

G What was life like in Russia during the Civil War?

In the late twentieth century, civil wars in the Balkans and the Russian Federation showed how savage, brutal and chaotic such conflicts are. In the Russian Civil War, central authority disappeared and local areas were left to fend for themselves. The fighting fronts were rarely stable. Kiev in the Ukraine changed hands some sixteen times, so the inhabitants were not sure which army was approaching. It was also common for units of soldiers (the Cossacks in particular) to change sides, fighting at one time for the Whites and later for the Reds, depending on how they saw their interests and advantage. As Kolchak's army retreated, one whole regiment murdered its officers and went over to the Reds.

The Civil War in Russia was full of unspeakable atrocities committed by both sides out of fear and resentment. The Cossacks in the south raped and murdered whole villages of Jews in pogroms that may have taken 115,000 lives in the Ukraine alone. They claimed the Jews supported the Bolsheviks. In the Donbass region, the Whites routinely shot miners who did not produce enough coal. In one case in Rostov, they buried hundreds of Red miners alive. In Kharkov, the Reds nailed the epaulettes of officers to their shoulders while they were still alive.

The biggest killer of all was disease, especially typhus, which spread rapidly amongst the lice-ridden troops and the civilian population. Over one million people are thought to have died from typhus and typhoid in 1920. Estimates suggest that around 450,000 were killed by disease over the whole period while 350,000 were killed in the fighting.

One way to get an idea of what the Civil War was like is to look at novels written about this period by people who were personally involved. You can read extracts from Boris Pasternak's novel *Dr Zhivago* in Source 6.14. Pasternak had first-hand knowledge of the Civil War.

SOURCE 6.14 B. Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, paperback edn 1975, pp. 407, 416. Zhivago has been captured by partisans. At one point they are surrounded by White forces and come across a man who has crawled into their camp

His right arm and left leg had been chopped off. It was inconceivable how, with his remaining arm and leg, he had crawled into the camp. The chopped-off arm and leg were tied in terrible bleeding chunks on to his back, together with a small wooden board; on it, a long inscription stated, with many words of abuse, that the atrocity was in reprisal for similar atrocities committed by such and such a Red unit... It was added that the same treatment would be meted out to all the partisans unless, by a given date, they submitted and gave up their arms to the representatives of General Vitsyn's army corps.

[Zhivago escapes from the partisans and makes his way home.] For a long time, for almost half his journey on foot, he had followed the railway, all of it out of action, neglected and covered with snow. Train after train, abandoned by the Whites, stood idle, stopped by the defeat of Kolchak, by running out of fuel... they stretched... for miles on end. Some of them served as fortresses for armed bands of robbers or as hide-outs for escaping criminals or political refugees – the involuntary vagrants of those days – but most of them were common mortuaries, mass graves of the victims of the cold and the typhus raging all along the railway line and mowing down whole villages...

Half the villages were empty, the fields abandoned and unharvested as after an enemy invasion – such were the effects of the war: the Civil War... In the abandoned field the ripe grain spilled and trickled on the ground.

SOURCE 6.15 I. Babel, *Collected Stories*, trans. D. McDuff, 1994, p. 136. Isaac Babel was born in Odessa in 1894, the son of a Jewish tradesman. He joined the Bolsheviks in 1917. In 1920 he joined the Red Army and served with the famous cavalry commander Budyonny as a war correspondent for ROSTA, the Soviet news agency. In 1925 he wrote the book *Red Cavalry*, a collection of stories based on his Civil War experiences, from which this extract was originally taken

Budyonny was standing by a tree, in red trousers with a silver stripe. The brigade commander had just been killed. In his place the army commander had appointed Kolesnikov. An hour ago Kolesnikov had been colonel of a regiment. A week ago Kolesnikov had been the leader of a squadron.

The new brigade commander was summoned to Budyonny... 'The curs are giving us the squeeze,' the commander said with a dazzling grin. 'Either we win or we die. There is no other way. Got it?'

'Got it,' Kolesnikov replied, his eyes bulging.

'And if you run, I will shoot you,' the commander said, smiling, and turned to look at the section leader.

'Very well,' said the section leader... He touched his peaked cap with five youthful red fingers, began to sweat and walked off... He walked with lowered head, his long and crooked legs moving with agonising slowness. The blaze of the sunset washed over him, crimson and improbable as approaching death... His orderly led up a horse for him. He leapt into the saddle and galloped off...

I happened to catch sight of him again that evening (after the battle in which the enemy was annihilated)... riding out in front of his brigade... his right arm in a sling... The front squadron was lazily leading the others in the singing of obscene couplets. In Kolesnikov's manner of sitting in the saddle that evening I saw the lordly indifference of a Tartar khan.

TALKING POINT

How useful do you think novels like these are to historians?

H Why did Lenin adopt War Communism?

While Trotsky managed the Civil War, Lenin concentrated on building and consolidating the Bolshevik state. This is not to say that Lenin had no part in the Civil War. He and Trotsky took strategic decisions together and Trotsky needed Lenin's support on a number of occasions, for example, over the use of former tsarist officers in the army. But Lenin took charge of the day-to-day business of the Sovnarkom and the problems he faced were formidable. Chief amongst these was the rapid deterioration of the economy in the spring of 1918.

To ensure their survival in the first months after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks had handed over control of the land to the peasants and control of the factories to the workers' committees. The pressure from peasants and workers had been irresistible. But it was not long before the shortcomings of both policies became apparent.

Industry fell apart as workers' committees proved incapable of running the factories (although the economic collapse was underway well before the workers took over, so they cannot be blamed entirely). This was compounded by acute shortages of raw materials created by the Civil War. Industrial output, particularly consumer goods, shrank in the Bolshevik-held central area. The shortage of goods led to soaring price inflation and the value of the rouble collapsed. Peasants would not supply food to the cities if there were no goods for which food could be exchanged and paper money was worthless. Moreover, the rich wheat areas of the Ukraine were outside Bolshevik control. So the food shortages got worse and as early as February 1918 the bread ration in Petrograd had reached an all-time low of only 50 grams per person per day. There were

FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on:

- the problems facing the Bolshevik government on the domestic front
- the main features of War Communism as a solution to the Bolsheviks' problems and a means to develop socialism
- the use of terror and class warfare to defeat elements in society hostile to the government
- the arbitrary nature of the terror.

■ Learning trouble spot

A change of name

In June 1918, the Bolshevik Party changed its name to the Communist Party. However, you will find that in this and other books the term 'Bolshevik' continues to be used in relation to the period up until 1928, after which 'Communist' is generally used.

THE PROBLEM OF FOOD SUPPLY

Getting food into the cities had been a problem since 1915 and had contributed significantly to the February and October Revolutions. For some time the peasants had been unco-operative. During 1917 they had been interested only in getting the land and once they had it they wanted to be left alone to farm it. Their main wish was to run their lives without outside interference. They were not really concerned about the problems of the cities, which had little to offer them in return for their grain. Added to this, large peasant households had split themselves into several smaller households to increase their claim for land and consequently the land had been divided up into small parcels. This encouraged a return to subsistence farming rather than production for the market. Yet Lenin had promised to give the workers 'bread' and this was a promise he could not afford to renege on.

SUMMARY OF KEY FEATURES OF WAR COMMUNISM

- Grain requisitioning
- Private trade banned
- State control of industry
- Single managers to replace workers' committees
- Passports to prevent workers leaving the towns
- Rationing

food riots in many cities in early 1918. Workers started to flee from the cities, leaving factories short of workers. The situation was desperate. Lenin was faced with two main problems:

- keeping the workers in the cities to produce munitions, essential war supplies and other desperately needed goods
- feeding the workers.

SOURCE 6.16 B. Williams, *The Russian Revolution 1917–21*, 1987, pp. 62–63.

By the end of 1920 the proletariat, the class the revolution was all about, had shrunk to only half its pre-revolutionary size. Petrograd lost 60 per cent of its workforce by April 1918 and one million people had left the city by that June. In Russia as a whole the urban proletariat decreased from 3.6 million in January 1917 to 1.4 million two years later. Starving and unemployed workers left the towns to return to the villages, to join the Red Army, or to enter the ever-growing ranks of the bureaucracy. Hardest hit were the large state-owned metallurgical factories employing the very section of the working class which had provided the Bolsheviks with the core of their support in 1917. The Vyborg district of Petrograd saw its population fall from 69,000 to 5,000 by the summer of 1918.

It was not only economic problems that Lenin faced in the summer of 1918; he was also confronted by the full onslaught of the Civil War. From this point onwards, the Bolsheviks were fighting for their lives. As a result, the whole economy of the Red-held part of Russia was geared towards the needs of the army. The name given to the policies Lenin adopted from 1918 to 1921 is War Communism.

The main features of War Communism

Grain requisitioning

The Bolsheviks had been sending units of Red guards and soldiers out into the countryside to find grain for the hard-pressed cities. In May 1918 a Food-Supplies Dictatorship was set up to establish the forcible requisitioning of grain as the standard policy. Unsurprisingly, the peasants resisted bitterly.

Banning of private trade

All private trade and manufacture were banned. However, the state trading organisation was extremely chaotic and industry was simply not producing enough consumer goods. So an enormous black market developed, without which most people could not have survived.

Nationalisation of industry

All industry was brought under state control and administered by the Supreme Council of National Economy (Vesenkha). Workers' committees were replaced by single managers reporting to central authorities. These were often the old bourgeois managers now called 'specialists'. This was the only way to stop the chaos caused by the factory workers' committees who had voted themselves huge pay rises, intimidated management and stolen materials for illegal goods. Not all workers were against nationalisation: many, faced with the closure of their factory, urged that it be nationalised and kept open. They were desperate to keep their jobs.

Labour discipline

Discipline was brought back to the work place. There were fines for lateness and absenteeism. Internal passports were introduced to stop people fleeing to the countryside. Piece-work rates were brought back, along with bonuses and a work book that was needed to get rations.

Rationing

A class-based system of rationing was introduced. The labour force was given priority along with Red Army soldiers. Smaller rations were given to civil servants and professional people such as doctors. The smallest rations, barely enough to live on, were given to the *burzhui* or middle classes – or as they were now called, 'the former people'.

THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON LENIN AND THE BEGINNING OF THE LENIN CULT

After addressing a meeting of workers on 30 August, Lenin was shot in the neck and badly wounded. The culprit arrested on the spot was Fanya Kaplan, an ex-anarchist turned Socialist Revolutionary. She claimed that she was protesting about the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The Lenin cult began at this time. Eulogies appeared in the Bolshevik press giving him Christ-like qualities, unafraid to sacrifice his life for the revolution. Portraits and posters of him appeared in the streets (none had been produced up to this time) in a deliberate effort to promote his god-like leadership qualities. (See Chapter 8 for more about the Lenin cult.)

The Red Terror

Another crucial component of War Communism was the systematic use of terror to back up the new measures and deal with opposition. The Bolsheviks faced increased opposition inside the cities from:

- workers who were angry at their economic plight, low food rations and state violence. There were calls for new Soviet elections, a free press, the restoration of the Constituent Assembly and the overthrow of the Sovnatom (only six months after the revolution). Signs appeared on city walls saying: 'Down with Lenin and horsemeat! Give us the Tsar and pork!'
- anarchists who rejected the authoritarian control of the government
- left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries who were protesting about the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. They turned to terrorism, shooting the German ambassador in July 1918 to try to wreck the Russian relationship with the Germans. They captured Dzerzhinsky, the head of the Cheka, in May and managed to shoot Lenin in August 1918. Two other Bolshevik Party leaders were murdered. They put the regime under real pressure.

The assassination attempt on Lenin prompted the Cheka to launch the Red Terror in the summer of 1918, but this was simply an intensification of what was already happening. From June onwards, Socialist Revolutionaries had been arrested in large numbers, along with anarchists and members of other extreme left groups. Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were excluded from taking part in soviets. Many Kadets were already in prison, others had fled to the south.

The execution of the Tsar and his family

One of the most significant victims in this period was the Tsar. Nicholas, along with his family and servants, was shot on 17 July 1918 in Ekaterinburg in the Urals. Lenin and Sverdlov (Party Secretary 1918–19) claimed that it had been carried out by the local soviet against their wishes, but the weight of evidence now suggests that the order came from the centre. Lenin did not wish to antagonise the Germans at this point so he probably wanted to suggest that it was nothing to do with him. Alexandra, the Tsar's wife, was German and, of course, the Tsar was a blood relation to the other monarchs in Europe – for example, he was cousin to the German Kaiser. The stories about the possible survival of some of the Tsar's children may have been allowed to flourish for similar reasons: the Bolshevik leaders did not wish to accept responsibility in the international community for this horrific act. The truth must have been known to them: that the whole family had been shot and their bodies, having been drenched in acid, had been thrown into a disused mine shaft and later buried.

The Terror intensifies

When the Red Terror got underway, the change was one of scale and intensity. Execution, previously the exception, now became the rule. Prisoners in many cities were shot out of hand. Official records put the figure for deaths at the hands of the Cheka for the years 1918–20 at nearly 13,000, but estimates put the real figure at nearer 500,000. The Cheka fanned the flames of class warfare, as some Bolsheviks talked of wiping out the middle class completely. But the real purpose of the Terror was to terrify all hostile social groups. Its victims included large numbers of workers and peasants as well as princes and priests, prostitutes, judges, merchants, traders, even children (who made up five per cent of the population of Moscow prisons in 1920) – all guilty of 'bourgeois provocation' or counter-revolution. The problem was that no one was really sure who the counter-revolutionaries were.

THE CHEKA

The Cheka grew rapidly after occupying its new premises in the infamous Lubianka in Moscow at the end of March 1918. By June it had a thousand members and by September most provinces and districts had a Cheka branch. It worked outside of the law or justice system, reporting directly to Lenin and the politburo. As one of its founder members put it: 'The Cheka is not an investigating committee, a court or a tribunal. It is a fighting organ on the internal front of the Civil War ... It does not judge, it strikes.'



SOURCE 6.17 The Lubianka in Moscow, the headquarters of the Cheka. There was a prison inside the building

**Felix Dzerzhinsky**

The head of the Cheka was Felix Dzerzhinsky, a Pole from Lithuania. As a boy he had wanted to be a Jesuit priest and may have brought some of the Jesuit religious fanaticism into his political life. For he was a fanatic, and just the person Lenin needed to head up the Cheka. He was incorruptible and merciless. Having spent a great deal of his adult life in tsarist prisons, he knew a lot about how they worked and possessed the zeal to deal with the class that had put him there. He commented to the Sovnakom: 'Do not think I seek forms of revolutionary justice; we are not in need of justice. It is war now - face to face, a fight to the finish. Life or death!'

In the cities, Cheka arrests had a terrifyingly random character (see Source 6.18). People were arrested for being near scenes of 'bourgeois provocation' or because they were acquaintances of suspects. Many were denounced as counter-revolutionaries following arguments or as a result of vendettas. In the provinces it was possibly worse, since local Cheka bosses controlled their own patch and acted as petty tyrants with no court of appeal. Some were very dubious characters who used their position to pursue long-term vendettas against sections of the local community. There was little central control.

The Cheka was particularly active in the countryside, helping requisitioning brigades to collect grain from the peasants. Quotas were filled even if this left peasants starving. It was little better than theft and some of the brigades were little more than bandits, taking much more than food. The peasants resisted in a wave of uprisings and attacked the collectors. Bolshevik party officials were murdered. One Cheka man was found with his stomach slit open and stuffed with grain as a lesson to others. In another village, the twelve members of a brigade were decapitated and their heads were put on poles.

The Cheka and Red Army units gave no quarter. They were supported by Lenin: in a telegram to Bolshevik leaders in Penza he wrote, 'Hang no fewer than a hundred well-known kulaks [richer peasants], rich-bags and blood-suckers and make sure the hanging takes place in full view of the people.' He tried to encourage the poorer peasants to attack the kulaks but he failed to ignite class warfare in the villages. Thousands of peasants were arrested. In retaliation, the peasants hid their grain and stopped planting for the next season. Wheat harvests went into serious decline. It would not be unfair to say that the Bolsheviks were at war with the peasants.

To house all these dissident workers, troublesome peasants and bourgeois saboteurs, the Bolsheviks set up concentration and labour camps. The machinery of terror and the police state were created under Lenin, not Stalin. It is almost certain that hundreds of thousands perished, although no accurate figures are available from a time when there was so much dislocation and disorder, and proper records were not kept or were lost.

Learning trouble spot**Were the Bolsheviks in control?**

It may be assumed that because the Bolsheviks used terror ruthlessly they were firmly in control of the internal situation in the cities, especially Moscow and Petrograd. But this was far from the case. According to Robert Service, evidence from the Russian archives has confirmed that the situation between 1918 and 1920 was extremely chaotic and that Bolshevik control was limited. When Lenin was shot, his minders had to make sure that he had a Bolshevik doctor, fearing that any other doctor might be happy to see him perish. Bolshevik officials were in great danger of being shot by enemies. Lenin rarely ventured out on to the streets. A story is told that on one occasion his car was stopped, he was robbed by a gang (who did not recognise him) and marooned in a dangerous area of Moscow; when he went to a local party headquarters he was not allowed in because the doorman did not recognise him either. ('The consolidation of the Bolshevik State', R. Service, unpublished lecture, London, January 1999.)

SOURCE 6.18 O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, 1997, pp. 643-44

Peshkhonev, Kerensky's Minister of Food, who was imprisoned in the Lubianka jail, recalls a conversation with a fellow prisoner, a trade unionist from Vladimir, who could not work out why he had been arrested. All he had done was to come to Moscow and check into a hotel. 'What is your name?' another prisoner asked. 'Smirnov,' he replied, one of the most common Russian names.

'The name, then, was the cause of your arrest,' said a man coming towards us. 'Let me introduce myself. My name too is Smirnov, and I am from Kaluga. At the Tagana there were seven of us Smirnovs ... they somehow managed to find out that a certain Smirnov, a Bolshevik from Kazan, had disappeared with a large sum of money. Moscow was notified and orders were issued to the militia to arrest all Smirnovs arriving in Moscow and send them to the Cheka. They are trying to catch the Smirnov from Kazan.'

'But I have never been to Kazan,' protested the Vladimir Smirnov. 'Neither have I,' replied the one from Kaluga. 'I am not even a Bolshevik, nor do I intend to become one. But here I am.'

Was War Communism just a reaction to the Civil War and the economic crisis?

It is clear that the Bolsheviks adopted more centralised systems of control to run the economy in order to carry on the war. They had to make sure the army was supplied: they needed the factories to produce munitions and other goods and they needed food to feed the workers. But War Communism was not just a reaction to these pressures. For Lenin, it was an extension of class warfare and no different from the waging of the Civil War against external enemies. In fact, the Bolsheviks called it the 'internal front'. Lenin wanted to squeeze out the counter-revolutionary forces whether they came from the left or the right - 'those not being with us are against us'. It was a way of wiping out old bourgeois attitudes and any lingering bourgeois power. Terror was an essential component of this.

Lenin was supported by other Bolsheviks. They hated the market system and were not unhappy to see it collapse in 1918. They thought centralised control was the way to develop socialism. They had always wanted the nationalisation of industry and state control. Their attachment to War Communism is shown by their reluctance to abandon it when the Civil War ended. Trotsky wanted to see the 'militarisation of labour', in which the discipline and practices of the army would be taken into civilian life to build the new socialist state. At the end of the Civil War, he wanted units of soldiers to be drafted into the factories and fields to work under military discipline.

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Make brief notes describing conditions in Bolshevik cities during the Civil War.
- 2 How did different groups survive?

What was life like in Bolshevik cities under War Communism?

Life in Russia between 1918 and 1921 was a matter of survival. Less than a third of the urban diet came from state-provided rations; the rest came from the black market. 'Bag-men' travelled between villages and cities selling their produce. The urban workers eked out their rations by selling or exchanging handmade or stolen goods for food. Many travelled into the countryside with goods to barter for food. This became known as 'cigarette lighterism' since cigarette lighters featured in the products they made, along with shoe soles made from conveyor belts, penknives, nails and ploughs made from iron bars. This movement of people created chaos in factories in 1918 because at any one time a high percentage of workers might be absent. The railway system was choked with bag-men moving between cities.

The Bolsheviks did try to stamp out the free market under War Communism, but it was futile. The Cheka raided trains to stop bag-men travelling, and they raided markets where the goods were sold. But they could not be everywhere and it was always easy to bribe officials. Anyway, the Bolsheviks had little choice but to tolerate the black market or see the cities starve. Everybody hunted for food as prices rocketed. Horses disappeared from the streets only to reappear as 'Civil War sausage'. Wages in 1919 were reckoned to be at two per cent of their 1913 level and on average an urban worker spent three-quarters of his income on food. Fuel for heating was also critically short. In the freezing winter of 1919–20, some 3000 wooden houses in Petrograd were stripped to provide fuel. Trees disappeared. Sanitary conditions were appalling and water had to be collected from pumps in the streets.

The middle classes were in a worse position than the workers. They were the class enemy and were not allowed to work, although some were drafted back as managers in the nationalised industries or to work in the civil service. Most survived by selling clothes and jewellery, in fact anything they owned, for bread. One study in the 1920s found that 42 per cent of prostitutes in Moscow were from bourgeois families. Emma Goldman found young girls 'selling themselves for a loaf of bread or a piece of soap or chocolate' (*My Disillusionment in Russia*, 1923, page 11). Members of the nobility fared no better: Princess Golitsyn sold homemade pies, Countess Witte cakes and pies. For the 'former people' life was arduous, queuing up with the poor for food and fuel.

SOURCE 6.19 Middle-class women selling items on the street in order to survive



EMIGRATION

By the end of the Civil War, many of the 'former people' had fled abroad. Two to three million emigrated in the first years after the revolution. Groups of Russians arrived in countries throughout the world. Many *émigrés* settled in Germany, France and other Western European countries while sizeable communities developed in the USA and Australia. Berlin was the *émigré* capital at first. Then they moved on to Paris where Tsar Cyril I was acclaimed by *émigré* monarchists. Restaurants and hotels were staffed by the old *burzhui* and there were thousands of Russian taxi drivers in Paris in the 1930s.

Soviet Russia lost a great deal of mercantile and managerial talent, along with scholars, scientists and other skilled groups. Much of the top educational élite fled, many becoming prominent in Western universities and industry, such as Sikorsky who developed the helicopter for the USA.

SOURCE 6.20 E. Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, 1923, pp. 8–9. Goldman is writing about the Petrograd she found on returning there in January 1920. She had lived there as a teenager in the 1880s but had gone to live in the USA. She was an anarchist with sympathies towards the Communist revolution

It was almost in ruins, as if a hurricane had swept over it... The streets were dirty and deserted; all life had gone from them... The people walked about like living corpses; the shortage of food and fuel was slowly sapping the city; grim death was clutching at its heart. Emaciated and frost-bitten men, women and children were being whipped by a common lash, the search for a piece of bread or a stick of wood. It was a heart-rending sight by day, an oppressive weight by night. It fairly haunted me, this oppressive silence broken only by the occasional shots.

The workers at least benefited from the social revolution insofar as the palaces and town houses of the rich were taken over and the living space divided up amongst poor families. One owner of a palace ended up living in his former bathroom. The houses were run by building committees, often under the control of former domestic servants who relished the opportunity to turn the tables on their former masters. There was a popular mood to humiliate the old bourgeoisie. City soviets rounded up army officers, civil servants, aristocrats, stockbrokers and other formerly wealthy people and made them clear rubbish or snow from the streets, much to the amusement of workers and soldiers passing by.

The workers were not so happy about the corruption that surrounded the Bolshevik Party. Many areas were run by local mafias of Bolshevik officials who lived well whilst others starved. It came from the top. Five thousand Bolsheviks and their families lived in the Kremlin and best hotels in Moscow with access to saunas, a hospital and three vast restaurants with cooks trained in France. In Petrograd, Zinoviev, the party boss of the city, lived at the Astoria Hotel, coming and going with his Cheka bodyguards and a string of prostitutes. The hotel, where many Bolsheviks lived, retained its old waiters, now 'comrade waiters', who served champagne and caviar in room service. Bribery and corruption was rife throughout the party. Almost anything could be had from corrupt Bolshevik officials: foodstuffs, tobacco, alcohol, fuel. The wives and mistresses of party bosses went around 'with a jeweller's shop window hanging round their necks'.

SOURCE 6.22 L. de Robien, *The Diary of a Diplomat in Russia 1917–18*, 1969. De Robien was a French diplomat used to moving in court circles

Friday 8 February 1918

We are living in a madhouse, and in the last few days there have been an avalanche of decrees. First comes a decree cancelling all banking transactions, then comes another one confiscating houses. I have made no mention of taxes which continue to hit people from whom all source of income has been removed: 500 roubles for a servant, 500 roubles for a bathroom, 600 roubles for a dog and as much for a piano. All inhabitants under the age of 50 are forced to join the 'personal labour corps'. Princess Obolensky has been ordered to go and clear the snow off the Fontanka Quay. Others have to sweep the tramlines at night.

SOURCE 6.21 A. Ransome, *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*, 1919, p. 19. Arthur Ransome was a British journalist who later went on to write the famous children's book *Swallows and Amazons*

Rooms are distributed on much the same plan as clothes. Housing is considered a State monopoly, and a general census of housing accommodation has been taken. In every district there are housing committees to whom everybody wanting rooms applies. They work on the rough and ready theory that until every man has one room no one has a right to two... This plan has, of course, proved very hard on house-owners, and in some cases the new tenants have made a horrible mess of the houses, as might indeed have been expected, seeing that they had previously been of those who had suffered directly from the decivilizing influences of overcrowding.

TALKING POINT

Why do you think Lenin's use of class warfare played so well with the workers and soldiers in Russian cities? Do you think the attitudes displayed by the workers and others towards the old bourgeoisie were reasonable and understandable?

ACTIVITY

- 1 What aspects of the experience of War Communism are revealed in Sources 6.20–6.22?
- 2 How reliable do you think these sources are? Consider the writers and their backgrounds. Do their backgrounds make them less or more reliable?