

Key Points in Early Soviet History

Socialist governments traditionally do make a financial mess. They always run out of other people's money.—Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, 1979-1990

Part One: Russian Civil War

The Russian Civil war was a conflict in which the Red (red being a traditional color of socialist revolutionaries; white being a color of those loyal to monarchies) Army successfully defended the newly formed Bolshevik government against various Russian and interventionist anti-Bolshevik armies, fought from 1918 to 1920.

The Western Allies, desperately pressed by the new German offensive in northern France in the spring of 1918, were eager to create another front in the east by reviving at least a part of the Russian army. From late 1917 onward, the new Russian government under Lenin was negotiating with the Germans for a peace, and in March 1918, the two countries signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Also that month, a small British force was landed at Murmansk (near Russia's border with Finland) with the consent of the local soviet. On April 5 Japanese forces landed at Vladivostok (about 50 miles north of the North Korean border).

A further factor was the Czechoslovak Legion, composed of Czech and Slovak deserters from the Austro-Hungarian army (which had fought Russia in the beginning of World War I), whom previous Russian governments had allowed to form their own units, to fight the German and Austrian forces (the Czechs and Slovaks saw themselves as not only fighting their Austrian overlords, but as forming the new armies of an independent Czechoslovakia which they hoped to form after World War I). In March 1918 the Bolshevik government agreed to let these units leave Russia by the Far East (as the Germany had control of the ports in European Russia), but in May violent incidents took place during the evacuation, and on May 29 Leon Trotsky, commissar for war, ordered them to surrender their arms. They refused, defeated attempts of the local Soviet authorities to disarm them, and took control of the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

At its peak, the Legion took over a considerable area around the railway from just east of Volga River all the way to Vladivostok (some 5,500 miles of track). Their existence played a role in the rise of other anti-Bolshevik groups and Siberia-based independence movements. Numbering upwards of 60,000, they presented a formidable foe for the Red Army. Eventually, however, the Czechs cut a deal with the Bolsheviks – gold and the leader of the anti-Bolshevik army, Admiral Kolchak (whom they handed over to the Soviets) for free passage home. Eventually, most of the Legion—totaling 67,739 soldiers—was evacuated via Vladivostok and returned to Czechoslovakia, to become the core of its own army.

After the German armistice in November 1918, the Allied governments now had to decide on their policy in the confused Russian situation. The original purpose of intervention, to revive an Eastern front against Germany, was now meaningless. Russian exiles argued that, since the pre-Bolshevik governments of Russia had remained loyal to the Allies, the Allies were bound to help them. To

this moral argument was added the political argument that the Communist regime in Moscow was a menace to the whole of Europe, with its subversive propaganda and its determination to spread revolution.

Direct intervention by Allied military forces was, however, on a very small scale, involving a total of perhaps 200,000 soldiers (by way of comparison, at the end of World War I, the Americans had 4 million people in the armed forces; the British and French would have combined for about 8 million more). The French in Ukraine were bewildered by the confused struggle between Russian Communists, Russian Whites, and Ukrainian nationalists, and they withdrew their forces during March and April 1919, having hardly fired a shot. The British in the Arkhangelsk and Murmansk areas did some fighting, but the northern front was of only minor importance to the civil war as a whole. The last British forces were withdrawn from Arkhangelsk and from Murmansk in the early fall of 1919. The only "interventionists" who represented a real danger were the Japanese, who established themselves systematically in the Far Eastern provinces.

In 1920 there was still an organized White force in the Crimea, under General Pyotr N. Wrangel, who struck northward at the Red Army and, for a time, occupied part of Ukraine and Kuban. The Red Army eventually battered Wrangel's forces, whose rearguards held out long enough to ensure the evacuation of 150,000 soldiers and civilians by sea from the Crimea. Although the émigrés hoped to resume civil war against the Russian communists in the future, this evacuation for all practical purposes ended the Russian Civil War in November 1920.

The victory of the Communists in the civil war is indeed mainly due to this simple fact of military superiority, reinforced by the fact that, holding the central core of European Russia throughout the war, they could plan operations and move men more easily than their enemies, whose bases were on the periphery and cut off from one another.

The Communist victory was at the same time a defeat for the various nationalist movements of the non-Russian peoples. The hopes of the Tatars and Bashkirs, between the Kazan area and the southern Urals, were ruined in the course of the civil war, as were the hopes of the Ukrainians, the Byelorussians (north of the Ukraine), and the peoples of the Caucasus mountains (just east of the Black Sea). The Communists proclaimed the right of self-determination, but in practice they imposed the dictatorship of the Russian Communist Party on them. In Tashkent the Muslim population remained mistrustful of any Russian authorities, and for some years guerrilla bands of nationalists, known as Basmachi, harassed the Communist authorities.

The political system that emerged victorious from the civil war called itself the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). *Soviets* were revolutionary councils that were formed in many cities; each of the constituent sections of the USSR were called *Soviets* (just as the constituent sections of the US are called states, and in other countries, provinces). In fact the soviets were of small importance. All power belonged to the Communist Party, members of which occupied all the posts in the Soviet of People's Commissars and the key posts at all lower levels of the machinery of government. The party itself was governed by its Central Committee, which Lenin dominated.

Parts Two: Soviet Economics in the early 1920s

War Communism

The policy of War Communism lasted from June 1918 to March 1921. The policy's chief features were the expropriation of private business and the nationalization of industry throughout Soviet Russia, and the forced requisition of surplus grain and other food products from the peasantry by the state. Strong protests against these measures, as well as the failure of the USSR to produce enough food under such conditions, resulted in the removal of these policies.

These measures negatively affected both agricultural and industrial production. With no incentives to grow surplus grain (since it would just be confiscated), the peasants' production of it and other crops plummeted, with the result that starvation came to threaten many city dwellers. In the cities, a large and untrained bureaucracy was hastily created to supervise the newly centralized, state-owned economy, with the result that labour productivity and industrial output plummeted. By 1921 industrial production had dropped to one-fifth of its prewar levels (i.e., in 1913), and the real wages of urban workers had declined by an estimated two-thirds in just three years. Uncontrolled inflation rendered paper currency worthless, and so the government had to resort to the exchange and distribution of goods and services without the use of money.

Workers in this Soviet "workers' paradise" went on strike, the most notorious being in Astrakhan (a city on the Volga River as it feeds into the Caspian Sea), where soldiers were sent against workers going on strike. Some soldiers joined the workers; troops loyal to the Bolshevik regime closed the city gates, and then ruthlessly recaptured the town. When the prisons were full, they simply took those remaining (some two to four thousand) strikers and their allied troops and threw them into the Volga with stones around their necks.

By early 1921 public discontent with the state of the economy had spread from the countryside to the cities, resulting in numerous strikes and protests. that culminated in March of that year in the Kronstadt Rebellion. In this rebellion, a naval squadron at Kronstadt, a naval fortress on Kotlin Island in the Gulf of Finland, mutinied against the new Bolshevik rule in the USSR. They demanded new elections to the Soviets, freedom of the press, an end to requisitioning grain from the peasants, the elimination of Bolshevik control and guards over the military and workers, and free trade unions to be organized. The Bolsheviks did crush this rebellion, but in response, the Bolsheviks had to adopt the New Economic Policy and thus temporarily abandon their attempts to achieve a socialist economic system by government decree.

New Economic Policy (NEP)

The economic policy of the government of the Soviet Union from 1921 to 1928, representing a temporary retreat from its previous policy of extreme centralization and doctrinaire socialism. The policy of War Communism, in effect since 1918, had by 1921 brought the national economy to

the point of total breakdown. The Kronstadt Rebellion of March 1921 convinced the Communist Party and its leader, Vladimir Lenin, of the need to retreat from socialist policies in order to maintain the party's hold on power. Accordingly, the 10th Party Congress in March 1921 introduced the measures of the New Economic Policy. These measures included the return of most agriculture, retail trade, and small-scale light industry to private ownership and management while the state retained control of heavy industry, transport, banking, and foreign trade. Money was reintroduced into the economy in 1922 (it had been abolished under War Communism). The peasantry were allowed to own and cultivate their own land, while paying taxes to the state. The New Economic Policy reintroduced a measure of stability to the economy and allowed the Soviet people to recover from years of war, civil war, and governmental mismanagement.

The NEP was viewed by the Soviet government as merely a temporary expedient to allow the economy to recover while the Communists solidified their hold on power. The NEP was dogged by the government's chronic inability to procure enough grain supplies from the peasantry to feed its urban work force. In 1928–29 these grain shortages prompted Joseph Stalin, by then the country's paramount leader, to forcibly eliminate the private ownership of farmland and to collectivize agriculture under the state's control, thus ensuring the procurement of adequate food supplies for the cities in the future. This abrupt policy change, which was accompanied by the destruction of several million of the country's most prosperous private farmers, marked the end of the NEP. It was followed by the reimposition of state control over all industry and commerce in the country by 1931.

Part Three: Soviet Economics in the later 1920s

Stalin and the Five-Year Plans

After taking over, Joseph Stalin implemented a series of Five-Year Plans, each with a separate objective in making the Soviet economy stronger and more communist. For example, the first Five-Year Plan (1928–32), concentrated on developing heavy industry and collectivizing agriculture. The third (1938–42) emphasized the production of armaments.

Since the October Revolution (in 1917) industrial progress had been slow. It was not until 1927 that industrial production had reached the levels achieved before the start of the First World War. Stalin decided that he would use his control over the country to increase production. In 1927 Stalin's advisers told him that the modernization of farming the Soviet Union would require an extra 250,000 tractors. As well as tractors, there was a need to develop the oil fields to provide the necessary fuel to drive the machines. Power stations also had to be built to supply the farms with electricity.

Under that first Five Year Plan introduced in 1928, Stalin set the workers high targets. He demanded a 115% increase in coal production, 200% increase in iron production and 335% increase in electric power. He justified these demands by claiming that if rapid industrialization did not take place, the Soviet Union would not be able to defend itself against an invasion from capitalist countries in the west.

Every factory had large display boards erected that showed the output of workers. Those that failed to reach the required targets were publicly criticized and humiliated. Some workers could not cope with this pressure and absenteeism increased. This led to even more repressive measures being introduced. Records were kept of workers' lateness, absenteeism and bad workmanship. If the worker's record was poor, he was accused of trying to sabotage the Five Year Plan and if found guilty could be shot or sent to work as forced labor on the Baltic Sea Canal or the Siberian Railway.

With the introduction of the Five Year Plan, Stalin argued that it was necessary to pay higher wages to certain workers in order to encourage increased output. His left-wing opponents claimed that this inequality was a betrayal of socialism and would create a new class system in the Soviet Union. Stalin had his way and during the 1930s, the gap between the wages of the labourers and the skilled workers increased.

Another project under the first Five-Year Plan was a continuation of the collectivization of farmlands, and placing them under control of the government. The result of Stalin's policies was the Great Famine (Holodomor) of 1932–33—a man-made demographic catastrophe unprecedented in peacetime. Of the estimated six to eight million people who died in the Soviet Union, about four to five million were Ukrainians. Its deliberate nature is underscored by the fact that no physical basis for famine existed in Ukraine. The Ukrainian grain harvest of 1932 had resulted in below-average yields (in part because of the chaos wreaked by the collectivization

campaign), but it was more than sufficient to sustain the population. Nevertheless, Soviet authorities set requisition quotas for Ukraine at an impossibly high level. Brigades of special agents were dispatched to Ukraine to assist in procurement, and homes were routinely searched and foodstuffs confiscated. At the same time, a law was passed in August 1932 making the theft of socialist property a capital crime, leading to scenes in which peasants faced the firing squad for stealing as little as a sack of wheat from state storehouses. The rural population was left with insufficient food to feed itself. The ensuing starvation grew to a massive scale by the spring of 1933, but Moscow refused to provide relief. In fact, the Soviet Union exported more than a million tons of grain to the West during this period.

Soviet livestock suffered the most precipitate decline. Between 1928 and 1933 the number of cattle fell by 44 per cent, of pigs by 55 per cent, and of sheep and goats by as much as 65 per cent. This decline — except in the case of pigs — was far greater than that which had occurred as a result of the six years of world war and civil war between 1914 and 1921. And these figures do not reflect the full extent of the calamity; animals after collectivization were smaller and weaker than they had been in the 1920s. The slaughter of animals resulted in a very temporary increase in the consumption of meat in the countryside; but, with this exception, throughout the 1930s far less meat and dairy products were available per head of population than in the late 1920s. The decline in the number of animals also resulted in a proportionate reduction in the supply of hides for the leather and footwear industries, and of raw wool for the textile industry.

Equally harmful was the decline in the number of horses, the main work-force in agriculture apart from human labor; the number fell by 1933 to less than half the 1928 level. As the total of all livestock in 1928 amounted to about half the total value of means of production in Soviet agriculture, so the destruction of livestock removed about a quarter of all existing capital — more if the decline in the quality of the animals which remained alive is taken into account. From 1934 onwards, the livestock sector began to recover, but only in the case of pigs was the 1928 level exceeded by the end of the 1930s.

The famine subsided only after the 1933 harvest had been completed. Settlers from Russia were brought in to repopulate the devastated countryside. Soviet authorities flatly denied the existence of the famine both at the time it was raging and after it was over. It was only in the late 1980s that officials made a guarded acknowledgement that something had been amiss in Ukraine at this time.

Trotsky, who had been expelled from the Soviet Communist Party in 1927, and exiled in 1928, continued to criticize Stalin and his policies. In particular, Trotsky said that instead of seizing all the farms (which meant a loss of agricultural production), that the Soviet Union should be promoting as much agricultural production as possible, and then trade their surpluses to the West, in exchange for machinery, which would help the USSR industrialize (forming a bond with workers in the West, by providing them with cheap food, which might promote socialism in their own countries).

Part Four

Stalin's Purges

In late 1934—just when the worst excesses of Stalinism seemed to have spent themselves—the Secretary General launched a new campaign of political terror against the very Communist Party members who had brought him to power; his pretext was the assassination, in Leningrad on December 1, of his leading colleague and potential rival, Sergey Kirov. That Stalin himself had arranged Kirov's murder—as an excuse for the promotion of mass bloodshed—was strongly hinted by Nikita Khrushchev, first secretary of the party, in a speech denouncing Stalin at the 20th Party Congress in 1956.

Two-thirds of the 1934 Central Committee of the party was executed, as were more than half of the senior officers of the army. Furthermore, the political police, or NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs), had license to extend the purges to lower-level officials and rank-and-file citizens. In the darkest years of the terror, from 1937 to 1938, the NKVD under Nikolay Yezhov rounded up several million people; as many as 1 million people were shot, while another 2 million are estimated to have died in the camps. In December 1938 Stalin's appointment of a new NKVD chief, Lavrenty Beria, signaled the end of the mass terror, although some arrests and executions continued into 1939.

Such were the main publicly acknowledged persecutions that empowered Stalin to tame the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet elite as a whole. He not only "liquidated" veteran semi-independent Bolsheviks but also many party bosses, military leaders, industrial managers, and high government officials totally subservient to himself. Other victims included foreign Communists on Soviet territory and members of the very political police organization, now called the NKVD. All other sections of the Soviet elite—the arts, the academic world, the legal and diplomatic professions—also lost a high proportion of victims, as did the population at large, to a semi-haphazard, galloping persecution that fed on extorted denunciations and confessions. These implicated even more victims until Stalin himself reduced the terror, though he never abandoned it. Stalin's political victims were numbered in tens of millions. His main motive was, presumably, to maximize his personal power.

Stalin purged not only the civilian government of the USSR, but its military as well. His purges removed 16 of the top 20 ranking generals, eight of nine admirals, and 154 out of 186 commanders of army divisions. In total, 30,000 members of the armed forces were executed. Many (but not all) feel that this decimation of the officers helped cause the poor showing in WWII against Hitler (some 3 million Russian soldiers were either killed or captured as the Germans drove deep into Russia).

Western Confusion about the Development of the USSR

A lot of people in the West were (and still are) confused about the USSR. This is partly due to positive myths about the USSR spread about in the press. The most notorious case of this is that of Walter Duranty, a Moscow-bureau journalist for the New York Times, and his reporting of

conditions in the USSR left something to be desired. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his articles on Stalinism and the Five-Year Plans, and even though he was writing during the time of the Ukrainian famine, he made no mention of the mass starvation and death going on at the time. Later, Duranty defended the exile of Trotsky by saying that he was plotting against Stalin, and in order to keep the USSR strong in the face of threats from the West and from Japan, Trotsky had to be exiled (and that it was an act of clemency, not to have simply killed him). In that article, Duranty still clung to the myth that “the First Five-Year Plan was proving unexpectedly successful.” He was aware that some were stating that there was a famine, but Duranty labeled this “a big scare story in the American press.” Duranty said that there was a food shortage, but no starvation. He also said that “you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs”—an interesting way to rationalize confiscation of people’s property rights (Fifth Amendment, anyone?) and widespread loss of life.

Another problem with accurate perceptions about the USSR in the West, is that most Americans were not aware that much of the industrial might of the Soviet Union didn’t come from the wonders of its collectivization programs, but were in fact directly imported from the West. Its four main plants for producing armored vehicles and tanks were either built or modernized by Western companies.

The writer Antony Sutton has documented extensively, the Soviet use of Western military technology. This is not to say that they stole the technology—much of it was freely for sale, and in the case of tractor plants (which would be transformed into tank plants after the American builders left), the American designers traveled to Russia to supervise the installation of the facilities.

Several tractor plants before WWII were established with US assistance. The plant at Stalingrad was built in the US, disassembled, and then re-assembled at Stalingrad. From these plants came the light Soviet T-37, T-26, BT-12, BT-3, and BT-28 tanks. Other US-built plants were those at Chelyabinsk and Kharkov. In 1938, these three American-built plants were producing over 460 tanks a month (a rate of 5,500 per year). By way of comparison, the Soviets had in total, some 25 thousand tanks when Germany invaded Russia in 1941.

Even the Soviet’s much-praised T-34 (arguably the best tank in WWII) used the suspension in the Christie tank (from American tank designer Walter Christie), and engines from the Christie or from BMW. Production of this tank was highest at American-built plants, and the first T-34s were assembled from several million tons of armor plate imported from the US.

In May 1929, Ford Motor Company signed an agreement with the Soviet Union to supply \$13 million worth of automobile parts and supplies by 1933, and to provide technical assistance on an automobile plant later known as the Gorki plant. After the Ford advisers left in 1938, it was converted to a plant manufacturing military vehicles such as armored personnel carriers, jeeps, personnel carriers, anti-tank gun vehicles, and amphibious assault vehicles. By the late 1930s, annual production was in the 80,000-90,000 range.

Similar statements could be made about Soviet aircraft, submarine, and naval ship production.