

## Communist Government of the USSR, 1917-24



### Key Questions:

- How did the Bolshevik Party seize power in 1917?
- To what extent did the nature of leadership in Russia change after 1917?
- What was Marxism-Leninism and how was it implemented?

### Background to the Bolshevik Revolution:

- Before the revolutions of 1917 Russia was ruled by Russian emperors, including the Tsar Nicholas II, who ruled from 1894 to 1917. Nicholas was believed to be more repressive than other European rulers. For example, hundreds of miners who protested for higher wages in 1912 were brutally massacred.
- The Tsar's empire extended from Russia to Ukraine, Georgia, Finland and Estonia
- The Russian economy was weak relative to western countries like Britain, Germany and the USA. Tsar Nicholas II tried to stimulate economic growth and was only partially successful, the population remained extremely poor.
- Political repression and economic inequality led to the growth of the underground popularity for opposition to the Tsar.
- The two largest opposition parties were the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) and the Social revolutionaries (SR), both of which had the objective to overthrow the Tsar, liberating the people of the Russian Empire and ending poverty. However, both groups were unable to organize properly due to the Tsar's effective secret police; which arrested & exiled their leaders. The repressive Tsarist regime was rocked by the 1905 revolution, a series of revolts that almost led to the Tsar being overthrown.
- During WW1, Tsar Nicholas was an incompetent wartime leader. By early 1917, Russia descended into economic chaos and political mismanagement.

### Russian revolution of 1905,

The Russian revolution was a mass political and social unrest that spread through the Russian Empire. It included worker strikes, peasant unrest, and military conspiracies.

It resulted in:

Defeat of revolutionaries

Tsar Nicholas II remains on the throne

constitutional reform promised basic civil rights of freedom of expression, assembly and religion along with:

- The establishment of the State Duma

- The multi-party system
- The Russian Constitution of 1906

### February revolution 1917,

The February revolution mainly took place in and near Petrograd; (present-day St Petersburg) the old capital of Russia, where long-term dissatisfaction with the tsarist regime led to mass protests against food rationing on 23 February (Old Russian date)

The Revolution itself lasted about eight days, involving mass demonstrations and violent armed clashes with police. On 27 February (Old Russian date) Russian Army forces sided with the revolutionaries. Three days later Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, ending the Romanov dynasty and effectively the Russian Empire as a whole. A Russian Provisional Government under Prince Georgy Lvov replaced the previous Council of Ministers of Russia.

### October revolution 1917,

Lenin, a radical marxist member of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) argued for a second revolution to end the First World War, overthrow the provisional government and demand for the redistribution of land to the peasants. These demands are referred to by the slogan 'Peace, Land and Bread'. As the economy suffered and the war continues Lenin became popular. By October 1917, Lenin had enough support by the Bolshevik Party, including Trotsky, to organise a coup d'état. Which was influential in the larger Russian Revolution of 1917–23. It took place through an armed uprising in Petrograd on 25 October, 1917 (Old Russian date).

It resulted in:

- Success of the Bolsheviks
- Urban workers began to organize into councils named: 'soviets' wherein revolutionaries criticized the provisional government. After the newly governing body, 'Congress of Soviets' had its second session it elected members of the Bolsheviks and other left-wing groups such as the Left Socialist Revolutionaries to important positions within the new state of affairs. This immediately initiated the establishment of the Russian Soviet Republic.
- On 17 July 1918, the Tsar and his family were executed.

### Lenin's state, 1917-18

Lenin's new state changed over time. Initially, it was a radically democratic state. However, by mid 1918, the revolutionary state was much more authoritarian.

### Key terms:

#### **Proletariat:**

A term used by Karl Marx meaning the industrial workers, a new class that had emerged

How did Lenin justify his new state?

Lenin believed that the chaos produced by the First World War provided an opportunity to overthrow capitalism across Europe and ultimately globally. Lenin employed Marxist ideas that a revolutionary government would be more democratic than a capitalist government.

Lenin strongly believed that a highly centralized and disciplined party should seize power on behalf of the proletariat. Power would then be taken away from the bourgeoisie and placed in the hands of the Bolshevik party, who would act as a dictatorship of the proletariat to promote socialism by government control over the economy in the interest of the workers.

as a result of the industrial revolution.

**Bourgeoisie:**

Those who own the means of production i.e. the owners of factories and shops.

**Constituent Assembly:**

A parliament elected by the people. In Russia it was seen by many politicians as the first step in forming a democratically elected government. After the October revolution, Lenin agreed to hold elections for the assembly in November 1917.

**Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 1918**

This was a peace treaty signed on March 3rd 1918, between the new governing Bolshevik party of Soviet Russia and Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire, that ended Russia's involvement in the First World War at a great cost. The main reason Lenin signed the treaty was because the war required enormous resources and energy from the government, with little chance of military success. Lenin realised that if his new government was to consolidate its hold over Russia and deal with internal enemies, it needed to pull out of the war to concentrate on strengthening Bolshevik control. This was unpopular and led Bolsheviks losing in the soviet elections across Russia.

As a result of the treaty, Russia lost control over the Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, Finland, Ukraine and parts of the caucasus region. It was a national humiliation for the conservatives, especially for military officers that had served in the Tsar's army. The only way to restore Russia's pride, and the reputation of the Armed Forces, was to overthrow the Bolshevik regime and reject the treaty. Hence, was a major contributor to the Russian Civil War of 1918-21.

**The impact of the Civil War, 1918-21**

- The Russian Civil War (1918-21) allowed Lenin to establish communist control over the whole of Russia.
- The Civil War led to the creation of the 'party-state' and, as a result of the Civil War, the state became increasingly authoritarian and centralised
- The new democratic government had radical opponents:

- The SR's and Mensheviks wanted a more democratic type of socialist government
  - Anarchists wanted to abolish the government altogether
  - Britain, France, the US and Japan also sent troops to fight the new government; in fear of the growth of socialism
  - Nationalist Groups within the Russian Empire, such as Ukrainians, Poles and Finns
- The first signs of military conflict emerged in January 1918 as General Kornilov organised an anti-Bolshevik army in the Don region.
  - SR's and liberals set up a rival government in Omsk, Siberia

Despite this, the Bolsheviks won the Civil war. This victory was largely achieved due to the better organisation of the Reds, in military, economic and political terms.

Following the Civil War Lenin banned opposition political parties and created a one-party state. He also banned factions within the Communist party, further centralising the Party.

### Lenin's government structure

It started out very democratic but then branched into four general groups; **Russian workers, peasants and soldiers, Local soviets, All-Russian Congress of Soviets** and ultimately the **Sovnarkom**

#### **Soviets**

- Councils democratically elected from towns and villages
- responsible for decision making

#### **All Russian congress of Soviets**

- Representatives of local Soviets attended
- Too big to meet often, elect Sovnarkom delegates

#### **Sovnarkom**

- Lenin was the chairman
- They didn't have much power at first, and needed to fight a genuine civil war to gain control of the whole of Russia-Trotsky and Stalin were 'People's Commissariats'
- Known as 'Commissar' rather than minister to disassociate themselves from the Tsarism and the Provisional Govt.
- Lenin and the Bolsheviks claimed that the new government was truly democratic
- A fraction of the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) supported the new government, despite being rivals

-One of the main reasons for the broad-based support was the belief that it would transform into a coalition government

### **Politburo**

The politburo was formed later to make decision making faster, this removed the other parties from contributing. Which made Lenin's initial appeal incorrect, and abandoned the democratic state. However, his beliefs on Marxism did allow for dictatorship based on the manifesto. Lenin might have been justified because of his government was under threat.

### **The emergence of a 'party-state'**

- Civil war meant that the new government had to act quickly to achieve victory. Consequently, Lenin tended to rely on Politburo. He preferred working with the Politburo because it had 7 members, and had his most loyal supporters at the time, such as Stalin, Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev.
- This 'Party-state' abandoned Lenin's initial plans for a democratic state.

### **The Constituent Assembly**

In Jan 1918, Lenin was clearly turning against democracy. Lenin refused to recognise the results of the Russian election held in 1917. The elected would have resulted in a Constituent Assembly with a Bolshevik minority, which met for the first time in early 1918. However, Lenin closed the Constituent Assembly by force after only one day, claiming it posed a threat to the soviets.

Despite this, Lenin approved the treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This was unpopular and led Bolsheviks losing in the Soviet elections across Russia. Lenin refused to recognise the results of the election, claiming that it was unfair. Moreover, Mensheviks and SR's were expelled from the Soviet Union. Lenin demanded new elections; that were quickly discarded because of the Civil War.

Quotation from *Lenin*, by Service:

"The central committee, the politburo and the orgburo were empowered to take charge of the highest affairs of state. Despite being party bodies, they were really the supreme agencies of state and their decisions were mandatory for Sovnakom, the

#### **Key terms:**

##### **Coalition Government:**

A government structure where multiple political parties cooperate with no great majority.

##### **The Communist Manifesto:**

council of labour and defence and the people's commissariat”

An 1848 political document by German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels; explaining the theory of the communist movement and goals etc.

### Lenin's succession crisis, 1924

Lenin died in 1924. This was a major issue because he wanted his successor to have a shared vision of marxism-Leninism, in Lenin's testament he suggested that neither Trotsky or Stalin were competent enough to run the communist party. In the beginning of the Testament he advocated a collective leadership based on an alliance between Trotsky and Stalin. However, towards the end of the testament he instructed the Central Committee to sack Stalin.

#### Lenin's Testament:

- Accused Trotsky of arrogance and in coded language suggested he was too silly to use violence
- Accused Stalin of impatience and rudeness
- Reminded the Central Committee that Zinoviev and Kamenev had been disloyal to the Party immediately before the October Revolution
- Argued that Bukharin did not fully understand his vision of communism

### Contenders to power:

Zinoviev	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Zinoviev claimed to be a true Leninist because he was Lenin's closest friend.</li><li>-Zinoviev supported Lenin from the beginning of the Bolshevik movement in 1903.</li><li>-He also created an extremely effective political strategy which denied trotsky power with Stalin and Kamenev which laid the foundation for Stalin's emergence as leader</li></ul>
Bukharin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-In 1925, he formed an alliance with Stalin, known as the Duumvirate. The alliance gave Bukharin and Stalin a majority in the Politburo</li><li>-He claimed to be a true Leninist for a number of reasons:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- He joined the Bolshevik fraction in 1906 and supported Lenin consistently</li></ul></li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lenin and Bukharin were close</li> <li>- Lenin entrusted Bukharin with a series of important jobs</li> </ul> <p>However, Bukharin and Lenin had disagreed over a lot of issues, eg. over ending the First World War</p>
Trotsky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-He played a major role in the October Revolution and the Civil War</li> <li>-Trotsky, however, was very unpopular with the Communist party</li> <li>-Many communists argued that between 1903 and 1917 he had opposed Lenin</li> <li>-He joined the Bolsheviks in 1917 as they were gaining power, people believed he just wanted power and didn't believe in Leninism</li> <li>-Trotsky and Lenin disagreed a lot eg. over the timing of the October Revolution</li> <li>-Trotsky remained in his position until 1927, however, he didn't have much control within the party</li> </ul>
Stalin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-He was continuously a part of the Politburo majority from 1923-28</li> <li>-Stalin claimed to be a true Leninist for a number of reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- He joined the Bolsheviks at the very beginning in 1903, and was very loyal to Lenin</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>However, Stalin started to become disloyal secretly when Lenin fell sick</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lenin held Stalin in high regard, referring to him as "that wonderful Georgian".</li> <li>- Lenin trusted Stalin with important administrative tasks.</li> </ul>