

for orphans were built from the proceeds of voluntary deductions from Chekists' salaries. Dzerzhinsky once told a fellow Chekist, 'Concern for our children's welfare is one of the best ways to wipe out counter-revolution.'³⁴

War Communism

V. I. Lenin: 'Long live civil war in the name of bread, for children and old people, for the workers and the Red Army, in the name of direct and merciless struggle with counter-revolution.'

Stabilising the economy proved an increasingly difficult task for the Bolsheviks. State Capitalism strained under shortages of raw materials, lack of consumer goods, pressure 'from below' for increased nationalisation of industry and declining grain stocks. This was exacerbated by the outbreak of the Civil War. Trade with other countries ceased as a blockade was enforced from mid-1918 until 1921. With fuel and food already scarce, the loss of the Ukraine (first to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, then White occupation and later to peasant uprisings) also denied European Russia its 'breadbasket'. Supplying the cities became a haphazard exercise, since the Red Army took precedence in rail deliveries.

The military emergency and failing economy convinced Lenin and other leading Communists that decisive intervention was needed. In the summer of 1918 a range of harsh, centralised economic measures were introduced. Later known as War Communism, these policies originated in part from the need to secure food for the cities, halt economic breakdown and focus industrial production on supplying the Red Army. Trotsky's catch-cry was: 'Everything for the front!'³⁵

Elements of War Communism

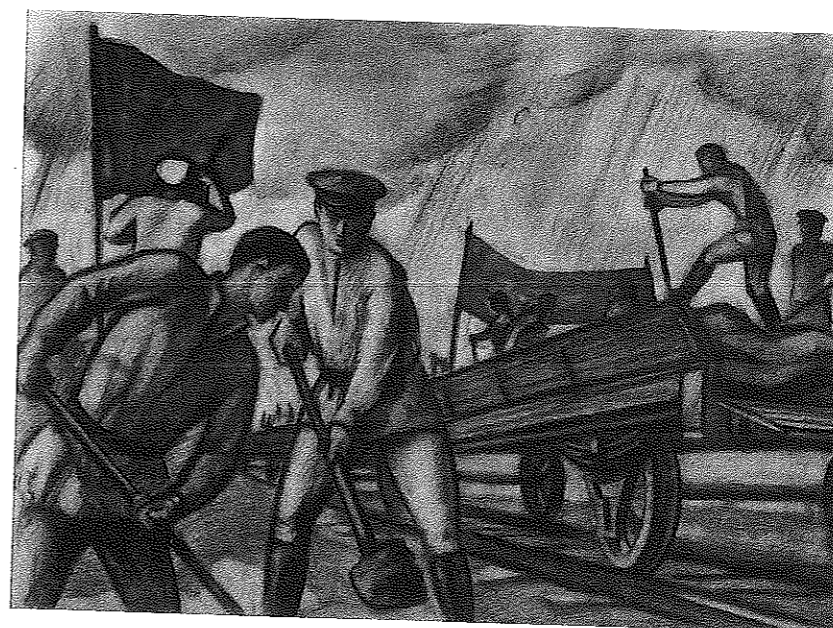
A dramatic increase in the degree of state control over industry marked the first element of War Communism. As 1918 wore on, more and more factory committees begged Sovnarkom officials to take control of their industries and bring order to the economy. A gradual process of nationalisation had begun. Faced with economic ruin, many enterprises had already nationalised without prior approval from the central authorities. Warnings were issued in January and again in April 1918 against the expropriation of industries without the approval of the Supreme Economic Council (VSNKh). Few workers' committees paid any attention. With the added pressure of mobilising the economy to assist in the support of the Red Army, on 28 June 1918 the Decree on Nationalisation was released. This point marks the leap into War Communism. The decree announced that the state would take full ownership of all metallurgical, textile, electrical, mining, cement and tanning industries. More enterprises soon followed, culminating in a decree promulgated on 29 November 1920, which announced the nationalisation of all factories that employed more than ten workers, and more than five if powered machinery was used.

First envisaged as a supervisory body, VSNKh now found itself the coordinator of a highly centralised economic system. Having taken over the means of production and drastically cut back private ownership of industry, the Communist regime had hoped to bring stability to the economy. Yet these measures did little to effectively improve economic output. Imposed during a time of severe economic and social disruption, difficulties in supply

³⁴ Cited in B. Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 137.

³⁵ D. Volkogonov, *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary* (Hammersmith: HarperCollins, 1996), 133.

and distribution were a perennial problem. The attempt to nationalise virtually everything led to the emergence of an unwieldy state bureaucracy. Resources and initiative were caught up in a mountain of red tape. Departments and officials haggled and held up the distribution of materials, the supply of additional workers to understaffed industries, and reports on the progress of production. Lack of adequate manpower, due to military conscription and the flight of workers from urban areas to the countryside, also proved to be an on-going impediment to economic recovery.



A Communist subbotnik: people worked 'voluntarily' without remuneration to help rehabilitate the war-ravaged economy.

Repression of workers

War Communism witnessed the effective militarisation of the workplace, as the state attempted to control the labour of all its citizens. The ideal of workers' control was rolled back, not just in regards to the running of industry, but also in the regulation of working hours, day-to-day conditions and the types of work undertaken. Workers were sent to factories where they were most needed; those who disobeyed were threatened with the loss of food rations and imprisonment. Towards the end of the Civil War Trotsky called for battalions of the Red Army to be mobilised into 'labour armies' and used to build roads, unload freight and cut trees. Those in charge of labour armies submitted military-style reports and workers marched to their workplaces. Longer working hours were introduced in all industries. Absenteeism could be punished through workers being assigned to more difficult duties and a deduction in their already scant rations. Strikers were threatened with execution. 'A deserter from labour,' according to Trotsky, 'is as contemptible and despicable as a deserter from the battlefield.'³⁶ Voluntary work on weekends, called 'Communist Saturdays' (subbotniki), was encouraged.³⁷ Workers were obliged to clean up roads or unload trains on their days off. Party activists soon placed great pressure on all workers to participate in such 'voluntary' work.

³⁶ V. I. Lenin, 'The Tax in Kind', in *Selected Works II*, 712.

³⁷ Cited in B. Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 377.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Zinoviev and Radek made ready use of the privileges granted to the Communist elite. They very much enjoyed the food and fine clothes their positions allowed them. But not all Bolshevik leaders revelled in luxury – Lenin, Bukharin and Lunacharsky lived quite modestly and Dzerzhinsky was notoriously frugal.

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DID YOU KNOW?

During the period of hyperinflation Preobrazhensky introduced one of his books with the dedication: 'To the printing presses of the Commissariat of Finance – that machine-gun which shot the bourgeois regime in the arse.' Another Communist economist outlined the purpose of induced hyperinflation: '...money will lose its significance as treasure and remain what it really is: colored paper.'

Before the Civil War period the supposed 'privileged' members of society had already been mobilised for compulsory labour service. Bankers, priests, military officers, factory owners, lawyers, stock brokers, former tsarist officials and members of aristocratic families were forced into work gangs and made to shovel snow or clear city streets of rubbish. Trotsky told one such group, 'Our grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and fathers all had to clean up the shit and filth of your grandfathers and fathers. Now you are going to do the same thing for us.'³⁸

Compulsory labour by the bourgeoisie was welcomed by workers whose hatred of their social betters remained an important element of support for the revolutionary regime. However, whilst ordinary people often went hungry and lived in substandard housing, the Red elite had access to French trained chefs and comfortable Kremlin apartments; this also fostered popular disillusionment.

Attempts to abolish money

In his 1919 draft programme of the Russian Communist Party, Lenin declared, 'The RCP will strive as speedily as possible to introduce the most radical measures to pave the way for the abolition of money.'³⁹ State-induced hyperinflation was the method by which this was achieved. The government continued to print money until it became well and truly worthless. Exchanges between state-run industries were simply exercises in bookkeeping. No cash changed hands. One wry observer noted that Soviet Russia was a 'country of millionaire paupers.'

Having eliminated reliance on a monetary economy, the Communist regime aimed to become the sole producer and provider of food and goods in Russia. Following a decree issued on 21 November 1918, all private trade was declared illegal, including small business, peasant markets and the selling of any personal goods for profit. A government body called the Food Commissariat was the only organisation legally allowed to supply consumer items. It was allowed to confiscate stocks held by private traders.

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ACTIVITY 5

Comprehension

Read about War Communism in this book and at least ONE other source. Then complete the questions below.

- 1 Why was War Communism introduced?
- 2 What were its main elements?
- 3 How have liberal, revisionist and Soviet historians interpreted its origins? (Cite one example of each.)
- 4 To what extent was this policy an attempt to shape the new society? To what extent was it a response to crisis?

³⁸ Cited in B. Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 53-4.

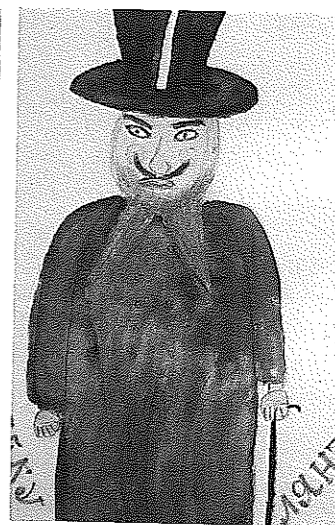
³⁹ Cited in Alec Nove, entry in Harold Shukman's *Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1988), 59.

Problems of War Communism

The complete collapse in the value of the rouble and the ban on private trade resulted in a booming black market economy. Bartering became a way of life for almost all Soviet citizens. It was the only way city dwellers could get enough food. Paradoxically, more people were now in private trade than ever before. Trains were crowded with speculators, known as 'bagmen', who travelled from the countryside to the towns with goods and food which they re-sold at substantial profits. People flocked to markets, such as the Sukarevka in Moscow, to trade for bread and other staple foods. The authorities periodically launched crackdowns on the markets and arrested those caught trading, but consumer demand was so great that the markets generally reopened the next day. Checkpoints were set up on the railways to confiscate any goods or food illegally transported. Despite the misgivings of Soviet authorities and a stream of propaganda denouncing the bagmen as 'evil exploiters', the bartering system had to be tolerated. It is estimated that during 1918-19 illegal traders supplied city dwellers with up to sixty per cent of their bread. The figure is even higher for smaller provincial towns.

A range of free services were introduced by the state to replace wages that would normally be paid in cash. The postal service, public transport, medical treatment and food rations of dubious quality and quantity were supplied by the government free of charge. In July 1918, a class-based food rationing system was introduced whereby workers, soldiers and members of the Communist party received considerably more food than the upper classes. Lenin famously declared, 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat.'⁴⁰ In the hierarchy that determined the amount of food one received those who lived off 'capital', namely the bourgeoisie, clergy and former employees of the tsarist regime, received very little. Zinoviev spoke of the bourgeoisie receiving just enough bread to remember the smell of it.⁴¹

Obtaining enough food to ensure that the cities and towns did not starve was soon the foremost concern of Soviet authorities. Thousands of people perished from starvation and riots broke out in numerous towns over the lack of available food. It was a desperate crisis that came to dominate the attention of many within the Party and government. Policies aimed at forcing the peasantry to provide more food were soon implemented. The Communists embarked on what Lenin called a 'crusade for bread.'⁴²



A line outside a butcher's shop (left) and a black marketeer (right), children's drawings from 1918.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Under the policy of War Communism, mansions were sub-divided and filled with the homeless. (This situation is portrayed in *Doctor Zhivago*.) The popular slogan was: 'Peace to the Hovels, War to the Palaces!'

⁴⁰ V. I. Lenin, 'The Famine: A Letter to the Workers of Petrograd', in *Selected Works II*, 345.

⁴¹ S. Smith, *The Russian Revolution*, 80.

⁴² A. Nove, entry in *Blackwell Encyclopedia*, 52-3.

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DID YOU KNOW?

A number of peasants wrote to the government after mid-1918 to announce that everyone in their village was 'poor' and all had joined the kombedy!

Though the Bolsheviks had won the tentative support of people in country areas through their Decree on Land, the peasantry remained reluctant to hand over their grain. Most preferred to feed up their livestock or sell their produce on the black market, usually to bagmen. Lenin was convinced that the food shortages were due to kulaks (rich peasants) hoarding surplus grain. His proposed solution was to turn the poorer peasantry against their well-off neighbors. Sverdlov explained, 'Only if we are able to split the village into two camps, to arouse there the same class war as in the cities, only then will we achieve in the villages what we have achieved in the cities.'⁴³

Committees of the Poor

On 11 June 1918 the government announced that Committees of the Poor (kombedy) were to be formed throughout the countryside. The theory was that the poorest of the peasantry would do the Communists' dirty work. The surplus grain and livestock of the kulaks was to be uncovered and confiscated by the kombedy, who would then hand it over to Soviet officials. The enticement was that the poorer peasants were allowed to keep a percentage of what they confiscated. The Committees of the Poor, however, were largely unsuccessful. Extra grain was received from some areas but splitting the village into two 'hostile camps' proved a problematic exercise. In some villages the middle peasants, who Lenin wanted to win over, were targeted. Self-interest also undermined the ideal, as confiscated grain was shared out amongst the poor peasants and not handed over to authorities. The biggest problem was the peasants' sense of communal solidarity. Many were reluctant to turn on each other. By December the Committees were abandoned.

Requisition squads

Lenin remained convinced that food shortages were due to 'hoarding' by rich peasants. If the countryside would not hand over its grain willingly, then force would be used. Lenin wrote to officials in charge of grain procurement to do all they could to find more grain. It was a matter of life and death; the very survival of the proletariat and Red Army were at stake.

Starting in January 1919 detachments of armed workers and Cheka agents were formed into grain-requisitioning squads and sent to the countryside to seize 'hoarded surplus' from whole villages, a practice known as *prodrazverstka*. In most cases, squads took all the grain they could find and left no seeds for peasants to re-plant. Deeply resentful of the government's new tactics, the peasantry responded by closing ranks. Requisition squads were faced with armed resistance. While some short-term increases in procurements were made, requisitioning quickly led to even less food being available. There was no incentive for farmers to produce any more grain than their immediate family needed to survive. The countryside simply stopped producing surplus grain. Between 1917 and 1921, the amount of land under cultivation dropped by forty per cent. Harvests were around thirty-seven per cent of the usual yield.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Lenin wrote to officials in charge of grain procurement to do all they could to '...send grain, grain and more grain!'

⁴³ Cited in W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution*, 1, 426.

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ACTIVITY 6

DOCUMENT:

Lenin's instructions regarding kulaks, August 1918.

Comrades! The uprising of the five kulak districts should be mercilessly suppressed...

1. Hang (hang without fail, so the people see) no fewer than one hundred known kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers.
2. Publish their names.
3. Take from them all the grain.
4. Designate hostages...

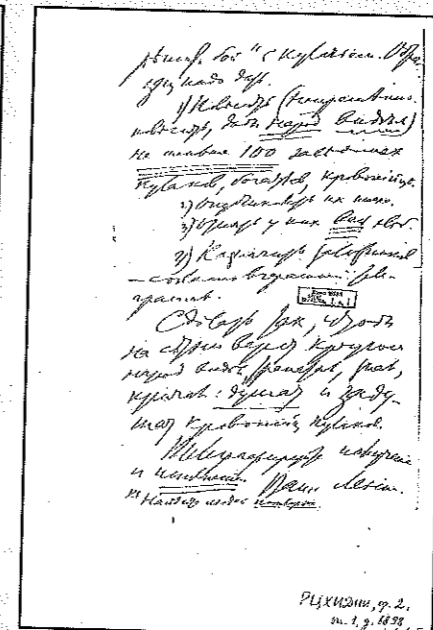
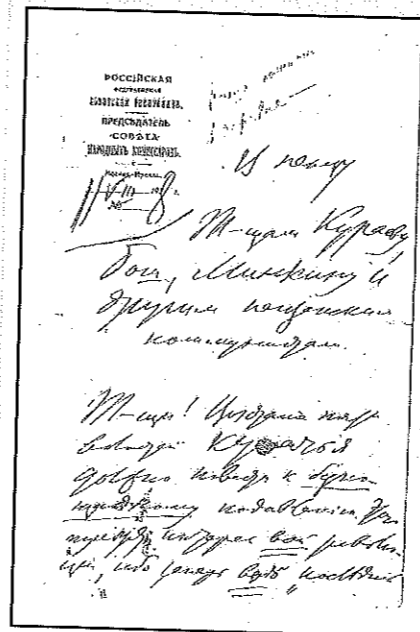
Do it in such a way that for hundreds of [kilometres] around, the people will see, tremble, know, shout: they are strangling and will strangle to death the bloodsucker kulaks.

Telegraph receipt and implementation.

Yours, Lenin.

P.S. Find some truly hard people.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Cited by R. Pipes, *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 50.



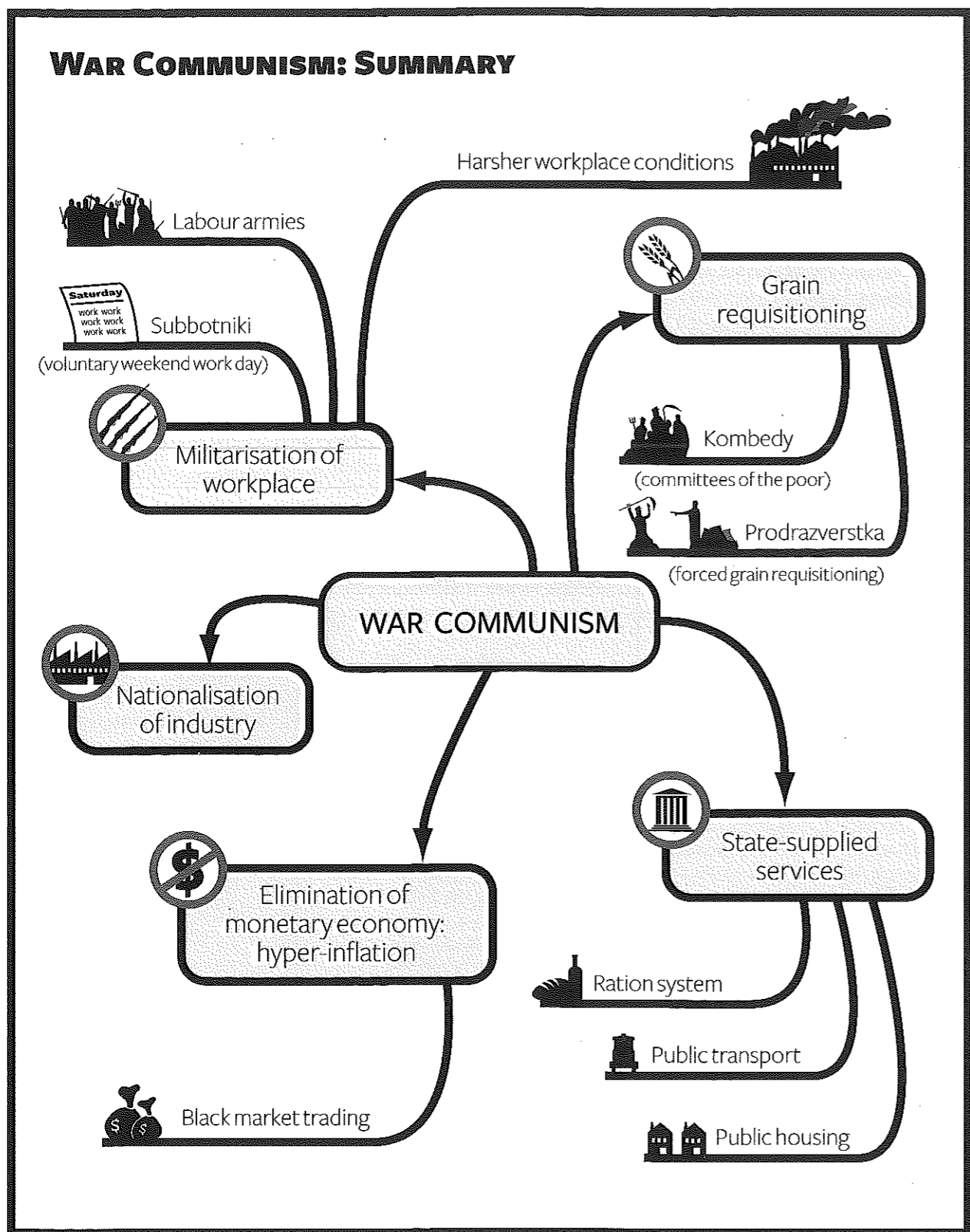
Left: The two-page handwritten letter from Lenin ordering communists in Penza to publicly hang at least 100 kulaks and confiscate their grain.

Document Analysis

Read Lenin's instructions on kulaks in August 1918. Then complete the tasks below.

- 1 Why does Lenin propose harsh measures against the kulaks?
- 2 How should kulaks be treated, according to Lenin?
- 3 What was the desired impact of such actions?
- 4 What does this document reveal about Lenin's attitude to revolutionary violence?
- 5 This document was only made available following the publication of Richard Pipes' *The Unknown Lenin* in 1996. Comment on why Pipes, a liberal historian, would have paid particular attention to this document.

WAR COMMUNISM: SUMMARY



Assessing War Communism

Soviet and Western Marxist historians argue that the policies of War Communism, though severe, were necessary due to economic collapse and war. They follow Lenin's retrospective assessment: 'We were forced to resort to "War Communism" by war and ruin.'⁴⁵

War Communism had obvious pragmatic justifications, but there were also ideological assumptions at play. Many within the Party saw War Communism as the first step towards a truly communist society. It represented a more extreme expression of socialist principles and was wholeheartedly welcomed at the time by theorists such as Bukharin and Preobrazhensky. Though the term 'War Communism' was applied after the event, observers at the time did describe the period as one of 'militant' Communism. For liberal historians, the policies demonstrated Bolshevik ideological fanaticism rather than a credible response to circumstance.⁴⁶ It was a flawed experiment in which socialist ideology fundamentally determined economic policy. Bernard Pares argues that it was 'not merely war Communism, such as is appropriate to a besieged city, but militant Communism or rather pure Communism, and its failure was self-evident.'⁴⁷

With its mix of ideological, economic and militaristic origins, War Communism was described by Alec Nove, a revisionist historian, as 'a siege economy with a communist ideology. A partly organised chaos. Sleepless, leather-jacketed commissars working around the clock in a vain effort to replace the free market.'⁴⁸ War Communism was literally *communism* in response to *war*. The period was not governed by unified, structured or carefully considered policies. Many decrees were improvised in the face of crisis, adjusted according to changing circumstances or not fully implemented. Local officials acted independently and instructions issued by Sovnarkom were at times contradictory or unclear. According to Figes, War Communism can also be analysed as a product of the growing divide in economic relations between the countryside and towns.⁴⁹ The unreliability of provincial soviet authorities in coordinating grain distribution set in train greater centralisation.

Everyday impacts of the Civil War

Mikhail Bulgakov: 'Great and terrible was the year of Our Lord 1918, of the Revolution the second...but the year 1919 was even more terrible.'

Life for ordinary people was dreadfully hard during the Civil War. Chronic shortages of food and fuel prevailed. Houses and fences were stripped of their timber to burn in stoves for heating. By 1920, most wages bought less than a fiftieth of what they bought in 1914.⁵⁰ As food became critically low, workers deserted factories and fled to rural areas in a desperate search for something to eat. Many still had relatives with whom they could seek shelter. The flood of cold and hungry city dwellers to the countryside reached such proportions that by 1920 Petrograd's population had fallen by seventy per cent and Moscow's by fifty per cent.⁵¹ An editorial in the 1919 New Year edition of *Pravda* proudly asked, 'Where are the wealthy, the fashionable ladies, the rich restaurants and private mansions, the beautiful entrances, the lying newspapers, all the corrupted "golden life"? All swept away.'⁵²

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DID YOU KNOW?

Mikhail Bulgakov is acclaimed as one of the most brilliant Russian novelists and playwrights of the twentieth century. His creative brilliance and satirical hilarity are best captured in his novels *The Heart of a Dog* (a medical experiment by an eccentric professor on a stray dog leads to considerable angst when the dog metamorphosises into an uncooperative humanoid) and *The Master and Margarita* (a complex narrative involving the devil causing trouble in 1930s Moscow). Both these works remained unpublished in Bulgakov's lifetime. His first major novel, *The White Guard*, was adapted for theatre and was one of Stalin's favourite plays – despite the main protagonist being a White officer.

⁴⁵ W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution II*, 295.

⁴⁶ R. Pipes, *Concise History*, 193; Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 112; Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 47-8.

⁴⁷ Bernard Pares, 'My Russian Memoirs', cited by Niall Rothnie, *Stalin and Russia, 1924-1953* (London: Macmillan Education, 1991), 123.

⁴⁸ A. Nove, entry in *Blackwell Encyclopedia*, 68.

⁴⁹ O. Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution 1917-21* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001), 247.

⁵⁰ B. Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 374.

⁵¹ S. Smith, *The Russian Revolution*, 85.

⁵² Cited by W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution II*, 348.

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DID YOU KNOW?

During the Russian Civil War, food was so scarce that horses, cats and dogs left outside overnight often disappeared. Horsemeat was colloquially known as 'civil war sausage'. Graffiti appeared on the streets of Petrograd that read: 'Down with Lenin and horsemeat! Give us the Tsar and pork!'



ПОМОГИ

Help! by Dmitry Moor, 1921.

Whereas the Soviet press saw some merit in the end of obvious signs of wealth, critics of the new regime noted, without undue cynicism, that if such a massive demographic upheaval continued the Bolsheviks would soon be the 'vanguard' of a nonexistent class. There were 2.6 million workers in 1917; this had dropped to 1.2 million by 1920.⁵³ This decrease in the workforce and in the availability of materials caused a dramatic decline in production. Large-scale industrial output fell to thirteen per cent of its pre-war level. Steel output was four per cent of 1913 levels and iron ore was at one-and-a-half per cent. Copper production ceased entirely.

Famine and disease

Famine and disease caused millions of deaths during the Civil War. Cartloads of rubbish in Moscow remained uncollected. Sewage systems backed up and burst pipes were left in a state of disrepair. Typhus, cholera and lice were rampant. It is estimated that starvation caused at least half of the fatalities of the Civil War period. Family life was severely disrupted, with millions of children orphaned or abandoned. Many fell into a life of crime or prostitution.

The villagers of some regions ate 'famine bread' made of clay and grass. Thousands of cases of cannibalism were also reported. One man arrested and brought to trial for eating human flesh confessed: 'In our village everyone eats human flesh but they hide it. There are several cafeterias in the village – and all of them serve up young children.'⁵⁴

Much to the chagrin of the Bolshevik government, Russia was forced to accept aid from the international community, in particular the American Relief Administration (ARA). In addition to supplies of medicine, grain seed and clothing, by 1922 ARA soup kitchens were feeding ten-million Russians per day.

The Communists were victorious in the Civil War but the Soviet regime was on the brink of economic ruin and torn by social unrest. W. H. Chamberlin wrote, 'The realm which the Bolsheviks had conquered bore strong resemblance to a desert.'⁵⁵ The situation in the countryside was particularly volatile. Increasing levels of peasant unrest, especially in the Tambov region and the Ukraine, were a major worry for the Communists. Many areas were ungovernable. The confused nature of peasant political alliances was expressed through slogans such as 'Long Live the Bolsheviks! Death to the Communists!' and 'Long Live Lenin! Down with Trotsky!'⁵⁶ Trotsky and Communists were associated with the Civil War; Lenin and the Bolsheviks with 'Peace' and 'Land'. What the peasantry really wanted was *volia* (freedom or liberty). They wished for the central authorities to leave them alone or to at least trade fairly and not seize their grain without proper payment.⁵⁷ One peasant wrote to the government: 'We welcome Soviet power, but give us ploughs, harrows and machines and stop seizing our grain, milk, eggs, and meat.'⁵⁸ Another lamented the fact that whilst the revolution had given the peasantry the land that they had desired for so long, the revolutionary government was taking away the fruits of their labour: 'The land belongs to us but the bread belongs to you; the water belongs to us, but the fish to you; the forests are ours but the timber is yours.'

Increasing authoritarianism

The Civil War had a profound influence on the political culture of the Communist party. In the face of crisis the new regime had become more

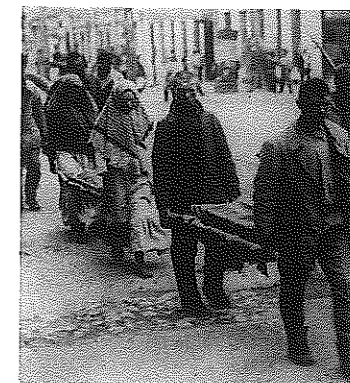
53 A. Nove, entry in *Blackwell Encyclopedia*, 60.
 54 Cited in O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 777.
 55 W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution II*, 291.
 56 O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 756.
 57 O. Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War*, 143.
 58 Cited in B. Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 467.

and more reliant on rule by decree and force. The centralised party-state was now seen as the instrument through which socialism would be built. The success of the Red Army and effectiveness of the Cheka reinforced such values. The Civil War had seen an influx of military personnel into the Party. These men brought with them different values and were generally more willing to accept decisions from above without question. Orders were orders. On being appointed Commissar of War, Trotsky had telegraphed Lenin from the Front: 'Send me communists who know how to obey.' There was a sense that the Party was now a militarised, fighting fellowship of leather-jacketed commissars. They were accustomed to the effectiveness of dictatorial practices. The Civil War bred a generation of men who were quick to reach for their pistols when their authority was questioned or when a crisis needed to be resolved. A belief in the infallibility of the Party hierarchy, common values and common threats bound the Communists together. The Party provided a pillar of self-assured strength for the rank-and-file amidst the social upheaval of the Civil War. Communist leaders likewise grew accustomed to flexing their political muscle and issuing commands which they expected to be obeyed.

Though the Bolsheviks claimed to have inaugurated a dictatorship of the proletariat based on 'Soviet' authority, as the Civil War progressed it became increasingly clear that the regime was more a dictatorship of the Party than a dictatorship of workers. The Bolshevik government – Sovnarkom – was theoretically subordinate to the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the Soviets, which was elected at the annual All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Decrees of 'general political significance' were meant to be submitted to the CEC for ratification and approval. Government commissars could be called before the CEC to explain their policies and could theoretically be replaced



'The Bolshevik and the Bourgeois. A Bolshevik is a person who doesn't want there to be any more burzhooi'. A child's drawing from 1918.



Two small coffins being carried on stretchers to the cemetery in the Volga famine district of Bolshevik Russia, 1921.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Lice were abundant during the Civil War. They were a source of discomfort and spread contagious disease. When the clothes of one Red unit were disinfected, a layer of what appeared to be grey sand two inches high covered the floor of the wash rooms. The grey sand was dead lice!

at its insistence. The Soviet Congress was never, though, an impingement upon Bolshevik authority. The individual who ensured this never happened was Yakov Sverdlov. Both Chairman of the CEC and Secretary of the Bolshevik Central Committee, Sverdlov was an organiser extraordinaire. His imposing personality kept critical debate within the Soviet Executive Committee to a minimum and he was adept at manipulating the votes during the annual Soviet Congress. Not surprisingly, non-Bolshevik Soviet delegates were soon removed from their posts. Accused of counter-revolutionary activity, the Mensheviks and SRs were expelled on 14 June 1918; the Left SRs barred on July 9. As time went on legislation was increasingly passed without the approval of the CEC. British historian Martin McCauley estimates that of the 480 decrees sanctioned during the first year of the Soviet regime, only sixty-eight were passed on to the CEC. And whilst Sovnarkom met daily, sometimes even twice a day, the Soviet Executive Committee was called to meet less and less frequently. In March 1918 Sverdlov argued that the Party should take up 'a significant part of the work which has up to now been performed by the soviets.'⁵⁹ Since almost all members of the Bolshevik Central Committee held posts in Sovnarkom, which was headed by Lenin, this was arguably an inevitable development. The Central Committee formulated resolutions on economic and political strategy which were then given to Sovnarkom to implement.

Sverdlov died unexpectedly in March 1919; a devastating blow to the Bolsheviks. The Party apparatus was subsequently restructured into the Secretariat, Politburo and Orgburo. The Secretariat was the administrative wing of the Party and government – it coordinated paperwork and communication. The Orgburo made decisions on personnel and delegated tasks to officials – it was the 'organising' body. The Politburo was a committee of five leading Communists (initially Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Kamenev and Kristinsky) who were given the authority to make decisions when urgency overruled a full meeting of the Central Committee. As Lenin explained, '...the Orgburo allocates forces, while the Politburo decides policy.'⁶⁰ The Soviet constitution made no reference to the Communist party; however, the Politburo was the highest decision-making body in Russia. Hierarchical and centralised authority, with the Communist Politburo at its apex, had become the basis of governmental rule in the new society.

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ACTIVITY 7

Document Research

Select ONE important decree introduced by the Communist regime. Use the internet to find an extract or full copy of the decree. Then complete the tasks below.

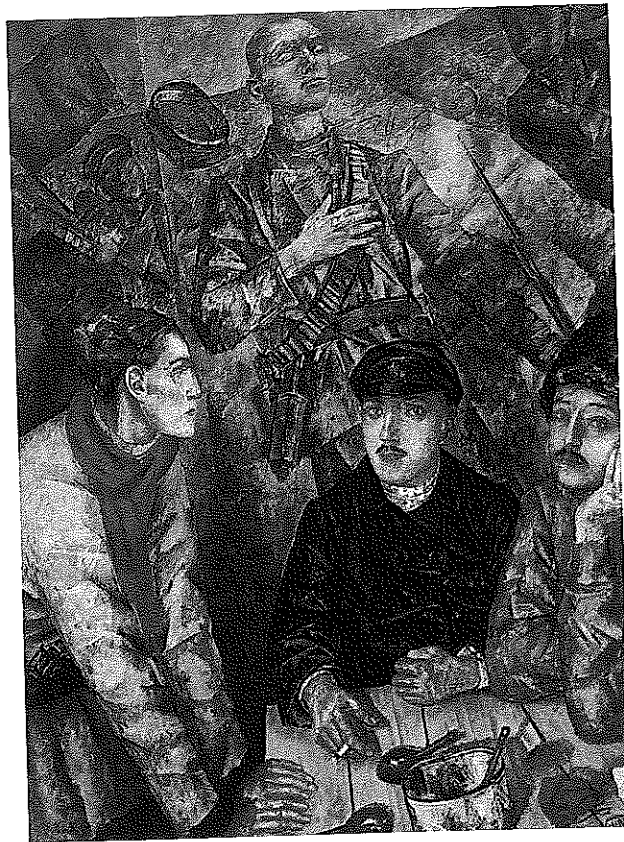
- 1 Explain the context in which the decree was implemented.
- 2 Select 3-5 short quotes from the document and explain their significance. What do they reveal about Bolshevik policy or ideology?
- 3 Identify perspectives from historians on this decree (or type of decree). What different interpretations have been placed on such decrees? Which do you find most convincing, and why?

⁵⁹ Cited in Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1970), 247.

⁶⁰ Cited in Martin McCauley, 'Commissars and Commissariats of Sovnarkom' in Harold Shukman (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1988), 37.

Conclusion

By conquering the counter-revolutionary ring of fire, the Soviet regime survived the Civil War. With its numerous protagonists and complex fronts, this conflict significantly shaped the nature of the new regime. Under the leadership of Trotsky the Bolsheviks went to war, raising a professional military force of five-million men. The Party itself became more militarised and a highly-centralised political structure evolved. War Communism, a range of economic policies informed by ideology and military emergency, harnessed 'Everything for the Front' to effectively feed and equip the Bolsheviks' armed forces. A more socialist economy was 'achieved'. With more unified purpose, better leadership and geographical advantages, the Red Army emerged victorious. Civil war was also class war. In response to pressures 'from below', ideological fanaticism and external threat, the Cheka grew exponentially and instituted a fearsome 'Red Terror'. So too, the Whites unleashed their own brutal measures. Life was cheap during the Civil War. He who did not work did not eat. Those who did work got very little. 'The cities were hives of the starving,' wrote Victor Serge.⁶¹ Seeing the shortages of grain as the product of kulak hoarding and failing to properly understand the nature of social relations in the countryside, the Communists brutally coerced the peasants into handing over grain far beyond the 'hoarded' surplus. Terrible famine, disease and societal breakdown emerged. Things could not go on. Just how far the Bolsheviks had drifted from the revolutionary idealism of October 1917 was clear to many. Though still supportive of 'Soviet Power', the vast majority of peasants and workers had become disillusioned with the revolutionary regime. By 1921 critical choices in policy had to be made.



After the Battle, painting by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, 1923.

⁶¹ Victor Serge, 'Memoirs of a Revolutionary', cited in C. Corin and T. Fiehn, *Communist Russia*, 364.