled with party activists who had travelled from the cities and were viewed as outsiders. Wealthy peasants who used hired labour were accused of being capitalist exploiters and prevented from being on the committee.

Some villages resisted attempts to create division because:

- the peasants were inter-related within the village
- they did not see themselves as 'rich' or 'poor', instead they viewed each other as equally impoverished
- they resented attempts to stir up trouble.

Poor Peasants Committees often acted illegally, extorting grain from the peasants and running some villages in a manner closer to gangsterism than the ideals of the revolution. This was a powerful contributory factor to waves of revolts in 1918 and 1919. Lenin abolished the committees in December 1918 at the 6th Party Congress when he realised the policy had failed.

The grain monopoly was declared when the village soviets refused to send grain to the cities because the price was too low and there was nothing to buy with the paper money they received in return. Because so many workers had left for the countryside, countless factories stood empty and the manufactured goods the peasants normally bought were not produced. Along with requisitioning came government propaganda that portrayed kulaks as greedy speculators and class enemies, planning to take advantage of the crisis to line their own pockets. Lenin made a series of speeches demanding death to the Kulaks and a Bolshevik 'food army' of armed requisitioning squads was formed to occupy peasant villages and use whatever violence was necessary to extract food from the peasants.

Industrial and agricultural change in Russia 1917-85: War Communism

Food brigades

Nearly 80,000 troops left from Russia's cities to the countryside in the food brigades. However, the brigades included few disciplined professional soldiers and were made up of vagrants, criminals and men desperate for work and food. Many brigades operated virtually as feudal warlords not simply taking the grain quota the government asked for, but plundering villages for anything they could take. They often seized seed grain, ensuring that there would be no harvest in the spring and dooming the village to starvation. They were notorious for torturing and murdering peasants and raping women and girls. Entire villages would run in terror into the forest when the food brigades approached. The extent to which Lenin officially sanctioned this brutality is unclear, though his rhetoric seems to have encouraged the squads, and the Bolshevik supporters, to see violence against the peasants as necessary. Much of the food was stolen or left in warehouses to rot, as the railway network was too chaotic to transport it to the cities. When Lenin's government directed the food brigades to confiscate food from the bag men, they set up road blocks and dragged small traders from trains to search their bags. This was an opportunity for widespread theft and plunder, but it did little to actually stop the trade. Even Lenin acknowledged that without the bagmen the cities would starve.



Famine in the Volga region Soviet Union 1928

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Famine

Three years of requisitioning resulted in widespread hunger in the countryside, but a poor harvest tipped large parts of peasant Russia into famine in 1921. For centuries peasants had learned to stockpile food, knowing that on average, famine conditions occurred somewhere in Russia about once every decade. The level of requisitioning had left some peasants with no food reserves at all. The Bolsheviks believed the peasants would deliberately try to hide their grain, so they set an impossibly high quota. Regional officials messaged the government in Moscow explaining that a famine was imminent, but Lenin and his government did not reduce the quotas. The famine that followed killed 6 million people, mainly in the Volga region. An international famine relief operation was developed through the Red Cross and the American Relief Administration, led by future US President Herbert Hoover. In total some 10 million people were fed by American, British and European aid.

Impact on the workers

In December 1917 the Bolsheviks had been forced to recognise the legitimacy of factory soviets. They claimed to be ruling Russia on the soviets' behalf so they were forced to tolerate workplace democracy. The civil war meant that workplace democracy could no longer be tolerated. The Red Army was desperate for munitions and supplies, particularly bullets and artillery shells, and military style factory discipline had to be imposed to produce them. One reason for banning the bagmen was to stop workers leaving their factories and taking frequent journeys to the countryside to find food. In the first few months of 1918 the Bolsheviks introduced their own managers into all major factories, replacing the bourgeois managers who had fled or been forced out of the factories by the workers during 1917. Offering workers full workplace democracy had been vital in convincing them to overthrow their employers, and now the workers felt betrayed by the Bolsheviks. However Lenin and the rest of the party had good reason for wanting to gain control over industry again:

- Workers had contributed to inflation by voting for large pay rises.
- They had attacked and killed many technical experts and managers out of a spirit of hatred and revenge, robbing Russian industry of expertise.
- Workplace soviets did nothing to bring about factory discipline – absenteeism, theft and a refusal to work were constant features of working life.
- The factory soviets and trade unions were often opposed to the Bolsheviks – there were frequent strikes and demonstrations in 1917 and 1918 against the party, especially as food supplies from the countryside dwindled.

Many workers expected their circumstances to rapidly improve once the Bolsheviks came to power and were disappointed and angry when this did not happen. There was widespread disillusionment with the party and little understanding that the Bolsheviks might not be able to address their living standards for many years. Some workers who were not disillusioned by politics, and who had supported the Mensheviks and the SR Party, formed a network of protest groups called the Extraordinary Assemblies of Factory and Plant Representatives. By June 1918 they had over a quarter of a million members. They demanded a return to the brief moment of democracy in Russia which had ended with the closing of the Constituent Assembly by the Bolsheviks. They also believed that the 'worker's revolution' had been replaced with Bolshevik control and that the promises of the revolution had been betrayed. In April 1918 Lenin decided that worker control of the factories must be replaced by state control. The old styles of management should also be re-introduced, he believed, and strict labour discipline re-introduced. He wrote an essay 'The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power' in April, and claimed that until the economy had been rebuilt, it was futile trying to overthrow capitalism:

- Bourgeois 'experts' and managers needed to be retained in order to make industry work.
- There would be different levels of pay for factory workers and managers and they would have to have a more privileged status.
- Equality had to take second place to efficient management.
- Because the managers would now be state employees, the power to control factories shifted from the soviets and trade unions to the government.

In May there was a large strike in Petrograd after the secret police, the Checka, had opened fire on protesting workers. The Bolsheviks responded by arresting and executing strike leaders associated with the opposition parties and threatening to sack any striking worker. They shut down opposition newspapers, outlawed the Extraordinary Assemblies and expelled non Bolsheviks from factory soviets. In February 1921 the factories in Petrograd ran out of fuel and 93 of them were closed, throwing 30,000 workers out of their jobs and ending their entitlement to food. Ten days later they re-opened but in that time tens of thousands of angry workers had taken to the streets to demand the end of the Bolshevik regime. The declaration of martial law by the Bolsheviks caused the Kronstadt sailors to revolt against the regime (see below).

Revolt!

War Communism resulted in an explosion of protest and violence by 1921, from the very groups the Bolsheviks claimed to represent, the peasants, workers and the Kronstadt sailors. This protest was chiefly the result of the party's policies towards the peasants and workers and it brought the Bolsheviks to the brink of defeat. Lenin said that he viewed the peasants' uprising as a far greater threat to the regime than all the white armies combined.

The Antonov Rebellion

In the province of Tambov, south of Moscow, between 1920 and 1921 a large and well organised revolt against the Bolsheviks began. It was directly inspired by the policies of War Communism and the brutal requisitioning of food. It was led by the peasant Social Revolutionary, Aleksandr Antonov and began in a small rural town called Khitrovo, following the decision by a Red Army commander to beat the town elders in front of the rest of the peasants. The revolt spread across Russia within a few months until over 70,000 peasants had taken up arms against the regime. It took 100,000 Red Army soldiers using aircraft dropping poison gas to finally eradicate the rebels. Concentration camps were also established to imprison tens of thousands of peasants, many of whom died of hunger and disease. Antonov himself was killed in a shoot-out with the Checka in June 1922.

The Workers Opposition

Within the Bolshevik Party the only female member of the politburo, Alexandra Kollontai, protested about the treatment of the working classes throughout the civil war. The banning of trade unions, the enforcing of long working shifts, food shortages and military style discipline in the factories were, in her view, a betrayal of the revolution. Around Kollontai, a party group known as the Worker's Opposition faction developed. They protested against the lack of party democracy and decision making that had emerged during the war. Most decisions by 1921 were taken directly by Lenin, who had become increasingly authoritarian and dictatorial. In 1922 Lenin banned factions within the party, clamping down on internal party democracy, a decision that would later help Stalin to consolidate his dictatorship after 1928.

The Kronstadt Uprising

The revolutionary sailors in the Tsar's fleet at Kronstadt Island, a fortress off the coast of Petrograd, had turned their guns on their officers in February 1917 and joined the revolution. They had been the most committed supporters of the Bolsheviks, helping them seize power in October 1917 by sailing the battleship Aurora up the River Neva, training its guns on the Winter Palace against the Provisional Government. It was a shock to Lenin that at the height of War Communism the Kronstadt sailors revolted against the Bolsheviks, accusing them of betraying the revolution.

In a manifesto they demanded:

- A. Freedom for the workers.
- B. A reinstatement of the power of the soviets.
- C. Democracy within army and navy regiments.
- D. An end to the grain requisitioning from the peasants.

The revolt was put down by a hastily organised force of 14,000 Red Guards led by the Red Army general Tukhachevsky. The first attack was repelled by the sailors but the Bolsheviks eventually crushed the garrison, advancing across the thick winter ice of the Gulf of Finland.

Tasks

1. Working in pairs come up with definitions for the following terms:
 - A. Worker's Opposition
 - B. War Communism
 - C. soviets
 - D. bagmen
2. Using the information above, how useful was War Communism in enabling Lenin to control Russia?
3. What do the revolts against Soviet rule show about their hold over Russia by 1921?
4. Which group was more affected by War Communism, the peasants or the workers?