

The Bolsheviks & the Russian Civil War 1918–1920

Task : To read through the following text as a class (together with any further resources are given), and then write the answers to the questions in our exercise books.

So, the Bolsheviks had seized and consolidated (to a certain extent) their revolution. They had changed their name to the 'Communists'. They had also accepted the unpopular terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. They were also still only a relatively small group with their support mainly derived from industrial workers in the towns, while they had little or no party organisation in more rural areas.

1. *Which were the groups in opposition to this new communist dictatorship?*

Before long, Tsarist generals put together anti-communist armies known as the 'Whites', and soon the communists in Russia seemed to be surrounded.

2. *Write down the names of the 'White' generals and where their armies were based in the winter of 1917/8.*

There were three main threats to the communist government:

- *Non-Russian nationalities* in the country were keen at this stage to form their own independent states and using the turmoil of the revolution to engineer this.
- *Russians who hated communist rule* who were referred to as 'Whites' as opposed to the 'Red' communists.
- *Foreign, western powers* like Britain, France, and the USA, who were all opposed to communism and who were in favour of the restoration of the Provisional Government. These powers were also furious and suspicious at the deaths of Tsar Nicholas and his family during the 'Red Terror' in July 1918.

3 *What was the organisation of these threats and how did this differ to the communist set up? There are three main points stated: list them.*

Initially, the communist forces looked to be the weaker of the two and the 'Whites' made good progress, pushing inwards from the north, south and east. In fact, the western powers actually created a new opposition government in the north at a place called Archangel.

Of course, the Russian economy had to provide the army with the supplies it needed and to achieve this, the communists introduced 'War Communism'.

4. *What exactly did 'War Communism' involve? Which two procedures did the government undertake to assist the take over the Russian economy?*

Once normal economic life in Russia had come to an end, and the army's needs had been fulfilled, there was precious little left for the rest of the people. In fact, food

supplies were so short that Lenin had to send the secret police, the 'Cheka', into the countryside to seize the grain supplies of peasants.

5. *Which part of the April Theses do these actions contradict?*

Lenin then suffers a failed assassination attempt in August 1918. A female Socialist Revolutionary called Fanya Kaplan fired several shots at close range at Lenin. Although he was not fatally wounded, two shots penetrated his lung and neck and so he was understandably shaken. This incident was partly a reason for the 'Red Terror' that had been launched across Russia. People opposing or suspected of being against the communists were arrested, tortured and executed. In Petrograd alone, over 800 'enemies of the state' were executed. By the end of the Civil War, over 200,000 and 750,000 people had been murdered and over 85,000 imprisoned.

6. *Which two groups of people were automatic targets of the Cheka's Red Terror?*

Meanwhile, the conflict showed all the normal characteristics of a civil war, in that it was exceptionally vicious and bloody with countless atrocities being committed on both sides. But, by 1920, the tide had finally turned against the 'Whites' and in the east and south their armed forces were totally pushed back. The Red's took the upper hand and they were victorious.

The Communist forces were 'saved' by five factors:

- The 'Whites' had no organised aims and they did not work together in fighting the 'Reds'.
- The Communists had the advantage of operating from the central bases of Petrograd and Moscow.
- By accepting the assistance of the western powers, the 'Whites' were seen as supporting an 'invasion' in the north and working for foreign powers while the Communists used this to their gain, promoting themselves as patriots saving Russia.
- The Communists were inspired to secure victory in order to conserve the gains of the revolution. This was particularly true for the peasants.
- Lastly, the Communists had Leon Trotsky, a talented and ambitious military leader who was able to turn the army into a very effective fighting force numbering over 5 million men. He was a brilliant organiser who injected energy and discipline into his troops.

Another brilliant soldier, Mikhail Tukachevsky, aided Trotsky. Trotsky was ruthless and reintroduced conscription (compulsory military service), and harsh measures were imposed on his men during combat. For example, if Commanders were witnessed retreating from battle, they would be instantly shot. To promote unity and maintain morale, he travelled up and down the country in an armoured train supervising troops and urging them on to greater efforts.

During the height of, and after the conflict, there were two important developments; the Polish advance and the Kronstadt rising.

In 1919, at the height of the civil war, Poland had advanced into the Ukraine taking advantage of the communists weakened position after the turmoil of the revolution and the recent events of the conflict. The relationship between Russia and her neighbour had always been quite poor and, in response to the Polish advance, a Red Cavalry army was despatched immediately and was successful in pushing the Polish forces way back into their own country. In fact, the Polish capital, Warsaw, was very nearly captured. However, a Polish counter surge forced the Red Army backwards in complete disarray and they were forced to ask for a peace treaty to avoid a military disaster.

The signing of a peace agreement with Poland in March 1921 was a reminder to the communists of the danger of pushing the revolution forward, too far, too soon.

7. *The Kronstadt rising, also in March 1921 further affected the communists. Describe briefly the events at the naval base and how this may have 'checked' the communists.*

Further Tasks and Questions

1. What do you understand by the term 'Communism'?
2. Why did the civil war happen? What were the aims of the opposing sides?
3. Why might the Tsar and his family have been murdered by the Communists?
4. Restate the advantages and disadvantages the communists had in fighting the civil war. Which do you think was most decisive in their victory over the 'Whites'?