

Communism in Russia

The new rulers of Russia, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and then Joseph Stalin, transformed the former tsarist empire into the world's first socialist society, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1922).

Lenin

In 1917, Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks had taken power in the name of the Russian working class, but socialist victory did not bring peace and stability to the lands of the former Russian empire. After seizing power, Lenin and his supporters had to defend the world's first "dictatorship of the proletariat" against numerous enemies, including dissident socialists, anti-Bolshevik officers and troops, peasants, and foreign military forces.

Opposition to the Bolshevik Party- by now calling itself the Russian Communist party-erupted into a civil war that lasted from 1918 to 1920. Operating out of its new capital in Moscow, Lenin's government began a policy of crushing all opposition. The communists began the Red Terror campaign in which suspected anticommunists known as Whites were arrested, tried and executed. The secret police killed some 200,000 opponents of the regime. In July 1918 the Bolsheviks executed Tsar Nicholas II, Empress Alexandra, their five children, and the remaining servants because they feared that the Romanov family would fall into the hands of the Whites, thereby strengthening counterrevolutionary forces. White terror was often equally as brutal as Red terror. The peasantry, although hostile to the communists, largely supported the Bolsheviks, fearing that a victory by the Whites would result in the return of the monarchy. However, foreign military intervention supported White resistance to the communist takeover. Russia's withdrawal from the Great War and anticommunist sentiment inflamed Russia's former allies (Britain, France, Japan and the United States) who sent troops and supplies to aid White forces. Although their numbers were negligible, the foreigners' presence sometimes had the effect of bonding otherwise hostile groups to the Reds. Poorly organized and without widespread support, the Whites were defeated by the Red Army in 1920. Estimates place the number of lives lost in the civil war at ten million, with many more persons dying from disease and starvation than from the fighting. The political system that emerged from the civil war bore the imprint of political oppression, which played a significant role in the later development of the Soviet state.

1. *How did Lenin gain and maintain control of Russia?*
2. *Who were his opponents?*

The new rulers of Russia had no plans to transform the economy, but in the course of the civil war they embarked on a hasty and unplanned course of nationalization, a policy known as war communism. After officially annulling private property, the Bolshevik government assumed control or ownership of banks, industry, and other privately held commercial properties. Landed estates and the holdings of monasteries and churches became national property, although the Bolsheviks explicitly exempted the holdings of poor peasants from confiscation. The abolition of private trade was

unpopular, and when the party seized crops from peasants to feed people in the cities, the peasants drastically reduced their production. By 1920 industrial production had fallen to about one-tenth of its prewar level and agricultural output to about half its prewar level.

3. *Describe War Communism.*

4. *Why do you think War Communism was unpopular?*

In 1921, as the Reds consolidated their military victories, Lenin faced the daunting prospect of rebuilding a society that had been at war since 1914. The workers, in whose name he had taken power, were on strike. Other problems included depopulated cities, destroyed factories, and an army that demobilized soldiers faster than the workforce could absorb them. Lenin and the party tried to take strict control of the country by crushing workers' strikes, peasant rebellions and a sailors' revolt. Yet Lenin recognized the need to make peace with those whose skills would rekindle industrial production. Faced with economic paralysis in the spring of 1921 he decided on a radical reversal of war communism.

Demonstrating his willingness to compromise, Lenin implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP), which temporarily restored the market economy and some private enterprise in Russia. Large industries, banks, and transportation and communications facilities remained under state control, but the government returned small-scale industries to private ownership. The government also allowed peasants to sell their surpluses at free market prices. Other features of the NEP included a vigorous program of electrification and the establishment of technical schools to train technicians and engineers. Lenin did not live to see the success of the NEP. After suffering three paralytic strokes, he died in 1924. His death was followed by a bitter struggle for power among the Bolshevik leaders.

5. *Why did Lenin reverse War Communism?*

6. *Describe the New Economic Policy (NEP).*

7. *Why was the NEP viewed more positively than War Communism?*

8. *Which system would you prefer and why?*

Stalin

Many old Bolsheviks continued to argue for a permanent or continuous revolution, asserting that socialism in Russia would fail if socialism did not move from a national to an international stage. Others in the Politburo, the central governing body of the Communist party, favored establishing socialism in one country alone, thus repudiating the role of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as torchbearer of worldwide socialist revolution. Joseph Stalin, who served in the unglamorous bureaucratic position of general secretary, promoted the idea of socialism in one country. A Georgian by birth, an Orthodox seminarian by training, and a Russian nationalist by conviction, Stalin indicated his unified resolve to gain power in his surname, which

meant “man of steel.” By 1928, Stalin lived up to his name and completely triumphed over his rivals in the party, clearing the way for an unchallenged dictatorship of the Soviet Union.

Stalin decided to replace Lenin’s NEP with an ambitious plan for rapid economic development known as the First Five-Year Plan. The basic aims of this and subsequent Five-Years plans, first implemented in 1929, were to transform the Soviet Union from a predominantly agricultural country to a leading industrial power. The First Five-Year Plan set targets from increased productivity in all spheres of the economy but emphasized heavy industry- especially steel and machinery- at the expense of consumer goods. Stalin repeatedly stressed the urgency of this monumental endeavor, telling his people, “We are 50 to 100 years behind the advanced countries. Either we do it, or we shall go under.”

9. What was the goal of the First Five-Year Plan?

10. How did Stalin influence the nation to follow his plan?

Integral to the drive for industrialization was collectivization of agriculture. The Soviet state expropriated privately owned land to create collective or cooperative farm units whose profits were shared by all farmers. The logic of communist ideology demanded the abolition of private property and market choices, but more practical considerations also played a role. Stalin and his regime viewed collectivization as a means of increasing the efficiency of agricultural production and ensuring that industrial workers would be fed. Collectivization was enforced most ruthlessly against Kulaks (wealthy peasants during the NEP but were only 3 to 5 % of the peasants.)

In some places, outraged peasants reacted to the government’s program by slaughtering their livestock and burning their crops. Millions of farmers left the land and migrated to cities in search of work, thereby further taxing the limited supplies of housing, on the land they once owned. When Stalin called a halt to collectivization in 1931, half the farms had been collectivized. Estimates of the cost in number of peasants lives lost have fluctuated in wildly, but even the most cautious place it at three million.

11. How did Stalin gain and maintain control of Russia?

12. How did the people respond to Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan?

13. Why do you think they reacted this way?

The First Five-Year Plan set unrealistically high production targets. Even so, the Soviet leadership proclaimed success after only four years. The Soviet Union industrialized under Stalin even though the emphasis on building heavy industry first and consumer industries later meant that citizens postponed the gratifications of industrialization. Before refrigerators, radios, or automobiles became available, the government constructed steelworks and hydroelectric plants. The scarcity or nonexistence of consumer goods was to some degree balanced by full employment, low cost utilities and when available- cheap housing and food. Set against the collapse of the U.S. stock market and the depression ridden capitalist world, the ability of a centrally planned

economy to create more jobs than workers could fill made it appear a viable and attractive alternative.

14. Why did Stalin state that the First Five-Year Plan was successful, when the people still lacked new innovative items?

Nevertheless, the results of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan generated controversy as the Communist Party prepared for its seventeenth congress in 1934, the self-proclaimed "Congress of Victors." The disaster of collectivization and the ruthlessness which it was carried out had raised doubts about Stalin's administration. The Congress of Victors became the "Congress of Victims" as Stalin incited a civil war within the party that was climaxed by highly publicized trials of former Bolshevik elites for treason and by a purge of two-thirds of the delegates. Between 1935 and 1938 Stalin removed from posts of authority all persons suspected of opposition, including two-thirds of the members of the 1934 Central Committee and more than half the army's high ranking officers. The victims faced executions or long term suffering in labor camps. In 1939, eight million Soviet citizens were in labor camps, and three millions were dead as a result of the "cleansing," as Stalin's supporters termed this process.

15. Why do you think Stalin used purges and labor camps to eliminate opponents?

16. Why impact did this use of power have on his leadership?

The outside world watched the events unfolding within the Soviet Union with a mixture of contempt, fear, and admiration. Most observers recognized that the political and social upheavals that transformed the former Russian empire were of worldwide importance. The establishment of the world's first dictatorship of the proletariat challenged the values and institutions of liberal society everywhere and seemed to demonstrate the viability of communism as a social and political system.

17. How did Lenin and Stalin use their leadership to form a new style of government?

18. Who do you think was most effective in maintaining control over the people and why?

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