

Russia 1917-1924

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This document was written by and is therefore copyright Stephen Tonge. Stephen Tonge was thirty-seven in 2008 and head of history at Catholic University School in Dublin. He is a past pupil of the school and had taught there for 14 years. He attended University College Dublin and received his MA in 1990. As well as history, he teaches business and economics. He also coaches both rugby and cricket and is the school's fixtures secretary. He is a co-author of a GCSE standard textbook *Living History*, published by the Educational Company of Ireland.

Lenin in Power

The new government

The new government's first acts were to agree an armistice with Germany. They abolished private ownership of land and distributed it among the peasants. Banks were nationalized and workers' control over factory production was introduced. The government or the Council of Peoples' Commissars (Sovnarkom) was set up. Lenin was the president and there were 15 ministers. Trotsky was Commissar for Foreign Affairs.

Lenin was no democrat. The Bolsheviks were determined not to share power. Elections were held for a **Constituent Assembly**. The Bolsheviks only received one-third of the popular vote. The Constituent Assembly dissolved at gunpoint by the Bolsheviks. This was the last democratic election in Russia for the next seventy years. All opposition was ruthlessly suppressed by the **Cheka**, or political police. The Red Army was also formed at this time.

In March, the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** signed with the Germans. Russia lost the Ukraine, its Polish and Baltic territories, and Finland. **The treaty was hugely unpopular in Russia but necessary if the Bolsheviks were to establish control of Russia.** Lenin believed that the revolution would soon spread to Germany and this would reduce the effect of the Treaty.

The Russian Civil War

In June 1918 the Russian civil war broke out. The supporters of the government were called the **Reds** and their opponents the **Whites**.

Japan, Britain, France and the US intervened on the side of the Whites. However the aid was half-hearted and morale among many of the foreign troops were low. During July 1918 as White armies advanced the Tsar and his family were shot at Yekaterinburg.

Bolshevik forces defeated the different White generals who never fought together and were separated from each other. The main White armies under the Generals **Kolchak Denikin, Yudenich**, and **Wrangel** were each in turn crushed. The war ended in 1921. It is estimated that 9 million people died as a result of the war.

Factors contributing to the victory of the Reds:

- Control of industry
- Bolshevik unity, White disunity. Bolsheviks outnumbered the reds by about three to one.
- Terror and the leadership of Trotsky
- Most of the industry and railways remained under Bolshevik control
- Reds promised land to the peasants while the Whites would have restored the land to its original owner.

Economic Policies

War Communism was an emergency programme established by **Lenin** during the civil war. War Communism included forced seizure of grain, nationalization of all trade and industry and strict control of labour. As a result of this program and of the ravages of the war, industrial and agricultural production declined sharply, and the population suffered severe hardship. It caused a famine that led to the death of an estimated 5 million people.

The following figures show the total collapse of the economy:

	1913	1921
Grain	80 million tons	37.6 million tons
Coal	29 million tons	9 million tons
Iron	4.2 million tons	1 million tons
Oil	9.2 million tons	3.8 million tons

By 1921 opposition to the communists had grown. General unrest erupted in a rebellion at the **Kronstadt** naval base. Shaken by this revolt, Lenin introduced the NEP to revive the economy. The new programme signalled a return to a limited capitalist system. Peasants could retain excess produce and sell it for a profit. Smaller businesses were permitted to operate as private enterprises. Large industries remained under state control. By 1928, the NEP had raised the Soviet national income above its pre war level. However, the NEP policies were reversed (1928) by Stalin .

Death of Lenin

In May 1922 Lenin suffered his first stroke. In all Lenin was to have four strokes. He was greatly weakened and was an isolated figure, as a power struggle began to succeed him. After a stroke in 1923 he could not speak. He died in January 1924 in the village of Gorky, near Moscow. His body was preserved and St Petersburg renamed Leningrad in his honour.

Lenin – an evaluation

Lenin's ability to seize an opportunity when it arose was one of his major political skills. He was convinced that the Provisional Government was doomed by October 1917. Against the advice of many of his supporters, he led a successful revolution. He pulled Russia out of the war with Germany which helped to consolidate his regime. Victory in the Civil War ensured the effective establishment of the Communist state. His ability to recognise when his policies had failed led him to abandon War Communism and replace it with the New Economic Policy.

However Lenin instituted a very brutal totalitarian regime. Democracy was banned and a one-party police state was established where political opponents were shot out of hand. The murder of the royal family cast a shadow across the new government. War Communism resulted in a famine in which an estimated 5 million people died.

Perhaps two of the biggest criticisms of Lenin were his failure to stop the rise of Stalin even though he realised his failings and his use of terror as state policy. This policy was directed against different groups in society who were seen as **enemies of the people**. He devalued human life and Stalin was to take this policy to its logical bloody climax in the 1930s.

Quotes on Lenin:

Dmitri Volkogonov	"The movement for a just and classless society in Russia began with unbridled violence, denying millions of people all rights except the right to support Bolshevik policy." "It is surely indisputable that no single leader in the twentieth century exerted as great an influence on the course of world history as Lenin."
Martin Amis	"Lenin bequeathed to his successors a fully functioning police state."
Michael Lynch	"Lenin's greatest achievement as a revolutionary was to reshape Marxist theory to make it fit Russian conditions."