

Chapter 1: Russia Under Lenin, 1917-1924

Introduction

Between 1917 and 1924, Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks transformed Russia into the world's first communist state. Lenin seized power through the October Revolution (1917), dismantled opposition, and implemented radical political, social, and economic changes. However, his rule was marked by civil war, repression, and economic instability, leading to policies such as War Communism and the New Economic Policy (NEP). His death in 1924 left a power vacuum, sparking a fierce leadership struggle.

1. The October Revolution (1917)

The Fall of the Provisional Government

- **February 1917:** Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, ending 300 years of Romanov rule.
- A Provisional Government, led by Prince Georgy Lvov, was established but failed to address key issues:
 - Continued Russia's involvement in WWI, despite widespread opposition.
 - Failed to redistribute land to peasants.
 - Did not solve economic problems, leading to food shortages and inflation.
- The Petrograd Soviet, dominated by socialist revolutionaries, competed for power, undermining the government.

Lenin's Return and the April Theses

- Lenin, exiled in Switzerland, returned to Russia in April 1917 with German assistance.
- He issued the April Theses, demanding:
 - "Peace, Land, Bread" - an end to WWI, land reform, and food distribution.
 - "All power to the soviets" - overthrow of the Provisional Government.
 - State control of industry.
- Bolshevik support grew rapidly, especially among workers and soldiers.

The Bolshevik Coup (October 1917)

- Kerensky, leader of the Provisional Government, lost support after suppressing worker protests and failing in WWI.
- Bolsheviks infiltrated the Petrograd Soviet, led by Leon Trotsky.
- 24-25 October 1917: The Red Guards seized key buildings, including the Winter Palace.
- The Provisional Government collapsed, and Lenin declared a Communist government.

2. Lenin's Consolidation of Power (1917-1921)

Dismantling Opposition

- **Elections (November 1917)**
 - The **Socialist Revolutionaries** won **380 seats**; **Bolsheviks** won **168 seats**.
 - **Lenin dissolved the Constituent Assembly in January 1918**, establishing a **one-party dictatorship**.
- **Cheka (Secret Police) Created (December 1917)**
 - Led by **Felix Dzerzhinsky**.
 - Used to **eliminate political enemies**.
 - Arrested and executed **“counter-revolutionaries”**.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918)

- To end Russian involvement in WWI, **Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** with Germany.
- **Russia lost 34% of its population, 32% of farmland, and 54% of industrial resources.**
- Although deeply unpopular, Lenin saw it as necessary to **focus on internal stability**.

3. The Russian Civil War (1918-1922)

The Opposing Sides

- **Reds (Bolsheviks):**
 - Controlled **industrial regions and railways**.
 - Led by **Trotsky**, who reorganised the **Red Army (5 million men by 1920)**.
 - Used **propaganda and strict discipline**.
- **Whites (Anti-Bolsheviks):**
 - Included **monarchists, socialists, and foreign-backed troops (Britain, France, USA)**.
 - **Uncoordinated and divided**.
- **Greens (Peasant forces):**
 - Opposed both **Reds and Whites**.
 - Led by **Nestor Makhno**, fighting for **peasant independence**.

Key Events

- **1918:** **Bolsheviks executed Tsar Nicholas II and his family** to prevent restoration of monarchy.
- **1919:** **Whites attacked Petrograd and Moscow but were defeated**.
- **1920-1922:** **The Red Army crushed remaining White forces**.
- **Over 3 million people died**, with **famine and disease** causing additional suffering.

4. Lenin's Economic Policies

War Communism (1918-1921)

- Introduced to supply the Red Army during the Civil War.
- **Key Features:**
 - **Grain requisitioning** - peasants' food taken by force.
 - **Nationalisation** - all industries under state control.
 - **Banning of private trade** - black markets emerged.
 - **Forced labour** - workers placed under military discipline.
- **Impact:**
 - Agricultural output **collapsed**.
 - **1921 Famine** - over **6 million deaths**.
 - Industrial production fell by **50%**.
 - Peasant revolts increased, e.g. **Tambov Rebellion (1920-21)**.

New Economic Policy (NEP) (1921-1924)

- War Communism had failed, so Lenin introduced a **partial return to capitalism**.
- **Key Features:**
 - Peasants could sell surplus grain for profit.
 - Small businesses and trade were allowed.
 - Heavy industry, banks, and transport remained under state control.
- **Impact:**
 - Agricultural output **recovered**.
 - Economy **stabilised**, but inequality grew.
 - **Some communists opposed NEP**, calling it a betrayal of socialism.

5. Lenin's Foreign Policy

- **Comintern (1919)** - organisation to spread communism internationally.
- **Treaty of Rapallo (1922)** - alliance with **Germany**, cancelling Brest-Litovsk losses.
- Lenin abandoned world revolution by **1923**, focusing on consolidating Soviet power.

6. Lenin's Death and the Power Struggle (1924)

Lenin's Declining Health

- **1922:** Suffered first stroke.
- **1923:** Criticised Stalin, calling him “too rude” in his Testament.
- **21 January 1924:** Lenin died, sparking a leadership battle.

The Power Struggle Begins

- **Key contenders:**
 - **Trotsky:** Led the Red Army, wanted **world revolution**.
 - **Stalin:** General Secretary, promoted “**Socialism in One Country**”.
 - **Zinoviev & Kamenev:** Bolshevik leaders allied with Stalin.
- **Trotsky was eventually sidelined**, and Stalin emerged as leader by 1928.

Conclusion

- Lenin transformed Russia into a **communist dictatorship**.
- He **crushed opposition**, nationalised industries, and introduced **War Communism**.
- The **NEP revived the economy**, but communists debated its ideological impact.
- His death in 1924 **sparked a power struggle**, leading to Stalin’s rise.

Key Terms

- **April Theses:** Lenin’s plan for revolution.
- **Cheka:** Secret police force.
- **Brest-Litovsk (1918):** Peace treaty with Germany.
- **War Communism:** Harsh economic system during the Civil War.
- **New Economic Policy (NEP):** Partial return to capitalism (1921).
- **Comintern:** Organisation to spread communism internationally.