

The Russian Empire, 1917

Russia in the late nineteenth century was the largest country in the world. Her territory stretched from Europe across central Asia and Siberia to the Pacific Ocean. Most of the Asian lands had been conquered by Russia between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Only about half of the 130 million people in this vast empire were Russians. The others belonged to many nationalities who spoke different languages. There were Poles, Finns, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, and Tatars. Some belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church, the state church, but many were Roman Catholics, Muslims, or Buddhists. Many of these national groups wished to be free of Russian control.

PEASANT RUSSIA

Although Russia had an enormous army and appeared to be one of the most powerful states in the world, she suffered from several weaknesses. Compared to industrial countries such as Britain and Germany, Russia was economically backward. Her modern industries were begun later than those of Western Europe whom she lagged behind.

Russia was still mainly an agricultural country. Ninety per cent of the people were peasants. They lived in the countryside and either farmed small plots of land or worked on the large wheat estates of the south. Until the 1860s most peasants had been serfs. This had meant that they

worked for a landowner and were not allowed to leave their village. At that time few peasants owned the land on which they worked. Most land was owned by the State, the Church, and a small number of nobles and businessmen. When the serfs were freed in 1861 some did buy land and become prosperous. But most peasants became poorer. The population was increasing rapidly and there was not enough land to go round. (D1)* Many peasants became landless labourers or went to work in the new industries which were being built in the countryside, and in the growing towns.

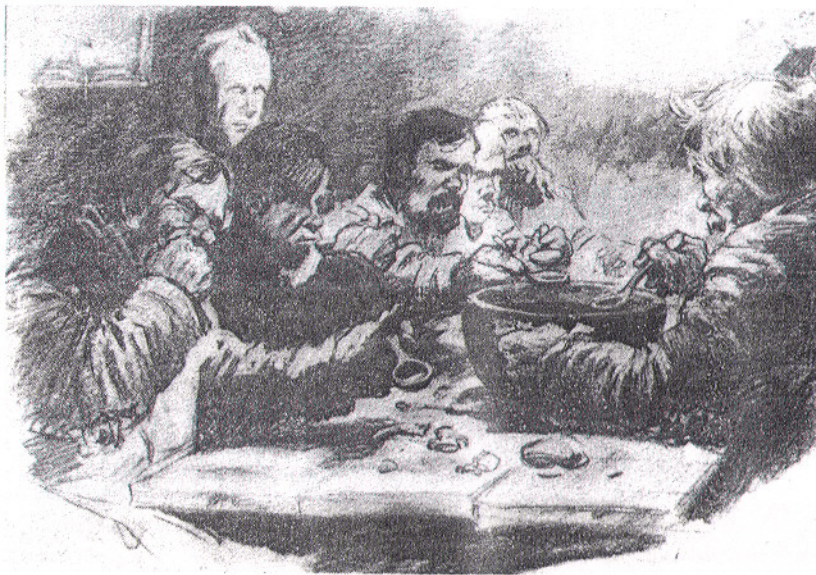
NEW INDUSTRIES

In the middle of the nineteenth century Russia began to develop

new industries. A large part of the equipment and money needed for building factories, mines and railways came from the industrial countries of Western Europe. This meant that many Russian industries were foreign owned. Russia paid for the equipment and money with exports of grain and timber and with taxes taken from the peasants. Many of the new industries were in cities such as Moscow and St Petersburg (it was called Petrograd after 1914; it is now Leningrad). The workers lived in sprawling slums and worked long hours in bad conditions for low wages. Russia's factories were among the largest in the world. Thousands of men and women worked in the same factory buildings. These were ideal places for agitators to organize trade



Famine in a village of the Volga region, 1892. Peasants being fed by a charity organization. Famine was common in the countryside and led to riots



Working men with wooden spoons eating from a common bowl. A picture drawn in St Petersburg 1905.



unions and plan revolution.

At the head of the Russian Government was the Tsar, Nicholas II (reigned 1894-1917). He was an absolute ruler. That means that he could appoint anyone he liked to be a member of the Government. Not a clever man, he was ill-suited to run a country as big and important as Russia. Nicholas believed that he had been appointed by God to rule. He didn't want an elected Parliament to help him govern or to advise about new laws. Most of the nobles, officials and church leaders who helped to run the slow, badly organized system of government agreed with this. And those who opposed the Government or tried to bring about changes were either imprisoned or sent into exile.

Tsar Nicholas II with his only son Alexius

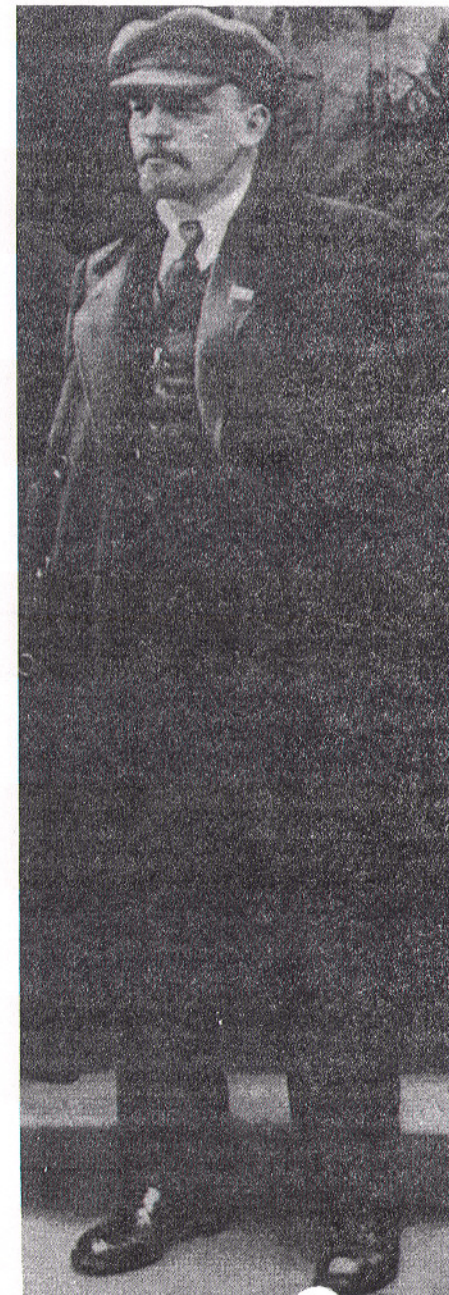
THE REVOLUTIONARIES

During the late nineteenth century many Russians, especially the younger and more educated people, wanted to solve their country's problems of poverty and harsh government. Some of the wealthier people, such as lawyers and businessmen, hoped that changes would come peacefully. Others thought that conditions were so bad that gradual reform would not work. Only a revolution could change Russia.

Many different ways of starting a revolution were tried. Some revolutionaries favoured the murder of important politicians and officials. Others thought it was more important to stir up the peasants against their landlords. But these methods did not work.

Some of the revolutionaries were followers of Karl Marx (1818-83). Marx was a German thinker who wrote about the social and economic conditions of Europe in the nineteenth century. He thought that industrial countries like Britain and Germany would go on growing in power and wealth. The powerful owners (capitalists) of the industries, who also ruled these countries, would become richer while the workers who made the goods in the factories would become poorer. He was sure that eventually there would be a revolution in which the working class would take over the factories and the running of the Government. (D2) All industry would then be owned by the people who would share out the riches of the state equally to everybody in the country. Marx

Lenin. A photograph taken in 1919 at a May Day rally in Red Square, Moscow. Lenin died in 1924 at the age of 54 after several strokes.



thought that this socialist revolution was bound to happen because it was a law of history (like a scientific law). He believed that the revolution would first start in Britain and Germany because they were the most advanced industrial countries with more factory workers, although later he thought that it might start in Russia.

One of the people most strongly influenced by Marx's writings was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known as Lenin. Lenin was born in 1870, the son of a schoolmaster. His elder brother, Alexander, was executed for attempting to kill Tsar Alexander III in 1887. This had a great effect upon the young Lenin. He studied law at university but was expelled for taking part in anti-government riots. In the 1890s he was imprisoned and sent to Siberia for his political activities. Lenin and others developed what Marx had written into the ideas that we now know as Communism. Lenin did not believe in waiting for the revolution to happen. His aim was to use every possible means to start a revolt in Russia. He therefore organized a group of Marxists called Bolsheviks into a disciplined

band of trained revolutionaries. (D3) He insisted that his ideas should be accepted. This did not make him very popular with other revolutionaries. But Lenin was clever and very determined. He did not care what other people thought. He was sure that he was right and that revolution would come in Russia.

The Tsarist Government was well aware of these revolutionaries and their activities. Members of the various groups were often caught and put in prison. Lenin himself spent many years in exile in Britain and Switzerland.

THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR

In 1904 Russia went to war with Japan over who should dominate Korea and Manchuria. (*Japan's Modernization*)* Japan won and Russia and the Tsar were in trouble. The troubles were not so much because of what had been lost in the war but because of the shame of defeat. For Russia had been beating Asian countries for four hundred years: now one of these despised Asian countries had beaten her. The Government's failure in the war and the terrible

*Titles in brackets refer to other booklets in the Program

The Russo-Japanese war. Russian soldiers preparing to defend an advanced post in Manchuria 1904



Sailors of the Black Sea fleet mutiny during the revolution of 1905. This picture is a recreation in the Soviet film Battleship Potemkin made by Sergei Eisenstein in 1925

living conditions of the people led to peasant riots and strikes throughout Russia.

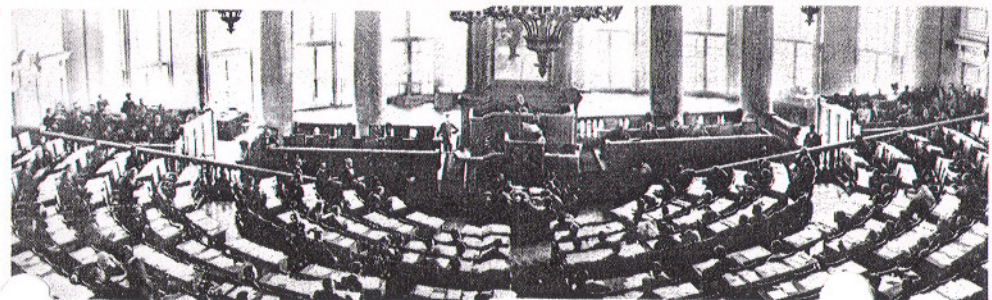
THE REVOLUTION OF 1905

On 'Bloody Sunday', 9th January 1905, troops opened fire on a workers' demonstration in St Petersburg. (D4,5) Throughout the spring and summer there were strikes in the towns, riots in the countryside and assassinations everywhere. In June the crew of

the battleship *Potemkin* mutinied, took over their ship and sailed along the coast of the Black Sea, bombarding towns on the shore. In October the nation was paralysed by a general strike which lasted for ten days.

The Tsar at last agreed to make important changes in the Government. He issued an 'October Manifesto' which promised to establish a Parliament, or Duma. (D6) The Duma was to be elected by some of the people but it could

The State Duma in session 1906. A portrait of the Tsar hangs above the head of the president of the Duma





Peter Stolypin, prime minister of Russia 1906-11. He ruthlessly suppressed all attempts at revolution

only give advice to the Tsar about how the country should be governed. This made little difference to ordinary people in Russia.

The revolution of 1905 failed for several reasons. By agreeing to a Duma the Tsar's Government gained the support of many of the better-off people who were content with gradual reforms. There were other people who wanted more rapid reforms and who were dissatisfied with the plan for the Duma. They wanted a Parliament, similar to those in France and

Britain, which was elected by most of the people and which would be responsible for governing the country. Thus the opposition to the Tsar's government was divided. Also many people who supported reform were frightened by the revolutionary violence and wanted law and order restored. The revolutionaries who hoped to change the whole way of life in Russia were few in number and the workers could not afford to remain on strike. But most important were the army and police who stayed loyal to the Government and helped to put down revolts in the towns and the countryside.

The Tsar still ruled Russia. He could ignore the Duma or just close it down if he did not like what it said. Nicholas was helped by a very able minister, Peter Stolypin. He persuaded the Tsar to introduce reforms in agriculture and education which would make some of the peasants more prosperous. He hoped these richer peasants would want peace in the countryside and thus help to prevent revolution. Above all Stolypin wanted to develop the wealth of the vast area of Siberia and thought that many of the problems of crowded European Russia could be solved if men emigrated to the new lands.

For a few years peace and prosperity seemed to be returning to Russia. But it was only a breathing space. Stolypin was shot dead in 1911. During the next few years there were renewed outbreaks of strikes and rioting. When war with Germany broke out in 1914 Nicholas hoped that it would unite the nation in support



Russian troops stop for food on their way to the front line during the First World War, April 1915

of him and his Government. Some of his ministers feared that war would only bring revolution. Lenin was sure of this. He realized that Russia was unlikely to stand the strain of a long war. (*The Two World Wars*)

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

For Russia the war was an almost total disaster. In the first two and a half years the army suffered more than five million casualties. In many parts of the front line the troops were reduced to fighting with their bare hands because the whole transport system had broken down and it was impossible to keep them properly supplied

with food and weapons. The situation was no better behind the lines. In the big cities the breakdown of the transport system meant shortages of food and fuel and so led to strikes and riots. (D7)

When Nicholas decided to take personal command of the troops at the front he handed over the running of the Government to his wife, the Tsarina. She was completely under the influence of a religious teacher, Rasputin. When any of the Tsar's ministers tried to say anything against him, Rasputin persuaded the Tsarina to dismiss them. The Government of Russia was therefore paralysed as one incompetent minister was



Demonstration in front of the Winter Palace, Petrograd 1917

succeeded by another in rapid succession. In the last twelve months of Nicholas's rule there were no less than four Prime Ministers, three Foreign Ministers and three War Ministers.

The Russian people had supported the war with enthusiasm at first. But by 1917 the peasants and workers had become heartily sick of it. Millions of men had been forced to join the army. Food production fell and prices rose. The corruption and weakness of the Government became more and more obvious every day. Many Russians wanted a strong Government that would fight the war properly. (D8) Even some of the nobles and officials who supported the idea of absolute rule began to plan how to get rid of Nicholas. Russia was on the

verge of breakdown. This was an ideal situation for the revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow the Government.

THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION

In late February 1917 strikes and food riots broke out in Petrograd. (D9) The soldiers called out by the Government to restore order mutinied (D10) and joined the rioters. Tsar Nicholas ordered the Duma to dismiss but its members set themselves up as the Provisional Government of Russia. On the next day Nicholas abdicated. (D11)

During the next six months the Provisional Government tried to govern Russia. Its leaders were reformers and moderate revolutionaries. They wanted to do two

main things: win the war against Germany, and hold elections for a new Duma which would then decide what changes had to be made in Russia. But the Provisional Government was not strong enough to rule. It did not have enough power. Throughout Russia factory workers, peasants and soldiers had organized themselves in to councils, or soviets, which held local control. One of the strongest soviets was in the capital, Petrograd. It was well organized and supported by so many workers and soldiers that it could act as another government alongside the Provisional Government. In the countryside law and order broke down and peasants seized the land for themselves. (D12) At the 'front' thousands of soldiers, most of whom were peasants, deserted and went home. And many of the national groups set up governments independent of Russia.

When the February revolution broke out Lenin was living in Switzerland. He was against the policies of the Provisional Government and wanted to return to Petrograd to organize the Bolsheviks ready to seize power. The Germans, eager to see revolt and chaos weaken Russia's war effort, agreed to help Lenin return home. After travelling secretly through Germany and Sweden by train Lenin arrived at the Finland Station, Petrograd, in April 1917. Other leading Bolsheviks living in exile also hurried back to Russia.

The war with Germany continued. Food supplies ran short. Most Russians wanted peace. (D13) Lenin was against the war



Kerensky (at left) taking the salute at a military parade. He was a brilliant speaker but his Provisional Government failed to end the unpopular war or deal firmly with the Bolsheviks. Kerensky went to live in America where he became a professor of history

and in his speeches he used the popular demands of 'Bread, Peace, and Freedom'. Workers in the big industrial areas gave their support to the Bolsheviks who gained control of the Petrograd soviet. In July the Bolsheviks tried to take over the Government by force but the attempt failed. Then, in August, a general named Kornilov threatened to march on Petrograd with his troops and seize power. Kerensky, the leader of the Provisional Government, armed the workers of the Petrograd soviet. These 'Red Guards', as they were called, prepared to defend the city. However, Kornilov's soldiers deserted him and joined the workers. Many



The first 'Red' Guards with arms seized from the arsenals in Petrograd

more workers began to support the Bolsheviks because they feared that other generals might try to take over the government of Russia. The Bolsheviks in the capital grew steadily stronger. They were well organized and backed by armed workers, soldiers and sailors. Lenin decided that now was the time to try to take over the Government.

THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

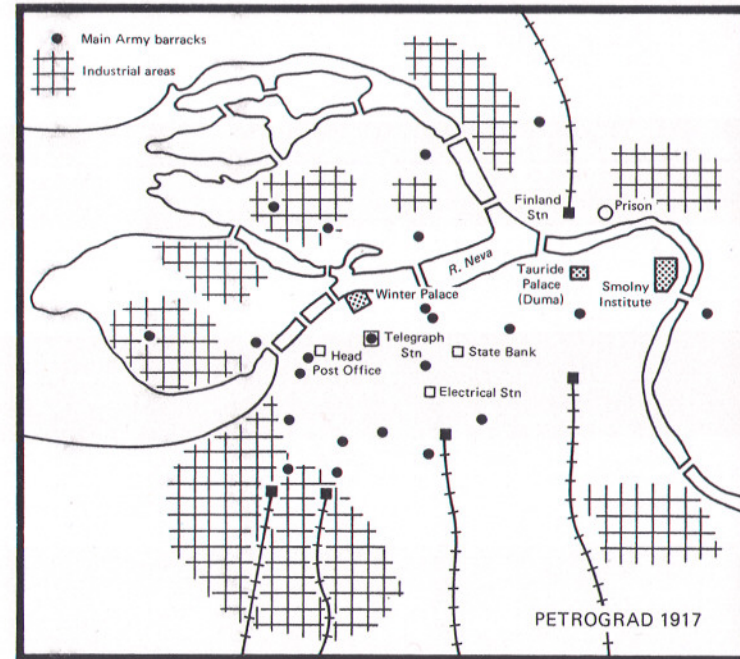
On the evening of 24th October the Bolshevik 'Red Guards' moved against the Provisional Government. They seized the bridges over the river Neva, occupied the main public buildings and the Winter Palace where the Provisional Government met. (D14) Within a few days the Bolsheviks

controlled Petrograd, Moscow, and several other cities. (D15) Securing control of the whole of Russia, however, was to take much longer.

Why were the Bolsheviks able to seize power so easily? One reason was that the Provisional Government was very weak. It could not keep order in the countryside and the towns, or prevent soldiers deserting the army. The Bolsheviks were never a large group. In free elections held at the end of 1917 only a quarter of the people voted for them. But their supporters lived in the large industrial centres of the heart of Russia, and were disciplined, determined and united. Many of the Bolshevik leaders were ruthless men, like Lenin, who were prepared to do almost anything to gain and keep power. (D16)



Demonstrators fleeing from troops of the Provisional Government in Petrograd during the July riots 1917



Petrograd, 1917



Lenin telling the Congress of Soviets to seize power, October 1917. A highly romantic view of the October Revolution painted by a Soviet artist after the death of Lenin. Notice that Josef Stalin, dictator of Russia, is given a prominent place behind Lenin

Although large parties opposed the Bolsheviks they were poorly organized and divided among themselves.

In the first months of Bolshevik control Lenin made a separate peace with Germany. A decree was passed giving the land to the peasants and all banks were taken over by the State. (D17) Lenin's aim was a Bolshevik, or Communist, dictatorship. He wasn't prepared to share power with other revolutionaries, or even fellow-Marxists, who didn't agree with his policies. Many of the anti-Bolsheviks prepared to fight Lenin's dictatorship.

THE CIVIL WAR

Before the war with Germany had ended civil war broke out in

Russia. Several groups known as 'Whites' opposed the Bolsheviks. There were socialists, liberals, nationalists, and former Tsarist generals. They set up separate governments in different parts of Russia and began to fight the Bolsheviks. Britain and France supplied some of them with arms, and also sent soldiers, in the hope that if they won they would bring Russia back in to the war against Germany. In the east Japan, and in the west Poland, took advantage of the chaos caused by the civil war to seize large parts of Russian territory. Facing the Whites and the Poles was the Bolshevik Red Army. It was organized by Leon Trotsky, one of the most brilliant of the Soviet leaders.

For nearly three years the Reds and Whites fought each other all

over Russia. (D18) The Bolsheviks won because they not only controlled the industrial areas but the Red Army was well trained and well led. The Whites lacked outstanding leaders, they were constantly divided, and at times even fought each other. France and Britain gave little help and soon withdrew from Russia.

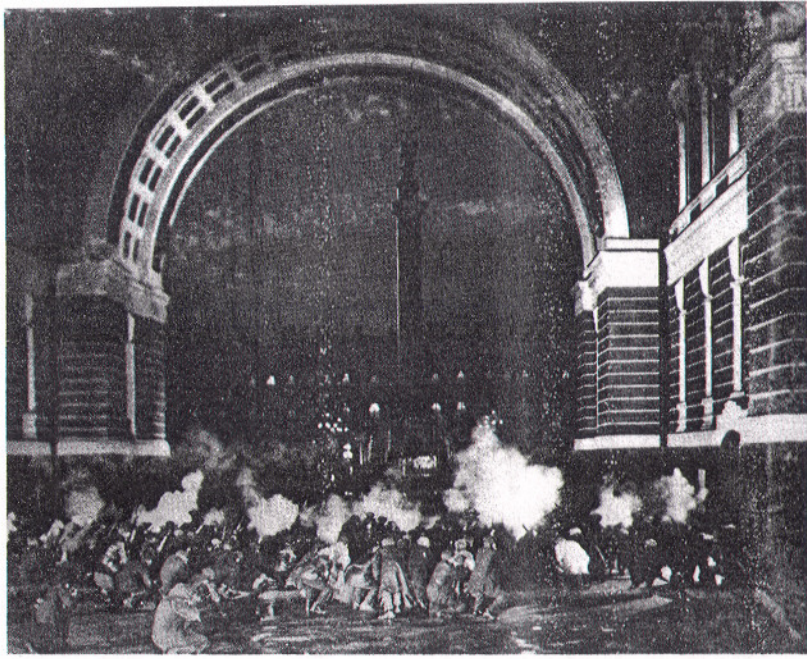
Millions of people were killed in the fighting or died from starvation. During the war the Tsar and his family were killed by the Bolsheviks. The old Russian empire was gone for ever. But all the national groups were not free. When the revolution began many thought that they could break away from Russian rule and set up their own independent states. But gradually the Bolsheviks regained control of almost all the lands which had previously been ruled by the Tsar. The Bolsheviks now



Leon Trotsky, the dynamic organizer of the Red Army. Lenin's death Trotsky left. He was murdered in 1940 on Stalin's orders

Students in Moscow drilling for the Red Army during the civil war





Red Guards storming the Winter Palace. From Eisenstein's film version of the October revolution Ten Days that Shook the World

called the new state the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or the Soviet Union. They hoped that as the Communist revolution spread other countries would join a union of socialist states. (D19)

THE CREATION OF THE SOVIET STATE

For Russia the civil war was an even greater disaster than the war with Germany had been. Much of the country was in ruins. Industries had been destroyed and everybody's way of life disrupted. Drastic measures were needed to restore order and to rebuild

Russia's economy. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were quite prepared to use whatever methods were necessary. Secret police and firing squads got rid of people who dared to oppose them.

Lenin wanted to make Russia a Communist country with the State controlling industry and agriculture rather than leaving it in the hands of private individuals or companies. But even with the power he had at his disposal he was unable to change everything at once. The peasants, for example, would not easily give up the land that they had just seized for themselves. In 1921 Lenin introduced his 'New

Economic Policy' which allowed some private ownership to continue for a few more years. The State kept control of the important parts of the economy, such as railways, banks and large factories, while small workshops and farms were left in the hands of their owners.

The adoption of the 'New Economic Policy' was forced on Lenin by the desperate state of Russia's economy and the violent opposition of peasants, workers and soldiers. (D20, 21) This shows that the ideas and practice of Russian Communism do not always go together. Lenin was mainly interested in keeping power and transforming Russia. And to

do this he was prepared to his ideas if necessary. It was to Stalin, Lenin's successor, that the Communist Party (the name taken by the Bolsheviks) extended State ownership on Russia had fully recovered the civil war.

But if economic changes came slowly, political and social power was placed in the hands of the Communist Party (the name taken by the Bolsheviks) other political organization was banned. The power of the Orthodox Church was broken and the educational system was to teach people to be good Communists. Russia was set on a new course for a new future.



The civil war and foreign intervention caused widespread destruction and famine throughout Russia. Hungry refugees at Samara, October 1921.