

The History Guide

Lectures on Twentieth Century Europe

Lecture 7

The Aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution

The initial triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution at the end of October, 1917 (see [Lecture 6](#)), did not mean that the entire population of Russia had been converted to Bolshevism. [Lenin](#) was aware of this. To gather national support, Lenin resorted to slogans for the masses. The most important of them was "Bread, Land, Peace and All Power to the Soviets." Was this enough? The Russian people were more anti-Bolshevik than Lenin would have liked. The tsar was gone and a revolution had taken the nation by storm. Were the Bolsheviks now in control?

There are parallels between 1917 and the French Revolution. Those who guide the revolution feel responsible for the success of the revolution. They know that their failure is also the failure of the revolution as a whole. The revolutionaries are the prophets and martyrs of social and political change. They bear the responsibility. They must keep the revolution moving ahead while at the same time taking every precaution to keep themselves in power against all opposition. In 1793, the French revolutionaries resorted to a Reign of Terror. Would the Bolsheviks of 1917 act any differently?

October symbolized a Bolshevik triumph. But what this also meant was that any hope for a liberal democratic order was now impossible. Late in November of 1917, an agreement ([THE DECREE ON PEACE](#)) was reached with the left wing SRs and peace negotiations were conducted with the Germans. Keep in mind, all the events surrounding 1917 must be seen within the context of the Great War. As far as the Bolsheviks were concerned, the revolution was over. As far as Lenin was concerned, he was in power. The Russian state, however, was in a state of decomposition. Numerous Bolsheviks began to speak of elections for a Constituent Assembly. Lenin had no use for a parliament, regardless of whether it was elected democratically or not. He considered it "inferior" to the Soviets of which the Petrograd Soviet under the leadership of [Leon Trotsky](#) was the model. But now, immediately after the October Revolution, Lenin was compelled to hold elections. On November 25, 1917, the Russian people held the first free election in the nation's 900 year history. When the vote was over, the Bolsheviks had only received one quarter of the vote...the other socialist parties, mainly the SRs, polled 62% of the vote. Bolshevik support was heaviest in the cities, especially Moscow and Petrograd, while the SR vote was largely rural.

Lenin accepted these figures as accurate. But, he also maintained that "the most advanced" elements had voted for him and the Bolsheviks. Draw your own conclusions. The Constituent Assembly met only once, in January 1918. Lenin dissolved it by issuing his [DRAFT DECREE](#) and sent heavily armed guards to prevent its meeting again. Those who were not Bolsheviks were indignant when they witnessed this unconstitutional act. Just the same, there was no public outburst. Why the delegates did no more than weakly protest is clear: the Bolsheviks had already taken action on what interested the people most -- Bread, Land and Peace. Were the Russian people ready for democracy? Regardless of how we can answer this question one thing is clear -- Lenin made it impossible for the Assembly to meet.

The period of Soviet history which runs from November 1917 to the end of 1920, is called the period of [war communism](#). The term implies that the main features of the period were determined by military events. Proof is abundant. For one thing, Russia entered a period of [Civil War](#) and foreign powers were on Russian soil. But the period of war communism also refers to the fact that the Bolsheviks were engaged in a militant drive to Bolshevize the population. So, on March 8, 1918, the Congress resolved that the "Party (the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party of Bolsheviks) be named henceforth the *Russian Communist Party*, with the word 'Bolsheviks' added in brackets." The capital was moved from Petrograd to Moscow in the heart of European Russia. All of this was necessary in order to keep the revolution going and to secure its aims and goals.

The Bolsheviks were convinced that a world revolution was about to begin, first in Germany and then England and ultimately the United States. Such a vision -- "Incipit vita nova" -- led the Bolsheviks to speed up the construction of a socialist state in Russia. It also led them to take a more casual attitude toward international affairs -- after all, they expected the reign of capitalism to end shortly. [It's worth noting here an important concept in 19th century European history. [Marx](#) had said that capitalism would dig its own grave because the conflict inherent in industrial capitalism was about to be reconciled. However, we don't really need Marx to explain to us the concept that capitalism could be replaced. In the 19th century there were very few people who saw industrialization as something more than a passing phase, as something which would quickly pass from the historical stage. In fact, this whole attitude is tied together with 19th century social criticism and would have been apparent whether Marx had lived or not. The key here is an awareness of "change," not just change, but "speedy change." Therefore, it was entirely plausible that industrial capitalism could disappear as quickly as it had appeared.]

By 1920 the state had taken over all enterprises employing more than ten workers. Labor was compulsory and strikes were outlawed. The state organized a barter system which replaced the free market. Internal trade was made illegal -- only the government food commissary could buy and sell. Money disappeared as the state took over distribution and production. Church and state were separated by decree and judges were removed and replaced by members of the local soviets. Nine opposition parties were liquidated.

Meanwhile, the government subjected the countryside to severe requisitioning. It mobilized the poorer peasants against the kulaks (wealthy peasants). Bitter class hatred resulted in the villages and stimulated a civil war in the countryside. Lenin knew he had to act. He knew the Bolsheviks had to keep the revolution secure. He could not afford to involve the nation in a civil war. So, in December 1917 a decree was passed which set up the "All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Fighting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage," better known by its acronym as the [CHEKA](#). The CHEKA established its headquarters in Lubyanka Street, Moscow. The Lubyanka would be the end of the road for thousands of victims. It was not simply a prison but rather a complex system of offices and departments responsible for administering the vast bureaucratic empire known as "state security." The CHEKA was ordered to act as the "revolutionary conscience," that is, it had to protect the revolution. By mid-1918, the CHEKA aimed its attention to whole sectors of society rather than individuals. In this way, Lenin hoped, counter-revolutionaries would be eliminated. Hated and feared by almost everyone, the CHEKA was deplorable because it introduced the concept of killing people not because of what they had done, but because of who they were or who they knew. Although the numbers killed by the CHEKA were relatively small compared to WWI or the Civil War, it is still difficult to accept the fact that hundreds of families simply disappeared.

The government had to function. The Bolsheviks knew this. They also knew, that without direct experience, their task was indeed difficult. What made matters worse was the war. Lenin knew that peace was necessary in order for the Bolsheviks to govern. The Russians began to negotiate with the Germans and Austro-Hungarians, negotiations which dragged on until 1918. Russia hoped a revolution would break out in Germany. And on March 3, 1918, the Russians signed the [TREATY OF BREST-LITOVSK](#). This treaty deprived Russia of the entire Ukraine, the Baltic provinces,

Finland and other territory that Russia had spent 300 years trying to acquire. One third of Russia's population was gone, 80% of its iron, and 90% of its coal. Many communists resigned in protest -- they could not accept peace with Germany. Furthermore, during the months which followed Brest-Litovsk, disorder in the countryside and class warfare was made worse by open Civil War.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was judged a betrayal by the Allies and there was a sizable outcry within Russia itself. There were hundreds of army officers who had sacrificed a great deal for the tsar's war, and now it seemed the Bolsheviks had just given away everything they had fought for. To these men the Bolsheviks were German agents. Combining forces with the Cossacks, who feared the loss of their land and privileges, army officers formed the White Army to engage in a war against Trotsky's Red Army. Lacking sufficient organization, unable to coordinate their movements and torn apart by different political goals, the White Armies ultimately failed to challenge the Bolshevik government. Just the same, in the three years of civil war, the Whites posed a serious threat to Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

Anti-Bolshevik forces were assisted with materials by the Allies who sent more than 100,000 troops as well as supplies for the express purpose of overthrowing the Bolshevik government by supporting its enemies....in this case, the White Army. Support came primarily from the United States, Britain, France and Japan and continued beyond the signing of the armistice in November 1918. Although [Allied support](#) was not crucial to the outcome of the Civil War, it played a significant role in shaping the Soviet perception of the world outside Russia. It's safe to assume that for the past 75 years generations of Soviet citizens have viewed allied support of anti-Bolshevik forces in 1918 as an example of the hostile and predatory state of mind consistent with western capitalism. At the very least, thanks to allied intervention during the final year of the Great War, the Bolsheviks came to expect a future encirclement of capitalist forces.

The [Civil War](#) had another legacy for the future of the Soviet State. To deal with the anarchy caused by the civil war itself, Lenin had to resort to a strengthening of the Bolshevik's dictatorial powers. All of this, of course, to the detriment of democratic elements. The new Soviet state, barely one year old, had to use the state police to suppress all opposition. As one historian has remarked, "the dictatorship of the proletariat gave way to the dictatorship of repression."

Thanks to the leadership of Trotsky, the Red Armies were victorious over the Whites. How is it that a smaller armed force like the Reds could defeat the numerically larger White Army? Well, the White Army could never gain the support of the peasantry. They could have done this by reallocating the land, something which the Bolsheviks had always talked about -- remember the slogan, "Bread, Land and Peace." Instead, the Whites restored the property of landlords in areas they temporarily controlled. The peasantry, meanwhile, had enough of the Reds AND the Whites. Furthermore, the White Army lacked a skilled and highly organized command. Finally, the intervention of allied troops was ineffectual and actually amateurish. Frankly, when the allies threw their support behind the Whites, more harm was done than good. The Red Army could speak of themselves as the protectors of the nation while portraying the Whites as the dupes of foreign governments. This charge had already been leveled against the Bolsheviks after Brest-Litovsk.

The struggle for power in Russia did not end with the civil war. [Famine](#) was raging. Sanitation was non-existent. And class hatreds were exploited on an unparalleled scale. Industrial production stood at one eighth of its pre-1914 level. Agricultural output fell by 30% and the distribution of essential commodities had broken down across the nation. The new regime, the Bolshevik regime, was losing support. People tire of revolutions. They figure, "look, we've done our work. We aided you as much as possible. We built barricades for the revolution. We threw bricks. We suffered the lash of the Cossack whip. We fought the White Army and we have had to do without bread. The revolution is over. Let us return to our lives."

The early 1920s witnessed the growth [authoritarian regimes](#) across Europe. Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece had all installed military dictatorships by 1925. The tendency toward authoritarian regimes was the result of the near total collapse of the European spirit following World War One. No one had expected this war to continue as long as it did. By 1915, there were few soldiers on either side who had a clear idea as to why they were fighting. They did know, however, that the "little fat men" -- the bureaucrats and generals in London, Berlin and Paris -- had run the war with an eye to profit. By war's end, and after 9 million men died, the viability of liberal democracy was weakened. What had capitalism done? It had brought Europe to war. What had liberal democracy done? It had brought Europe to war? And what did all that technology do? It made the killing of men easy. The only true victor in World War One was the war itself....and it would keep on winning.

Authoritarian regimes are nothing new. They have been in place for centuries and it wasn't until the Age of Reason, say from 1650 to 1800, that Europe began to learn to do without monarchs. It is for this reason that limited monarchies, based on the English example, became more prominent in the 19th century. In the 20th century, the word authoritarian is often replaced by the word totalitarian. Furthermore, when we speak of totalitarian we might also use the word fascist. There are subtle differences between the three expressions. Although authoritarianism has a long history, I would suggest that totalitarian and fascist are two words of recent origin. Following WWI, Mussolini created a political party in Italy called the Fascists. Il Duce's rule was absolute and he attempted to impose his will upon the entire nation. His authority was, however, of the political right, hence fascists are often called reactionary or ultra-conservatives or in modern jargon, to the right of right. A Fascist, furthermore, is not a socialist, communist or democrat. The only parallel to modern fascism is Rome under the Empire -- after all, the word fascist comes from the Latin *fasces* which was an ancient Roman weapon.

This much said, what about totalitarianism? This is clearly a 20th century phenomena. A totalitarian regime is one in which the state has absolute power over its people. It does not mean one man rules all. It does mean, however, the absolute and total rule by one group of men or party. Total control in this case is based upon propaganda, the creation of myth and the [CULT OF PERSONALITY](#). What made total control possible was technology, specifically communications and transportation. You cannot maintain total control unless that control reaches out to every individual, whether subject or citizen. Furthermore, whereas fascism sits to the right of right and is therefore considered reactionary, totalitarianism sits to the left of left. In the case of Soviet Russia, this meant communism.

From 1914 Russia had been in turmoil. War, revolutions, famine, civil wars. Industry and agriculture was crippled, the distribution of essentials was near breakdown and the communist regime under the Bolsheviks was actually quite close to losing public support. When a large-scale anarchist revolt broke out early in 1921 and could not be suppressed until mid-1922, Lenin himself became frightened about the future of his communist experiment. The mutiny of the sailors at [Kronstadt](#) near Petrograd in March 1921 triggered a change in general policy. The sailors called for "soviets without communists." These soviets were to be chosen by universal suffrage and secret ballot. They also agitated for free speech and assembly, the liberation of political prisoners and for the abolition of grain requisitioning. Trotsky finally realized something. The Russian proletariat was opposed to the dictatorship of the proletariat. For Trotsky, all that was needed was to educate the proletariat. Trotsky and others also realized that a European revolution was not going to take place. Governments across Europe were already persecuting Bolshevik sympathizers. The bottom line is this: Russia would have to go the socialist revolution alone. Russia would be an island of revolutionary socialism surrounded by the waters of industrial capitalism.

It was Kronstadt that led directly to the adoption of the NEP or New Economic Policy. Kronstadt was the catalyst. However, Lenin also recognized the need for reconstruction. It was also necessary, thought Lenin, to appease the peasants and to avert the possibility of another Kronstadt.

And, since the world revolution never did take place, it was the resources from the capitalist west that were badly needed to assist Russian reconstruction. So, the adoption of NEP coincided with an Anglo-Russian trade treaty. Outside of Russia, NEP was seen as the beginning of the Russian "Thermidor." Thermidor specifies that period of French history following the Reign of Terror and the death of Robespierre. In other words, Thermidor is a word used to describe a "return to normalcy" which follows the more destructive or violent stage of a revolution. In French history this stage is often referred to as the "Thermidorian reaction."

Under NEP, the government stopped its policy of requisitioning the peasants' entire crop and instead began to take only what was needed to meet the minimum requirements of the army and urban workers. The peasants were still forced to pay a heavy tax in kind but they were now allowed to sell the remainder of their crop. They could sell either privately or to the state. In a word, peasant agriculture became capitalist and the profit motive reappeared. With NEP, the earlier policy of war communism was abandoned. In the end, NEP helped the rich peasant at the expense of the poorer peasant, who now became a hired, landless laborer.

In an odd twist, Lenin himself described NEP as a partial return to capitalism and urged the communists to become good at business. Lenin even secured the services of American efficiency experts in order to speed up the development of Russian capitalism. He also admitted that it would probably take two or three decades for the peasant to be convinced that cooperative agriculture would be more efficient.

Over the course of five years, NEP allowed industrial and agricultural output to rise to its pre-war levels. In this sense, NEP did achieve economic recovery. But, NEP was also bitterly disliked by leading communists who saw it as a reversal of everything they believed. By 1924, private business accounted for 40% of Russian domestic trade. Those who took advantage of NEP were called NEPmen and were often persecuted by hostile officials who tried to limit their profits, tax them heavily and drag them into court. The kulak in the late 1920s and into the 30s had essentially the same experience.

To further complicate matters, there was a factional dispute within the Communist Party. One group favored the increase of private enterprise and supported NEP as the new road toward socialism. These were the right-deviationists. The left-deviationists favored the liquidation of NEPmen and the kulaks and a return to Marxism at home and the fostering of world revolution. Trotsky was a left-deviationist. In the center stood those who attacked both the right and the left.

NEP was not the only question to agitate communist leaders in the early twenties. Lenin died in January 1924. Because of a series of strokes, for the last two years of his life he played an ever-smaller role in the direction the government had taken or would take. Who would be Lenin's successor? How would industry be organized? what direction would Russian foreign policy take? The answers to these questions were to be solved by the then Secretary of the Communist Party, Joseph Stalin (see [Lecture 10](#)).

The years between 1922 and 1928 witnessed a desperate struggle for power between Trotsky and Stalin. Lenin knew this was going to happen -- there was really nothing to prevent it. Lenin found Trotsky able but overconfident. Lenin knew that Stalin had concentrated a great deal of power in his own hands -- he was afraid Stalin didn't know how to use it. Fortunately, Lenin has left us a [TESTAMENT](#) of his anguished thoughts in 1922.

In the struggle of the mid-1920s, Trotsky argued for a more highly trained managerial force in industry and for economic planning as an instrument that the state could use to control social change. Agriculture should be completely mechanized and peasant individualism should be weakened. Trotsky also maintained that only a world revolution would permit Russia to carry socialism to its proper conclusion. Socialism, in other words, could not succeed in one country. There must be either a world socialist revolution or Russian socialism was doomed to failure.

The opponents of Trotsky's left deviation found their voice in [Nikolai Bukharin](#) (1888-1938), the editor of *Pravda*. A defender of NEP, Bukharin managed to soften the rigorous Marxist doctrine of the class struggle. He believed socialism was sure of success. Bukharin did not believe in rapid industrialization -- his vision of socialism would be attained gradually over time. He favored cooperatives among peasants but opposed collectivization in which the peasants owned everything "collectively." In foreign affairs, Bukharin was eager to cooperate with noncommunist groups who might be useful to Russia.

In his rise to power, Stalin used Bukharin's ideas to discredit Trotsky, then, partly because Bukharin's policies were failing, he adopted many of Trotsky's policies and eliminated Bukharin. Stalin was not a theoretician. His Marxism took the form of a catechism. He could mimic the Marxist canon but could not elaborate upon the theoretical underpinnings of his statements. Stalin was a party worker and it was in the party apparatus that he felt most comfortable. He came to favor rapid industrialization. At the end of 1927 he ordered the collectivization of agriculture because its output was small when compared to the industrial sector. Agriculture, like industry, he said, must be transformed into a large-scale unified state enterprise.

In opposition to Trotsky, Stalin maintained that socialism was possible within one country. An independent socialist state could indeed exist. This did not mean that Stalin abandoned the idea of a world revolution. What it did mean is that until the world revolution did take place, Russia would have to serve as the world's shining example of socialism. In international affairs, this doctrine allowed the Soviet Union to pursue a policy of "peaceful coexistence" with capitalist states when necessary. Of course, this also meant that the Soviet Union would support socialist revolutions whenever possible. Stalin's idea of "socialism in one country" gave inner strength to those communists who had doubts about the prospects of a world revolution. And while Trotsky continued to argue a western Marxist version of the future revolution, Stalin convinced everyone that the revolution in socialism that he himself had helped to create was a Russian idea, thereby bolstering his overtly nationalist posture.

By the end of the Civil War, Stalin was Commissar of Nationalities. In this post he dealt with the affairs of 65 million (out of 140) inhabitants of the new Russian Soviet Republic. In 1922, Stalin proposed the new Union of Socialist Soviet Republics as a substitute for the existing federation of republics. In the USSR, Moscow would control war, foreign policy and trade and would coordinate finance, the economy, food and labor.

Stalin was also Commissar of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate. His duties here included the elimination of inefficiency and corruption from every branch of the civil service and to train a loyal cadre of civil servants. Although the Inspectorate never did what it was supposed to do, it did give Stalin control over thousands of bureaucrats and thus, over the entire machinery of government. Lenin attacked Stalin's work in the Inspectorate in late 1923, but by then it was too late. Stalin had managed to secure an ever-widening circle of loyal officials while he himself controlled the affairs of state.

Stalin was also a member of the Politburo, the five man group of party bosses elected by the Central Committee. Here his job was the day-to-day management of the party. He was the permanent liaison officer between the Politburo and the Orgburo, which assigned party personnel to their duties in factory, office or army units. Besides these important posts, Stalin also became General Secretary of the party's Central Committee in 1922. He prepared agenda for the Politburo and passed decisions down to lower levels. He controlled, in essence, all party appointments, promotions and demotions. He made sure that local trade unions, cooperatives and army units were led by loyal communists, responsible in all cases to Stalin himself. He also kept detailed files on all managers of industry and all party members. I hope that by now you have a better idea of how it was that this simple Georgian could have captured so much power for himself in the two years before Lenin's death. I would also suggest, without reservation, that Stalin knew EXACTLY what he was doing.

In a centralized one-party state like the Soviet Union, a man of Stalin's ambitions who held so many key positions had an enormous advantage in the struggle for power. Just the same, the Soviet state was new. It also suffered a great deal because its great prophet, Lenin, had been incapacitated for the remaining two years of his life. Furthermore, although Stalin held numerous key positions, none of his positions were as important as the Ministry of War, and of course, that post was Trotsky's. The point here is that the likelihood of Stalin assuming power was not generally recognized -- until it was too late. Inside the Politburo, Stalin formed a three man team with [Zinoviev](#) and Kamenev. Zinoviev was chairman of the Petrograd Soviet and head man of the Communist International (referred to as the Comintern). Kamenev was Lenin's deputy and president of the Moscow Soviet. The three taken together -- Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev -- were what we call "old Bolsheviks." In other words, these three men had been behind Lenin and the Bolshevik cause right from the very start. You could not say this about Trotsky. Before 1917, Trotsky had been a Menshevik and served as an independent member of the intelligentsia.

The triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev proved completely unworkable. Each man used the secret police in order to suppress all plots against them. They resisted Trotsky's demands for party reform. The three, at Stalin's prompting, initiated the cult of Lenin immediately before his death in January 1924 so that any act by Trotsky would have appeared as a violent act against the now dead holy saint. Any Trotsky supporter within the party was assigned a post as far from Moscow as possible. Stalin and the others also prevented the publication of Lenin's Testament (see above) so that the rank and file, the ordinary party members, would have no knowledge regarding Lenin's doubts about Stalin's leadership abilities. Instead, they published everything Trotsky had ever said which might have been at variance with Lenin.

Early in 1925 Stalin and his allies forced Trotsky to resign as Minister of War. The Triumvirate then dissolved. Stalin allied himself with Bukharin and other right-wing members of the Politburo to which he now appointed his loyal followers. Using all of his accumulated powers, Stalin struck against his former allies on all questions of policy. As a result, Zinoviev and Kamenev moved into an alliance with Trotsky in 1926. Stalin now charged Zinoviev with plotting in the army and so Zinoviev was expelled from the Politburo. Next, Trotsky was expelled from the Politburo, and Zinoviev was ousted as president of the Comintern. In December 1927 a Communist party congress expelled Trotsky from the party and exiled him to Alma-Ata in Central Asia. With Trotsky exiled from the country, with Lenin dead, with Zinoviev and Kamenev deflated, Stalin was now ready to institute his "revolution from above."

| [Table of Contents](#) |

| [The History Guide](#) | [Feedback](#) |

copyright © 2000 Steven Kreis

Last Revised -- April 13, 2012

[Conditions of Use](#)