

MODERN HISTORY

Assess the impact of War Communism and the New Economic Policy (NEP) on both the peasantry and proletariat in Russia society between 1918 and 1928.

The series of rigid economic policies introduced in 1918, referred to as War Communism had a devastating effect on the peasantry and the proletariat. As a response to its crippling nature on the Russian economy, and the need to regain urban and rural support, the Bolshevik government were forced to implement The New Economic Policy (NEP). These capitalist reforms caused huge improvements in Russian living standards for both the peasantry and the proletariat.

War Communism led to decreased productivity and food shortages that devastated the Russian peasantry. Its policies allowed the Bolshevik government to control the distribution of resources around Russia and meet the demands of fighting a Civil War. Desperate and brutal methods were implemented in rural areas to attempt to gain control over the countryside, where the majority of the country's resources lay. In order to supply food to towns and factories, the government introduced grain requisitioning. Detachments of armed soldiers, workers from nearby towns and the secret police, CHEKA, began to seize stocks and confiscate surplus produce from richer peasants. These harsh measures stirred discontent within the Russian peasantry and, disillusioned with a government that had promised them land, 'only to have its produce seized by force', began to respond with violence. Instead of giving up grain to Food Detachments, peasants destroyed remaining crops and livestock and refused to sow. Production levels dropped to thirty seven million tonnes in 1921, and widespread famine caused five million to die. Resistance in the form of armed peasants were met with extreme brutality; and hundreds of peasants were arrested or executed. As the government encouraged class warfare between the poorer peasants and the kulaks, violence and corruption penetrated all areas of life; overturning the lives of the Russian peasantry.

War Communism crippled the Russian economy, leading to a state of discontent in urban areas. War Communism aimed to implement Marxist ideology in Russia and comprised of the nationalisation of industrial enterprises and removal of the market economy. In 1919, the Bolsheviks flooded the economy with bank notes, and the rapid inflation that followed reduced the role of money in favour of government-controlled bartering. The proletariat began to trade illegally and crime rates ran high as goods such as food and clothing were allocated through a class-based rationing system favouring workers and soldiers. Government seizure of factories was slow and chaotic; and Bolshevik-run enterprises were often inept and corrupt. Workers resented the loss of factory control and the strict labour discipline which prevented them from leaving their jobs without permission. The introduction of conscription and food shortages prompted a mass exodus to the countryside. The urban proletariat had decreased from 3.6 million in 1917 to 1.4 million in 1919 and the Russian capital, Petrograd, lost 70% of its workforce. Production levels dropped by 13% from 1913 to 1920, and the unrelenting measures of the Bolsheviks ensured the regular strikes and public demonstrations; revealing the widespread discontent War Communism caused amongst the proletariat.

The NEP renewed rural desire to increase productivity and support for the Bolsheviks; improving the living standards of the Russian peasantry. The public opposition of the Kronstadt sailors, the 'heartland of the Bolshevik support base', in 1921 'lit up' the harsh reality of Russian life 'like a lightning flash'. To restore peasant support for the government, Bolshevik leader, Lenin reluctantly introduced the capitalist policies of the NEP. His reforms put an end to grain requisitioning and introduced 'tax in kind'; a system where peasants were able to sell surplus grain on the open market for a profit. By providing peasants with an incentive to sow, grain production increased by 40 million tonnes in five years, allowing for the reopening of shops and restaurants, and the semblance of a normal life. A return to the market economy and ability to work for a profit resulted in a widespread improvement in peasant living standards and self-sufficiency. The legalisation of trade also saw the

return of the richer subclass of Russian peasants, the kulaks. The NEP worked to address the damage caused to the Russian peasantry through War Communism, and by increasing grain production and decreasing its rigid control over peasant life; it succeeded.

Proletariat living standards benefitted from the policies of the NEP. Reluctantly implemented to restore the Russian economy and public confidence in the Bolsheviks, the NEP allowed for a partial return to capitalism through the re-introduction of a free market and private ownership. Though heavy industry and banking was still largely controlled by the government, the market economy was allowed to develop through the legalization of small shops and businesses. Allowing the proletariat to generate their own wealth increased living standards, and developed the NEP men; a new class of small businessmen. As rationing was stopped and grain-taxes increased the productivity of peasant farming; the urban food supply increased. Coupled with the demilitarised labour and legalization of trade unions, the improved conditions in the cities halted urban exodus to the countryside. Additionally, the legalisation of gambling halls and night clubs on the condition that part of the receipts were reserved for the state, supplied the government with money to restore and refurbish buildings, houses and streets allowing for an improved quality of life. However, Russia's backward economy prevented factories from producing consumer goods at the same rate as the peasantry produced grain. The high supply of raw materials and limited supply of factory produced goods resulted in the scissors crisis, whereby peasants were not able to afford consumer goods; weakening bond between peasants and proletariat. In response the peasants began to limiting their output and Russia's main source of capital 'began to dry up'.

The harsh policies of War Communism resulted in a dramatic drop in levels of food production and had devastating results on the peasantry and the proletariat. In order to reverse the damage it caused on the Russian economy and the public opinion of the Bolsheviks, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy. The NEP succeeded in reviving the economy and increasing industrial and food production and, though it created new problems, resulted in the dramatic improvement of peasant and urban living standards.