

### 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 (search '25198' to find it on [Teachit History](#))
2. **The New Economic Policy (this resource)**
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.

#### Background

By 1921 the enemies of the Bolsheviks had been defeated and the allied intervention in Russia was ending. Lenin's use of state power to run the economy during the war had enabled the Bolsheviks to exert their influence and ideology on Russia in a way that would not have been possible before the civil war. However, the policy of War Communism had devastated the Russian economy and had led to a series of revolts that almost overwhelmed the regime. Lenin described the Kronstadt rebellion as being:

'Like a flash of lightning which threw more glare upon reality than anything else'

He meant that the Communist party could not bury its head in the sand and ignore the consequences of War Communism if the regime hoped to survive. Instead a radical change of direction was needed. At the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party in March 1921 Lenin announced the ending of *razvyorstka* (forced grain requisitioning) and its replacement with a food tax called the *prodlog*. This was the most important element of the New Economic Policy (NEP) as it enabled peasants to retain their surpluses and to sell them to traders. Lenin hoped to stimulate *smychka*, an alliance between the peasants and workers, where both parties were dependent on one another. Russia would be enriched when the workers were fed by the countryside and in return, the peasants would be sold the goods they created. Lenin also allowed small businesses such as restaurants, grocers, butchers, tailors and cobblers to re-open and for the profits of those businesses to remain in private hands. The 'commanding heights of the economy' however, were still controlled by the state. Heavy industry, electricity production and the railways remained firmly in the hands of the government and Lenin had no intention of allowing them to fall into private hands.

Historians have been divided over Lenin's intentions regarding the NEP and the introduction of a limited amount of private enterprise in Russia. It is clear that he understood that Russia's economy was in a very grave state, but it is unclear how long he believed the NEP should last for. Some historians argue that the NEP was a temporary retreat by Lenin that would last for no more than a few years; others believe that Lenin thought the NEP would be a permanent policy. If the latter were true, it suggests that the impact of the civil war had been enough to make Lenin abandon full state led socialism by 1921. Lenin died in 1924 without making clear (due to several incapacitating strokes) exactly what the economic future of the USSR should be in the long run and it was down to Stalin to eventually resolve this with the Five Year Plans.

### Impact on the peasants

Despite the mistrust that the Bolsheviks had for the peasants, Lenin believed that under the NEP reforms they could play an important part in developing the Russian economy. The Bolshevik government allowed peasants to borrow money from the state in order to purchase tools and other manufactured goods and by 1927, half of all peasants belonged to a cooperative. It was a very popular and effective measure with the peasantry, but this did not prevent the left of the party from being very suspicious of it, believing it was creating a new rural capitalist class.



Productivity improved in Russian agriculture under the NEP, partly because there were financial incentives for the workers and partly because of state intervention, finance and assistance. By 1926, Russian peasants were producing the same amount of food that they had grown in 1913 and harvest yields continued to grow throughout the 1920s. However, there was a broad agreement across the party that the future of agriculture did not lie in peasant cooperatives, but instead in state run collective farms where the land and livestock would become state property and the peasants would become state employees. Mechanisation and the merging of the peasants' fields into large scale farming operations would mean a plentiful supply of cheap food would be available for the workers in the towns and cities. Crucially, this process (prior to the emergence of Stalin) was meant to be gradual and voluntary, but the government also used financial pressure to encourage collectivisation, heavily taxing kulak farmers after 1927 and offering credit to collectives. Most peasants who chose to join collectives opted to join the smaller variety (the TOZ) where the land was shared but livestock and tools were not. Bigger collectives, called Kommuny were less popular because land, livestock and tools became communally owned.

#### Impact on the workers

##### Resentment

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The NEP was referred to by some workers as ‘the new exploitation of the proletariat’. They looked on with resentment as the peasants were allowed to sell their produce and accumulate profits. Many believed that the peasants were becoming a new capitalist class and were holding them to ransom with high food prices. The peasants were not exploiting the situation, rather the rising inflation that was a deliberate policy of the Bolsheviks during the 1920s (they printed money in order to devalue it and bankrupt the bourgeoisie), resulted in higher prices. Under the NEP, workers had access to shops and markets again in order to buy produce but they lacked the spending power to be able to purchase what they wanted. They were resentful also of a new generation of wealthy traders called NEP-men. In satirical magazines like the party publication Krokodil, the NEP-men were portrayed as gangsters, drinking champagne and enjoying the company of prostitutes. Whilst some NEP-men were wealthy and lived decadent lifestyles (having bought the finery and luxuries of the former aristocracy), many were simply small traders who managed to make enough to survive.

##### Anxiety

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In the early 1920s, there was an influx of workers into the party. Many new party members, committed to the revolution and to building socialism, felt very conflicted by the NEP. In many of Lenin’s writings, he had argued that complete commitment to the revolution and its values involved abandoning ‘bourgeois’ ways and ignoring the desire for consumer goods and comforts. To crave individual pleasures such as foodstuffs, clothing or a luxury like tobacco or sugar was counter revolutionary. Many workers, hungry and poorly clothed after years of factory toil during War Communism, understandably found themselves longing to enjoy the brief return to material prosperity, but then found themselves fearing they were betraying the revolution’s values. Many had begun to identify so closely with the revolution that it caused a profound sense of crisis in them, with some party members even feeling suicidal.

#### Disagreement in the party

From 1921 onwards, there was a profusion of flea markets across Russia, as the desperately impoverished people, emerging from the civil war, began to trade under the NEP. To many in the Bolshevik Party, the entire point of the war had been to defeat capitalism. The civil war had been a crusade in which many party comrades had died and there was widespread shock and disbelief that capitalism was being resurrected in its aftermath. Trotsky had originally proposed that the economics of War Communism be maintained into peacetime and the Red Army be used as a vast labour force to rebuild essential infrastructure like the railway network. Nikolai Bukharin, who had originally been on the left of the Bolshevik Party, gradually became less and less radical and began to support the NEP. He believed that the path to socialism needed to be gradual and long term.

#### Tasks

Form into groups of four. Two people in the group will argue for and two people will argue against the following statements:

1. 'After the introduction of the NEP, Russia would never become a communist state'.
2. 'Introducing the NEP was Lenin's only choice.'
3. 'Had Lenin lived, he would never have continued with the NEP.'

Each side must take no more than four minutes to make its arguments and all statements must be based on evidence.

Answer the following essay questions:

1. How far was the Bolshevik government dependent on the peasants to survive in the years 1917-27?
2. To what extent were Lenin's policies based on pure pragmatism 1921-1924?