

Knowledge Organiser 6: Life in early Communist Russia

Did Lenin succeed in establishing a Communist state in Russia?

Key issue

Russia became a one-party state in which the Communist Party was the only legal political organisation. Lenin made it illegal for factions (groups inside the party) to disagree with the views of the Central Committee or Politburo. Freedom of speech was suppressed. Lenin was, in effect, a dictator. Russia was renamed the USSR (the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) in 1923.

Main organisations of the CPSU

Politburo

This was the leading decision-making body. It met on a daily basis and included between 7-9 members. Chosen by the Central Committee; it included Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin.

The Central Committee

The committee had 30-40 members and ran party affairs. It was the main body of the party until 1919 but continued to discuss key issues in the 1920s. However, major decisions were taken by Politburo.

Orgburo (the Organisational Bureau)

This was responsible for carrying out decisions made by the Politburo. It was led by the Secretariat under Stalin.

The Comintern

In March 1919, Lenin announced the creation of the Comintern or the Third International. Its purpose was to organise socialist revolutions throughout Europe and to spread communism beyond Russia. This alarmed Western powers. However, his success was limited. Trotsky believed in a 'permanent revolution', and the approach of 'socialism in one country'.

Role of the Cheka and Red Terror

'....it is the defence of the revolution'.

Created by Lenin, the Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle against Counter-Revolution, Sabotage and Speculation, the Bolshevik secret police. It was headed by Felix Dzerzhinsky and arrested, tortured and executed anyone who appeared disloyal to the Bolsheviks. Events such as Fanya Kaplan's shooting of Lenin three times at close range and the assassination of the chairman of the Petrograd Cheka resulted in Cheka's Red Terror campaign killing 250,000 people.

Key aspects of the economy

Decree on banking in 1917

nationalised all banks; they were now controlled by Sovnarkom.

Industry was kept under control of Vesenka

By 1919, 80% of enterprises were estimated to be under government control.

Bolshevik centralisation

Transport

Took control of the railway system as this was essential for the war effort and to maintain supplies to the cities.

Foreign Trade

In 1921, the Anglo-Russian trade treaty was reopened. In 1922, Russia signed the Treaty of Rapallo with Germany to secure greater economic ties.

Women

One of the first actions of Lenin and the Communists was to improve equality for women. A number of reforms were passed; divorce was made easier. Abortion on demand was made legal in all state hospitals. Women gained more equality in the workforce. A Women's Department of the Sovnarkom was created (the Zhenotdel), with its leader Alexandra Kollontai being the first woman to be a member of a European government. In employment, however, men were still given preference for jobs. NEP women were forced from skilled to unskilled work.

Education

Defined as 'an instrument for the Communist transformation of society'. Lenin recognised the importance of controlling education and so launched a massive literacy programme with the purpose of spreading communist ideas. Each child was to receive 9 years of free, universal education. Youth organisations were set up. Schools were placed under the Commissariat for Enlightenment. Curriculum was to include learning about the history of the revolution and communism. The Komsomol was an organisation for young people of the age 15 to early 20s which prepared them for entry into the Communist Party.

Propaganda and censorship

Lenin set up the Commissariat of Popular Enlightenment. Propaganda was vital to encourage support for the government and to make the masses understand the aims of the Communists. All news media were controlled by the government. Pravda, the Bolshevik newspaper, claimed to produce 375,000 posters in 1919. Agitprop trains and boats toured the country showing Sergei Einstein's films 'October' and 'Battleship Potemkin', which portrayed the power of the people in the Bolshevik seizure of power.

Street processions and theatres

May Day and the anniversary of the October Revolution became annual festivals. Statues and banners were also displayed of revolutionaries including Marx and Engels.

Religion

Lenin saw religion as a possible resistance to communism. As most Russians were religious, Lenin allowed freedom of belief and worship, but at the same time, he destroyed the power and wealth of the church. The decree on the Separation of Church and State declared that the church could not own property and banned all religious education in schools. Priests were labelled as fat parasites living off the peasants; they were also made to pay high taxes. Sunday schools and many monasteries were closed. Lenin used the famine of 1921-22 to demand that the church surrender its valuables. There was resistance, resulting in more than 8,000 people being executed in this anti-church campaign.

Culture

Experimentation in the arts was encouraged. Revolutionary Russia had become a centre for new 'avant-garde' ideas in art. However, Lenin had no use for avant-garde art because it was neither loved nor understood by people. He preferred a group of artists known as the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia who promised to 'depict the life of the Red Army, the workers, the peasants and heroes of Labour'. This was known as 'Socialist Realism' art for the people. Artists were encouraged to work in teams and orchestras did away with conductors. The government could not control writers in Russia and well-known writers continued to write as they had done before the revolution. The Russian film industry developed into one of the most innovative in the world.

How did life change for the people under Communist rule?