

Question 10

When the Bolsheviks overthrew the existing government in Russia in Oct/Nov 1917, they had little idea of what they were to face regarding the management of an entire nation. They were soon forced to discover how to do so, however, by sheer necessity. Their management of the country between 1918 and 1928 was marked by two broad approaches to the economy. Between 1918 and 1921 War Communism was adopted to cater for the needs of the Civil War. With this method of resource mobilisation proving unpopular among the masses, this eventually had to be changed. Thus was born Lenin's New Economic Policy. Both policies had an impact on the peasantry and proletariat in Russia (later the USSR), and this intends to explore assess this impact on Russian society.

The overthrow of the Provisional Government was not a bloodless affair. In fact, the Bolsheviks immediately realised that they had a great number of enemies, both internal and external. Britain and France were annoyed at the Russia's withdrawal from the war against Germany and so were intent on seeing the former government restored. They consequently sent forces, minimal forces admittedly, to assist in overthrowing the Bolshevik regime. (The fact the Bolsheviks also repudiated their war debts also contributed to this.) These forces merely added to the existing 'White forces' already within Russia, fighting against the Bolshevik 'Red Army'.

The Bolsheviks' assumption of power had following their coup which took control of St Petersburg and Moscow, and, faced with this White threat, resources had to mobilised in order to combat the enemies the Red regime. The policy adopted has come to be known as War Communism, and it is categorised by *prodazverstka*, or grain requisitioning. In other words, War Communism involved taking from the peasants what it needed by force. This proved highly destructive amongst the rural classes, who, illiterate and perhaps a little ignorant, did not understand why their grain was being robbed from them. The destructive impact of War Communism on the peasantry can be judged by the famine which occurred during the Civil War, resulting in the deaths of millions of Russians as a result of starvation. The Civil War in Russia was a turbulent period, and as a result statistics are perhaps unreliable and often difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, opposition to War Communism manifested itself in a number of ways.

For example, peasants, rather than have their livestock and grain 'requisitioned' would instead kill their livestock for their own consumption. Anecdotal evidence suggests this was not a particularly uncommon occurrence. At the same time, peasants attempted to hoard grain, and the fact that the Cheka and Red Army often engaged in quite violent skirmishes with the peasants suggests that the impact of War Communism on the countryside was quite negative. (In other words, peasant opposition shows the detrimental impact of the Bolsheviks' policies.) It seems that in the urban sector the results of War Communism were only slightly improved. The Bolsheviks knew that the proletariat was their sole base for support, so they tried to keep conditions in the cities as good as possible. Nevertheless, with peasants withholding their grain and making life difficult for the regime, this necessarily resulted in a declined standard of living in urban areas. Rationing and similar measures were imposed, but the government's priority was to feed the cities, so the largest and most negative impact was felt in the countryside amongst the ignorant peasantry. As Lenin actually admitted: 'The essence of War Communism was that we took from the peasant any surplus he may have had, and sometimes also what he needed to live on.'

Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks (or Communists, as they became in 1918) triumphed over their unorganised White opponents by 1921, and in some measure this must be attributed to the harsh repressive measures imposed by War Communism. The peasants and proletarians often had more support for the Reds, who were not being assisted by foreigners, but they nevertheless objected to the decline in the standard of living which was resulting from the new regime's attempts to deal with their economic problems.

However, once the Civil War had concluded, Lenin believed (quite rightly) that measures could be made a bit more lax and thus life made a bit easier on the peasantry and proletariat. There were less pressing needs once the Civil War had ended, and it was obvious that in both the towns and the countryside there was much objection to the way in which the Bolsheviks had handled things. One instance is when the loyal naval garrison of Kronstadt rose up against the Bolsheviks, demanding more liberty and less harsh methods of government control. In consequence to such discontent Lenin announced the introduction of his New Economic Policy, which many Communists objected to because they saw as a partial return to capitalism (which it was), against which they fought so hard and for so long.)

Nevertheless, NEP was necessary and it did relax pressures on peasantry and proletariat. It was Lenin's belief that the *smychka*, or alliance between peasantry and proletariat and Party, had to be maintained, and only NEP could achieve this. If the peasants were pushed too hard they would either object by revolting or simply sow less grain. The fact that the peasants did not do this is in indication of the NEP's success in making a positive impact on the peasantry and, in consequence, the proletariat (who depended on the countryside's produce for food). Whilst the Party controlled the 'commanding heights' of the economy, as Lenin said, NEP could continue uninterrupted for the time being.

However, one impact of NEP was the emergence of two new classes of people: the NEPmen and the kulaks, both profiting from the conditions under which NEP existed. They were later to be branded by Stalin as class enemies and then persistently 'smashed', but their existence must surely be considered a sign of a positive impact of the NEP. The fact that some peasants and proletarians were actually able to flourish under the new system suggests that life was much better for the peasantry and proletariat than it had been under War Communism, and the few statistics that do exist from the period suggest that the overall grain produce, and the corresponding production of goods in the towns, was improved under NEP.

This early progress did not prevent the Scissors Crisis from occurring in 1923, when declining output and rising prices produced a cross-over in the big graph of economics. This seemed to prove that the left-wingers in the Party had been right: NEP would not continue to stimulate the growth it had once the country had recovered from its former war matters. Nevertheless, whilst the arguments between the right and left regarding modernisation raged on, NEP continued until 1928 until it was unceremoniously abandoned in favour of Stalin's more oppressive Urals-Siberian method, which once again took from the peasants everything by force and expropriated kulaks and NEPmen. The fact that the worst living standards ever recorded in Russian peacetime history were experienced in 1932 seems to suggest that Stalin's resort to direct methods of mobilisation were detrimental once again for the peasantry and proletariat, as they had been under War Communism.

As a result, it seems that the impact of War Communism on the peasantry and proletarians had been rather negative. The requisitioning or *prodazverstka* took from the peasants all surplus, and often what was needed to live on. The resultant man-

made famine and decline in sowing is indicative of the negative impact which War Communism had on the peasants, as is the fact that peasants often took up arms and objected to the Cheka or Red Army from seizing their produce. In the towns the proletariat fared a little better because they were more likely to support the Communist regime, but times were similarly hard under War Communism with rationing and conscription and, overall, a restriction on the liberties which people could generally expect to hold in times of less crisis. By contrast, both proletarians and peasants seemed to flourish under NEP, or at least NEP seemed to have a more positive impact on the inhabitants of Soviet Russia. The trade between the proletariat and peasantry was mutually helpful, and it maintained the *smychka* which Lenin had thought so integral to the Bolsheviks' success. And although NEP signified a partial return to capitalism and the emergence of kulaks and NEPmen, both supposed class enemies of the regime, it must be considered to have a reasonably positive impact on Russian society between 1921 and 1928, as a reasonable degree of liberty was also permitted.