

Source 25 shows it was not only industrial production that collapsed. The shortage of food was even more serious. Peasant communities fiercely resisted the grain requisitioning of 1918 (see pp.118-119) – some by force. Many reacted by refusing to grow more crops than they needed for their own consumption. They also refused to join the State collective farms the government had set up. This produced a crisis of food supply. Requisition squads entered the villages again in 1919 and 1920, confiscating not just the peasants' surplus – this was not enough to feed the army and the cities – but also seed grain and the food the peasants needed for themselves and their families.

Think about

- ▶ Why were some Communists pleased to see the collapse of the value of the rouble?

The value of money during this period totally collapsed. Inflation between 1917 and 1922 ran at about 1,000,000 per cent! Workers were paid in goods not worthless money. Some Communists, eg Bukharin, actually welcomed this development. They saw it as marking the end of capitalism. Inflation removed any incentive to work hard or produce goods or food for sale.

The situation in Russia at the end of the Civil War

By the end of 1920 the Civil War had been won, peace had been made with Poland and foreign troops had left Russian territory. Just when the Communist government should have been celebrating its victory it found itself thrown again into another series of conflicts. There were hundreds of peasant risings in 1920 and 1921. These were the Greens (see page 120). Requisitioning had turned millions of peasants against the regime. 'By March 1921 Soviet power in much of the countryside had ceased to exist,' according to Figs. At the same time a wave of strikes threatened the regime in the cities and industrialized areas. These strikes in Petrograd turned into mass demonstrations, in which soldiers and sailors joined. The Communists had won the Civil War but their methods had lost them the support of the people.

Facts and figures

By 1920 in Petrograd two-thirds of adults ate in communal canteens.

Famine!

A drought in 1920 was followed by a severe winter. When another dry spell followed in the summer of 1921, Russia was hit by famine on a terrifying scale. Peasants had either eaten any reserves or seen them confiscated by the requisition squads. A combination of government policy and climate caused the worst famine for thirty years.

In 1920 Ukraine grain production fell to 20 per cent of its pre-war total. Perhaps five million died not only of famine but also of disease, as typhus and cholera followed in its wake. Millions more tramped across the country in search of food. Reports of cannibalism reached foreign reporters. Corpses, especially of children, were stored to be eaten by their own families. Deaths would have been even greater had it not been for the American Relief Administration. Herbert Hoover raised money from the American people and used it to distribute food and seed in the worst famine areas. An estimated 14 million people were kept alive in this way. Throughout the famine Lenin's government had not been swift to act, and accepted American help with great reluctance.

Think about

- ▶ Why was the work of the American Relief Administration deeply embarrassing for the Communists?

Source 26



Victims of the famine of 1921.

The Kronstadt Mutiny, 1921

The most serious and disturbing threat came from Kronstadt. The naval base here had a special significance in Communist mythology. Its sailors had taken to the streets of Petrograd to demonstrate for a soviet government in the July Days and had played a key role in the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917. When demonstrations began in Petrograd in 1921, they quickly spread to Kronstadt on 28 February. Within hours the garrison called for an end to the Communist dictatorship. Communist Party members in the base supported the demands to hold new soviet elections, release political prisoners and end the grain requisitioning. Most of those based at Kronstadt were peasants and knew only too well what Communist rule had brought to their villages.

Source 27

In carrying out the October Revolution, the working class hoped to achieve its liberation. The outcome has been even greater enslavement of human beings... By means of State-run trade unions, the workers have been chained to their machines so that labour is not a source of joy but a new serfdom. To the protests of the peasants, expressed in spontaneous risings, and those of the workers, whom the very conditions of life compel to strike, they have responded with mass executions and an appetite for blood that by far exceeds that of Tsarist generals.

Declaration by the Kronstadt 'Rebels',
8 March 1921 in *The Kronstadt Pravda*

Lenin and the government acted swiftly. Trotsky was sent to crush the rebellion. It was a bloody affair. The first attacks failed, but eventually 50,000 Red Army troops recaptured the island base after an advance across the ice.

Think about

- ▶ What was the main criticism of the Communist government made by the Kronstadt 'rebels'?

Source 28



Red soldiers, many of them dressed in white camouflage, advance across the ice to recapture the Kronstadt naval base after the mutiny there. Dead and wounded men can be seen on the ice after earlier attacks.

Think about

▶ What questions would a historian wish to ask about this photograph?

Think about

▶ Why was Lenin heard in silence?

10,000 Red soldiers were killed in the attack. Captured rebels were treated savagely, many being executed and others being sent to the first Soviet concentration camp, inside the Arctic Circle.

The New Economic Policy, 1921

While the Kronstadt mutiny was at its height, the Communist Party was holding its Tenth Party Congress in Moscow. It was clear to everyone that the government faced a national emergency. Drastic action was needed if the Communists were to retain power. The peasants held the key, as Lenin realized. On 15 March Lenin explained to the party that it had to rebuild a *smychka* (alliance) with the peasants. 'Let the peasants have their little bit of capitalism as long as we keep the power,' he said. He spoke for three hours, and his speech was heard virtually in silence.

The New Economic Policy comprised:

1. The end of the requisitioning of grain
2. The payment by peasants of a tax in kind (i.e. grain) to the government. This was eventually set at 10 per cent of their crop.
3. The reintroduction of a free market, in which peasants were to be able to sell any extra surplus.
4. The legalization of small businesses
5. Heavy industry, transport, banking, 'the commanding heights' of the economy, were to remain under State control.

6 Why were the Bolsheviks able to stay in power?

Walter Durranty, an American reporter in Moscow, described how Lenin later justified this new policy to a meeting of party delegates:

Source 29

'The real meaning of the New Economic Policy is that we have met a great defeat in our plans and that we are now making a strategic retreat,' said Lenin in one of the frankest admissions of failure ever made by a leader of a great nation...

'Before Lenin spoke,' says the official newspaper *Izvestia*, 'there had been a somewhat acrid discussion, which many Communists cannot fail to regard as an objection (denial) of their dearest ideals. But, as usual, Lenin's logic vanquished opposition. His statement is clearly intended to close the discussion definitely.' 'Our defeat in the economic field, whose problems resemble those of strategy, though even graver and more difficult,' said the Soviet chief, 'is more serious than any we suffered from the armies of Denikin or Kolchak. We thought the peasants would give us sufficient food to ensure the support of the industrial workers, and that we should be able to distribute it. We were wrong, and so we have begun to retreat. Before we are utterly smashed, let us retrace our steps and begin to build on a new foundation.'

Moscow 22 October 1921. Walter Durranty, *Russia Reported* – a collection of reports for *The New York Times*, later published in 1934

This new policy eventually put an end to armed resistance in the countryside. Those groups, which had already rebelled, were put down ruthlessly by Marshal Tukhachevski. Farmers and workers returned to work and the immediate crisis was lifted. Better weather and grain donated by Americans also helped to ensure better harvests in 1922 and 1923. In 1922 the government introduced a new currency to replace the old, devalued rouble. At least people would now have some incentive to sell food and other goods again.

However, many members of the party were unhappy about this change of direction. Only Lenin's enormous personal authority and a tight control of the proceedings at the Congress ensured its acceptance. Despite the controversial nature of the changes, only four short speeches were allowed after Lenin had finished speaking.

The Decree on Party Unity, March 1921

Acceptance of the NEP was made easier by an earlier decision of the 10th Party Congress to ban the formation of any subgroups/factions within the Communist Party. The rising discontent amongst workers and peasants during the Civil War had caused the formation of two distinct pressure groups in the party. The most important was centred around Shliapnikov and Kollontai, both commissars in the government, and called itself 'The Workers' Opposition'. It called for more worker involvement in the running of their factories and a greater role for independent trade unions. Together with the 'Democratic Centralists' they called for a greater involvement in policy-making for ordinary party members.

Think about

- ▶ Why did Lenin regard this policy as a 'great defeat'?

Quotation

Marxism teaches that only the political party of the working class, i.e. the Communist Party, is capable of uniting, training and organising a vanguard of the proletariat... that will alone be capable of withstanding the inevitable traditions and relapses of narrow craft unionism.

Lenin, *Left-wing Communism*, 1920

Under the decree, opposition to decisions by organized party groups was now formally banned. Another decree finally made the Communists the only legal political party in the country.

Cross-reference

Chapter Seven introduces the debate between historians about Lenin's role in these events.

Activity

KEY SKILLS

Why did the Communists stay in control of Russia, 1917–22?

This is a very common focus for examination questions and you should be sure that you understand the different reasons.

In pairs collect together evidence on the following topics:

- The divided opposition to Communist rule after 1917
- The policies of Lenin's government
- The attitudes of different groups to the government's policies
- The flexibility of the Communist government
- The Communist Party – was it a united or divided party?
- The apparatus of repression
- The roles of Trotsky and Lenin

Prepare a presentation to your group on which of these factors or group of factors was most important and then debate your own conclusions with those of other groups.

Prepare your presentation group by carrying out further reading from sources in your library or the Internet. Incorporate a visual image in your report – it does not have to be a picture.

Conclusion

The Bolsheviks had won the Civil War, but it was largely a war of their own making. If they had not insisted on a one-party dictatorship, but instead taken other socialist groups into coalition in 1917 or 1918, there would have been no war on such a grand scale. In the end most Russians probably did not care about the war, despite the announcement of some radical social and economic policies by the Bolshevik government. They simply wanted to be left alone. A combination of ruthlessness, propaganda, geography and some support from the industrial proletariat and the soldiers in the Red Army enabled the Communists to win the Civil War. The Whites were outnumbered and divided. Despite Allied help, the longer the fighting went on the more hopeless their position became.

By the end of 1921 peace had been restored across the whole of the country. However victory had its price. The Communists found they had lost the support of the population, and the country was in ruins. A Communist vision of the future also seemed further away than ever with the introduction of the NEP. The party had accepted this reluctantly, and Lenin had tried to restrict party debate by the decree on party unity.

Nor was Russia firmly under Communist control. Very few peasants were Communists and in the backward regions poor transport and lack of telephones meant that the government in Moscow was very remote indeed. Robert Service in his *A History of Twentieth Century Russia* suggests that there was only one Communist group for every 1200 square kilometres of Russian countryside during the period of the NEP. This issue was to return to the centre of politics later.

Further reading

- G. Leggett, *The Cheka*, 1981
- S. Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 1987
- R. Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917–91*, 1991
- D. Volkogonov, *Lenin Life and legacy*, 1994
- C. Read, *From Tsar to Soviets*, 1996
- R. Service, *Lenin a biography*, 2000
- W. Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 1989
- C. Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, 1987