

CHAPTER 30

Soviet Russia Under Lenin and Stalin

TIME LINE

- 1917 The March Revolution leads to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II
The Provisional Government is established
Soviets are elected in Petrograd and other Russian cities
The Bolsheviks take power in the November Revolution
- 1918 The Soviet government dissolves the constituent assembly
The Soviet government signs the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk
- 1918-1920 The Reds defeat the Whites in the Russian Civil War
Lenin introduces the New Economic Policy (NEP)
The March Revolution leads to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II
The Provisional Government is established
Soviets are elected in Petrograd and other Russian cities
The Bolsheviks take power in the November Revolution
The Soviet government dissolves the constituent assembly
- 1924 Lenin dies
Joseph Stalin introduces the doctrine of socialism in one country
The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is established
- 1928 Stalin initiates the first Five Year Plan
- 1934 The murder of Sergei M. Kirov marks the beginning of the Great Purge

World War I hastened the collapse of the tsarist regime. By the end of 1916, Russia was no longer able to sustain military operations against the Central Powers. The economy was in chaos, and the power of the government had all but evaporated.

In March 1917, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated. The new Provisional Government failed to establish its effective control over the country. In the November Revolution, Vladimir I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power, beginning their effort to create the world's first Communist society.

Following Lenin's death in 1924, Joseph Stalin gradually established his authority. In the Five Year Plans, which began in 1928, Stalin sought to reorganize the country's economy, eliminating capitalism and promoting the development of heavy industry and the collectivization of agriculture. Stalin's rule

VIAULT

was also marked by the Great Purge, the dictator's attempt to eliminate any possible opposition to his absolute authority.

The March Revolution

National Collapse

For Russia, World War I was a devastating experience. Russia's backward agriculture and underdeveloped industry, transportation, and communications could not sustain a major war effort. In the autumn of 1915, Tsar Nicholas II (r. 1894-1917) took personal command of his army, leaving the government in the hands of his wife, the Empress Alexandra (1872-1918). She came increasingly under the influence of the unscrupulous Grigori Rasputin (1872-1916), a self-proclaimed holy man who supposedly had the mystical power to stop the bleeding of the imperial couple's hemophiliac son, Alexei. As Rasputin's power grew, the prestige of the tsarist regime suffered. In December 1916, a group of conspirators with close ties to the imperial family murdered Rasputin. The removal of one man, however, could not reverse the course of Russia's collapse.

End of Tsarist Regime

In early 1917, spontaneous strikes and demonstrations swept the Russian capital of Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg). The unrest resulted from war-weariness, shortages of food and other goods, runaway inflation, and distrust of the government. Tsar Nicholas II dissolved the Duma (the Russian parliament), but most of its members remained in the capital. On March 12, the Duma elected a committee to represent its interests.

As the disturbances mounted, Tsar Nicholas II ordered troops to suppress the demonstrations. Disobeying their orders, the troops joined the demonstrators. On March 15, the tsar abdicated. After three hundred years of ruling Russia, the power of the Romanovs collapsed. (In 1917, Russia still used the Julian calendar, which, in the twentieth century, was thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar. By the Julian calendar, the disturbances in Petrograd intensified in late February. For that reason, the revolution is often referred to as the February Revolution.)

The Provisional Government

The Duma committee now became Russia's Provisional Government, headed by Prince George Lvov (1861-1925), a liberal nobleman. Alexander Kerensky (1881-1970), a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, was

the only socialist to serve in the liberal-dominated government. The Provisional Government promised reforms and announced plans for the election of a constituent assembly to draft a constitution for a democratic republic.

Creation of Soviets

In the meantime, workers, soldiers, and sailors in Petrograd, responding to a call issued by socialist leaders, elected the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. ("Soviet" is the Russian word for council.) Although the Petrograd Soviet was controlled by members of the various socialist parties, it gave tacit support to the Provisional Government. Similar soviets were established in other Russian cities and towns.

Bolshevik Program

In April 1917, Vladimir I. Lenin (1870-1924), the leader of the radical Marxist group known as the Bolsheviks, returned to Petrograd from his exile in Switzerland. He presented his program, the April Theses, to his Bolshevik followers, urging them to push for a proletarian socialist revolution.

The Bolsheviks and other socialists called for "Peace, Land, and Bread": an end to the war, the confiscation of the land of the great landowners and its distribution to the peasants, and the seizure of food for the cities.

Policies of Provisional Government

While the Provisional Government recognized the peasants' need for more land, it also respected the rights of private property. Therefore, the government was not prepared to authorize the confiscation of land, nor was it willing to seize food to meet the needs of the cities.

The Provisional Government also wanted to continue the war against the Central Powers. In July 1917, the Russian army launched an offensive against the Austrians in Galicia. However, the offensive quickly collapsed.

The July Days

Even before news of the events in Galicia reached Petrograd, the July Days insurrection broke out in the capital. The July Days represented a spontaneous revolt against the unpopular Provisional Government. Most of the leaders of the Petrograd Soviet opposed the insurrection, believing it was premature. Although Lenin shared this view, the Bolsheviks nevertheless supported the July Days. When the insurrection was suppressed, Lenin had to flee to Finland to escape arrest. In the short run, the Bolsheviks were weakened by their support of the revolt. In the long run, however, this

VIAULT

position won the Bolsheviks many new followers among the increasingly more radical workers, soldiers, and sailors of the capital.

In late July, Kerensky replaced Prince Lvov as head of the Provisional Government. The change in leadership did little to strengthen it.

The Kornilov Affair

In September 1917, General L. G. Kornilov (1870-1918), the commander of the Russian army, attempted to seize power and establish a military dictatorship. With the help of the Bolsheviks, who now controlled the Petrograd Soviet, the Provisional Government was able to turn back the threat. The Kornilov Affair served to weaken further the Provisional Government.

The November Revolution

In late October, Lenin ordered his followers to begin plans to overthrow the Provisional Government. On the night of November 6-7, the Red Guards, an armed force organized by the Petrograd Soviet, seized key strategic locations in the city. (By the Julian calendar, it was October 24-25, and even today the Soviets refer to the "Great Socialist October Revolution.")

On the morning of November 7, Lenin announced the establishment of a new regime, which bore the revolutionary name of the Council of People's Commissars. Lenin served as the council's chairman, while Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) became commissar for foreign affairs. Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) was commissar for nationalities.

In the other major cities and towns, the Bolsheviks also took control, although fighting continued in Moscow for several days. While the Bolsheviks had seized power with relative ease and little violence, their new government confronted immense problems.

Lenin

Youth and Early Career

The man known to history as Lenin was born Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov in 1870 in Simbirsk, a town on the Volga River east of Moscow. His father was the director of the elementary schools of the province. His older brother, Alexander I. Ulianov, was involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Tsar Alexander III. The plot was uncovered before it could be carried out, and Alexander Ulianov was executed in 1887.

Lenin attended the University of Kazan briefly but was expelled for participating in a student demonstration. He studied law on his own, and in the mid-1890s he passed the state law examination.

More interested in Marxism than the practice of law, Lenin became involved in radical activities in St. Petersburg. He was arrested and imprisoned and then exiled to Siberia. In 1900, he went into exile in Western Europe. There he published a Russian-language Marxist newspaper, *Iskra* ("The Spark"), which was smuggled into Russia.

Leader of the Bolsheviks

In 1898, a group of Russian Marxists established the Social Democratic Party (see Chapter 25). When the Russian Social Democrats met in London in 1903, Lenin and his followers, known as the Bolsheviks, split with the more moderate Russian Marxists, the Mensheviks. Lenin and the Bolsheviks insisted that party membership should be restricted to an elite group of committed revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks also believed the party should press for the proletarian revolution in Russia at an early date, rather than wait for Russian industrial capitalism to achieve a mature level of development.

Early Measures of the Bolshevik Regime

Following the November Revolution, Lenin and his followers sought to realize the Bolshevik vision of the new socialist society. The government urged the conclusion of an immediate peace. It called on the peasants to seize the landowners' land and the workers to take control of the factories.

Reform Laws

Regarding the Russian Orthodox Church as a reactionary institution, the Bolsheviks sought to destroy it. Church and state were separated, church property was seized, and many churches, monasteries, and convents were closed. Religious instruction was prohibited, and only civil marriage ceremonies had legal recognition.

The Bolsheviks replaced the Julian calendar with the Gregorian calendar and simplified the Cyrillic alphabet. Titles of nobility were abolished.

The Constituent Assembly

Prior to its overthrow, the Provisional Government had scheduled elections for a constituent assembly to be held in late November. Lenin's government decided to allow these elections to be held, but the results were disappointing for the Bolsheviks. Although the Bolsheviks had won increasing support in Russia's cities, the country remained overwhelmingly rural, and the

VIAULT

Socialist Revolutionary Party had a large following among the peasants. Some 420 Socialist Revolutionaries were elected to the constituent assembly, while the Bolsheviks won only 225 seats.

In January 1918, the constituent assembly met in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks dissolved it after only one session. Lenin also organized a secret police force, known by its Russian acronym as the Cheka, to combat counterrevolutionary activity. By dissolving the constituent assembly and establishing a secret police, Lenin began the process of creating a Bolshevik dictatorship to replace the autocracy of the tsars.

Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

Negotiations between Lenin's government and the Germans led to the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. Believing that it was impossible for Russia to continue the war, Lenin insisted that there was no alternative to accepting the harsh terms dictated by the Germans. In any event, he reasoned, the world revolution would soon engulf Germany, and the treaty would then be nullified.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk forced the Russians to give up Finland, Russian Poland, the Baltic area (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), part of Belorussia and the Ukraine, and Transcaucasia. The treaty was nullified following Germany's defeat by the Allies later in 1918.

The Civil War

The November Revolution had been unexpected, catching the Bolsheviks' opponents off balance. By the spring of 1918, however, these opponents had recovered their poise and began their effort to topple Lenin's regime.

Reds Versus Whites

During the Civil War, the Bolsheviks—who began to call themselves Communists—had certain advantages. They dominated the heart of the country and had much of Russia's remaining industry under their control. Their lines of communication and supply were relatively short. Furthermore, Leon Trotsky, who now served as commissar for war, succeeded in creating an effective fighting force, the Red Army. On the other hand, the anti-Communist forces, known as the Whites, failed to coordinate their efforts. Furthermore, many Russians feared that a White victory would mean the restoration of the old order.

Nevertheless, the Whites took control of large areas of Russia. In July 1918, as White forces approached the Ural Mountains town of Ekaterinburg,

local Communists ordered the murder of the former tsar and his family to prevent their rescue by the Whites.

During 1919 and 1920, the Reds gradually defeated the major White commanders: Admiral Alexander Kolchak (1874-1920) in western Siberia, General Nikolai Yudenich (1862-1933) in the Baltic region, and Generals Anton Denikin (1872-1947) and Piotr Wrangel (1878-1928) in the Ukraine and northern Caucasus.

Allied Intervention

Allied intervention in the Civil War proved to be of limited significance. French, British, and American troops were sent to Russia to prevent the Germans from seizing stockpiles of raw materials, while the Japanese intervened in eastern Siberia. While the Allies provided some assistance to the White forces, they did not commit themselves fully to the effort to overthrow Lenin's regime. Nevertheless, the Soviets have never forgotten these Western invasions of Russia.

Soviet Territorial Losses

During the Civil War, the Soviets suffered some major setbacks. In the West, Finland and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania gained their independence, while Rumania seized the province of Bessarabia. Independence movements failed, however, in the Ukraine and in Georgia and Armenia in the Caucasus. In 1920, Poland invaded Russia. Under the terms of the Treaty of Riga, signed in March 1921, Poland annexed western Belorussia and the western Ukraine.

War Communism

During the Civil War, the Soviet regime established a policy known as War Communism. The major industries, as well as banks and insurance companies, were nationalized. Private trade was prohibited, and the regime requisitioned food from the peasants in order to feed the cities. The Supreme Economic Council supervised the operations of the Russian economy.

The economy sank into deeper chaos. Agricultural and industrial production declined sharply, the transportation and communication systems collapsed, and the cities experienced increasingly more serious shortages of food and fuel.

The New Economic Policy

Soon after the Civil War, the mounting Russian discontent erupted. In February and March 1921, sailors mutinied at the Kronstadt naval base, near

VIAULT

Petrograd. This was an especially shocking occurrence, since the Kronstadt sailors had long been ardent supporters of Lenin and the Communists.

Recognizing the need for changes, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in March 1921. The NEP brought a partial restoration of capitalism, which Lenin justified as one step backward that would make possible two steps forward later.

Under the NEP, the state retained ownership and control of large industries, the so-called "commanding heights" of industry. The state also controlled transportation and foreign trade. Smaller industries were turned over to private operators and cooperatives, and private retail trade was permitted.

Believing that "it is easier for us to change our policy than it is to change the peasant," Lenin ended the requisitioning of food. A tax in kind, payable in grain, was levied on the peasants, who could then sell their surplus produce on the open market. This provided the peasants with an incentive to produce more. Peasants were also permitted to rent additional land and to hire labor.

Concessions were granted to foreign capitalists so that Russia could get the technical expertise it needed to carry out its economic recovery. Under the New Economic Policy, the Russian economy revived. By 1927, it had generally regained the level of 1913.

The Soviet State

The Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR)

The constitution of 1918 established the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, embracing the traditional heartland of European Russia, as well as Siberia and Central Asia. The indirectly elected All-Russian Congress of Soviets served as the republic's parliament, while executive authority was entrusted to the Council of People's Commissars.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)

In 1924, a new constitution went into effect, creating the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This was a federation of the RSFSR with the Soviet republics of the Ukraine, Belorussia, and Transcaucasia. While the republics were permitted a degree of cultural autonomy, political control was exercised by the Communist party leaders in Moscow.

The Stalin Constitution (1936)

In 1936, the so-called Stalin constitution was adopted. The USSR remained a federation of states, which now numbered eleven republics. (There

would later be fifteen.) A new national parliament, the Supreme Soviet, was established, consisting of two houses, the Soviet of the Union and the Soviet of Nationalities. The members of the Supreme Soviet were directly elected, with all citizens eighteen years of age and over granted the right to vote. The Council of People's Commissars continued to exercise executive authority.

The Stalin constitution also contained a bill of rights, which included the right to employment and the right of the elderly and disabled to care, along with guarantees of more traditional civil liberties.

Communist Party Rule

In the Soviet system, however, a wide gulf persisted between constitutional provisions and practical reality. Power remained in the hands of the leaders of the Communist Party. In theory, the work of the party was directed by a Central Committee, whose members were elected by a party congress that met every few years. In practice, however, the Political Bureau (Politburo), which consisted of the party's top leaders, dominated both the Communist Party and the Soviet state.

The Secret Police

The Soviet Union remained a police state. In 1922, the secret police, the Cheka, was reorganized as the GPU. In subsequent years, the Soviet secret police underwent a series of reorganizations, becoming in turn the OGPU, the NKVD, the MVD, and finally the KGB.

Stalin Versus Trotsky

In 1922, Lenin suffered the first in a series of strokes. He died in January 1924. Even before Lenin's death, a struggle for power began within the Soviet leadership. The chief rivals were Trotsky and Stalin.

Trotsky's Doctrine of Permanent Revolution

Trotsky, the commissar for war, was the second best-known Communist leader after Lenin. He was an advocate of the doctrine of permanent revolution, which taught that the revolution that had begun in Russia as a bourgeois revolution and had become a proletarian revolution would continue and turn into a world proletarian revolution. According to this view, the world revolution was necessary for the survival of Soviet Russia's socialist society.

Stalin's Doctrine of Socialism in One Country

VIAULT

Although Stalin was less well-known than Trotsky, he held several key positions in the Soviet leadership, including the posts of commissar for nationalities and general secretary of the Communist Party. Stalin used the latter position to develop support among the party rank and file.

As his rivalry with Trotsky intensified, Stalin proposed the doctrine of socialism in one country. Writing in *Problems of Leninism* (1924), Stalin contended that the Soviet Union could survive and develop its socialist society even if the world revolution did not occur in the near future.

Stalin's Victory

In his struggle against Trotsky, Stalin formed an alliance with two other ambitious men, Grigori Zinoviev (1883-1936), the leader of the Communist Party in Leningrad (formerly Petrograd) and the head of the Communist International (Comintern), and Lev Kamenev (1883-1936), the party leader in Moscow.

In 1925, the triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev forced Trotsky to step down as commissar for war. In 1926, Trotsky and his supporters were expelled from the Politburo. In 1927, Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party and exiled to Central Asia. Two years later, in 1929, he was exiled from the Soviet Union. Ultimately Trotsky went to Mexico, where he was murdered by a Stalinist agent in 1940.

As Trotsky appeared on the verge of defeat in 1926, Stalin ended his alliance with Zinoviev and Kamenev. The Left Bolsheviks, as Zinoviev and Kamenev and their followers were known, advocated the end of the New Economic Policy, forced industrialization, and a policy designed to compel the obedience of the peasants. Stalin now allied himself with the Right Bolsheviks, whose leaders included Nikolai Bukharin (1888-1938), a prominent party theoretician and the editor of *Pravda*, the official Communist party newspaper; Alexei Rykov (1881-1938), who had replaced Lenin as chairman of the Council of People's Commissars; and Mikhail Tomsky (1880-1936), the head of the trade unions. The Right Bolsheviks opposed a sudden ending of the NEP and forced industrialization and favored a conciliatory policy toward the peasants.

Zinoviev and Kamenev were soon isolated and expelled from the Communist Party. Stalin then ended his alliance with the Right Bolsheviks. By 1929, Stalin had established his dictatorial control.

The Five Year Plans

As Stalin moved toward establishing his unchallenged authority, he adopted the program of the defeated Left Bolsheviks. In 1928, he initiated the first in a series of Five Year Plans. These plans were designed to end the New Economic Policy, eliminate capitalism, and create a socialist economy; to promote the rapid development of heavy industry; and to collectivize agriculture. The collectivization of agriculture would accomplish two goals, increasing the productivity of agriculture and forcing the peasants to cooperate with the regime.

Industrialization

The entire Soviet economy was placed under the centralized direction of the State Planning Commission (Gosplan). Immense efforts were put forth in a campaign to develop the Soviet Union's industrial plant. In an effort to encourage productivity, efficient workers were rewarded with higher pay, better housing, and other benefits. The Stakhanovite award, named for Alexei Stakhanov, who mined an immense amount of coal in a single day, was presented to workers who exceeded their quotas. By 1940, the Soviet Union stood third in total industrial production behind the United States and Germany. However, the production of consumer goods and the construction of housing were neglected.

Collectivization of Agriculture

During the first Five Year Plan (1928-1932), the campaign to collectivize agriculture encountered intense resistance from the peasants, who did not want to surrender their holdings.

The state planned to establish two types of farms, collective farms (*kolkhozes*) and state farms (*sovkhazes*). Peasants joining a collective farm would pool their land to form a commune. An elected management committee would run the kolkhoz, and the peasants would share in its income. Peasants who worked on state farms would be paid regular wages, similar to those earned by factory workers. According to the plan, most farms would be kolkhozes.

To fight collectivization, many peasants burned their crops, smashed their equipment, and killed their livestock. In order to feed the cities, government agents seized food, leaving the peasants to starve. During the struggle over collectivization, some 5 or 6 million peasants died, most of them in the Ukraine and the northern Caucasus.

VIAULT

The regime denounced the resisting peasants as kulaks, peasant capitalists, and launched a campaign for the elimination of the kulaks as a class. Millions of peasants were sent to labor camps in Siberia and the Arctic region.

In order to accomplish the collectivization of agriculture, the regime made concessions to the peasants during the second Five Year Plan (1933-1937). Peasants on the collective farms would be allowed to have their own houses, a few head of privately owned livestock, and kitchen garden plots. They were allowed to sell surplus produce from their kitchen garden plots on the open market. With this compromise, a clear concession to capitalism in agriculture, the campaign for collectivization was pressed forward.

The third Five Year Plan was introduced in 1938 but was suspended following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

The Great Purge

In December 1934, Sergei M. Kirov (1888-1934), chief of the Communist Party in Leningrad, was assassinated. A popular Communist leader, he had challenged Stalin's policies. Stalin apparently instigated the murder, but the government blamed a conspiracy organized by the exiled Trotsky.

The secret police, now known as the NKVD, began mass arrests of party members and others. Between 1936 and 1938, three public trials of prominent Old Bolsheviks were held, involving more than fifty defendants. All were convicted, and almost all were promptly executed, including Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, and Rykov. A secret trial of the Soviet Union's top military commanders was held in the summer of 1937. Marshal Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky (1893-1937), the chief of the general staff, and seven other generals were executed. An extensive purge of the officer corps followed. Less prominent victims were sent to labor camps, which may have held as many as 10 million prisoners by 1939, when the Great Purge subsided.

The purge of prominent members of the Communist Party hierarchy and the military high command, however vicious, served to eliminate any possible rivals to Stalin. But the purge of millions of rank-and-file party members and ordinary Soviet citizens served no evident purpose apart from filling the citizenry with a sense of terror.

Soviet Foreign Policy

In the years immediately following the November Revolution, the Soviet leaders expected the world revolution would occur in the near future. In

March 1919, they established the Communist International (Comintern) to further this goal; they placed little emphasis on traditional diplomacy as a means to foster the objectives of the Soviet state in international affairs.

The failure of the world revolution to materialize led the Soviets to return to the methods of diplomacy. From 1918 to 1930, Soviet diplomatic efforts were directed by Georgi Chicherin (1872-1936), the commissar for foreign affairs.

Diplomatic Relations

During 1920-1921, Soviet Russia established relations with several neighboring states, including Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Turkey, Persia, and Afghanistan. In 1922, the Soviets signed the Treaty of Rapallo, a treaty of friendship with Germany. By 1924, Chicherin had succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations with most of the Western European states, including Great Britain, France, and Italy. However, the United States did not extend diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union until 1933.

Comintern Activities

While Chicherin sought to develop diplomatic relations with other countries, the Comintern continued its efforts to foment revolution against the governments of these countries. The activities of the Comintern thus interfered with Chicherin's efforts to conduct even the semblance of a normal foreign policy. Gradually, the Comintern was subordinated to serve the interests of the Soviet state. In the meantime, however, stresses developed in the Soviets' relations with the Western powers, and by the late 1920s the Soviets were almost as isolated diplomatically as they had been at the beginning of the decade.

By the time of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, two basic Soviet realities had become apparent. The first was the reality of Soviet economic power. As a consequence of Stalin's Five Year Plans, the Soviets developed their heavy industry, although agriculture, the production of consumer goods, and the construction of housing were neglected.

The second Soviet reality was its totalitarian political system. The power of the Stalinist dictatorship was about as absolute as humanly possible. The dictator's use of terror forced the Soviet people into total submission, creating a society of isolated individuals incapable of any organized opposition.