CHAPTER 15

Towards the Abyss

When the Russian State entered the war it did so in an incomparably ramshackle, dilapidated, and inefficient condition. But this did not mean it was powerless. On the contrary, in one way the very fact that it was so inefficient, that power was so decentralized, that the bureaucracy was so incompetent, acted as a source of strength, for it gave to the State a quality of resilience that a more efficient and centralized régime might have lacked.

This resilience had shown itself more than once in Russian history. In the seventeenth century, during the Time of Troubles, the combined effects of civil war, foreign intervention, and economic collapse had still left the State intact. Napoleon's invasion of 1812 was no more successful. Even 1905, which would have toppled many a régime, did no more than shake the autocracy. The German invasion of 1941 is but another example of the amazing resilience of the Russian State. So long as the centre remained standing, almost any sacrifice could be endured, any loss undergone, any disaster overcome.

But resilience and the ability to absorb punishment were not enough in the conditions of twentieth-century warfare - all the more so in the face of the unsolved social problems that beset Russia. Stolypin's policy did, it is true, inaugurate an era of relative peace on the agrarian front. In the years before the war the number of peasant riots annually decreased. But Stolypin had asked for twenty years of peace - and this he would not have. In any case it is not easy to see how his policy could in the long term have contributed a lasting solution. On the other hand, in these very years, the workers' movement was reviving after the defeat of 1905. The number of strikes rose from 222 in 1910 to 466 (1911), to 2,032 (1912), 2,404 (1913), and to 4,098 (January–July 1914).

The dynasty had long lost any prospect of acting as a rallying-point. It had never regained the prestige lost on Bloody Sunday. The tercentenary of its accession, celebrated in 1913, evoked no answering echo amongst the public. Furthermore, the growing influence of Rasputin, the licentious, hypnotically gifted monk, rendered the court more and more odious.

Even so, as in all the other belligerent countries there was something of a union sacrée at the beginning of the war. The war was all things to all men. The ruling classes, as in Germany, could see in war the opportunity of diverting the labour movement into less dangerous paths. The Russian Liberals could console themselves with the hope that alliance with the Western democracies might lead to some relaxation of the autocracy. And as for Lenin - 'a war between Austria and Russia would be a very helpful thing for the revolution,' he said in 1913, 'but,' he added regretfully, 'it is not likely that Franz Josef and Nikolasha will give us that pleasure.'

The first Russian offensive culminated in the defeat at Tannenberg in August 1914. The campaign was undertaken in response to urgent French pleas for a manoeuvre that would take some of the pressure off Paris. And save Paris it did. The East Prussian campaign forced the Germans to divert eastwards two corps needed for the crucial first battle of the Marne. But the Russian losses were 170,000; a few weeks later the Russians suffered another disaster in East Prussia. The next year, on the southern front in Galicia, there came further disasters, with casualties reaching unprecedented totals. By the end of the first ten months of war they have been estimated at 3,800,000. In 1915 also, Poland, Lithuania, and Courland all fell to the Central Powers. In 1916 an offensive against Austria-Hungary dealt the Dual Monarchy an irreparable and overwhelming blow. It also saved the Italian army, materially helped the Allies during the battles of Verdun and the Somme, and brought Romania into the war on the allied side. But again Russian casualties and prisoners ran into millions. By now, the end of 1916, in a welter of corruption, incompetence, abysmal military leadership, and unimaginable human suffering, the Russian army had all but lost its capacity to fight.

Collapse at the rear matched disarray at the front. The mood of August 1914 was ephemeral. Very soon an unbridgeable
chasm was opening up between the Government and the people. In fact, who or what was the government? It changed so quickly, no one could be quite sure. In the first two years of war, four prime ministers, three foreign ministers, three defence ministers, and six ministers of the interior came and went.

The railway system in the western provinces and Poland proved to be inadequate; again, through the closing of the Baltic and the Black Sea ports, Russia was virtually cut off from its allies. Only the port of Archangel remained open, and this was icebound for about half the year. Furthermore, it had only a limited railway link with the interior. Entry through Vladivostok entailed a journey half-way round the world. The low level of technical and economic development produced an army suffering a paralysing shortage of equipment and trained personnel. Many soldiers often had no weapons at all; they were expected to arm themselves from the discarded rifles of the killed and wounded. Shells had to be rationed to the artillery batteries. Hospital and medical services, in the hands of volunteers from the union of zemstva and town councils, were so thinly spread that they had no practical value. The call-up operated irrationally, amounting by 1917 to some fifteen million—about thirty-seven per cent of the male population of working age. Chaos was piled on chaos through the influx of millions of refugees, mainly Jews and Poles, from Poland when the western provinces were placed under martial law and their population moved out of the fighting zone. As early as 1915 it was becoming difficult, according to the reports of provincial governors, to call up reservists and new classes of conscripts. Inflation, recourse to paper money (the convertibility of the rouble was abandoned in July 1914), rising prices, food shortages, and a fall in real wages produced an increasing ordeal for the mass of the population. This applied more to the towns than to the villages, which were more self-supporting. A rapidly mounting wave of strikes gave voice and vent not only to economic but also to political demands. 'Down with the Tsar'—this was the ominous cry beginning to be heard.

This went hand in hand with an atmosphere that Trotsky has described with characteristic verve:

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Enormous fortunes arose out of the bloody foam. The lack of bread and fuel in the capital did not prevent the court jeweller, Fabergé, from boasting that he had never before done such flourishing business. Lady-in-Waiting Vyrbuova says that in no other seasons were such gowns to be seen as in the winter of 1915-16, and never were so many diamonds purchased... everybody splashed about in the bloody mud—bankers, heads of the commissariat, industrialists, ballerinas of the Tsar and the Grand-Dukes, Orthodox prelates, ladies-in-waiting, liberal deputies, generals in the front and rear, radical lawyers, illustrious mandarins of both sexes, innumerable nephews, and more particularly nieces.\(^1\)

At the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917, almost every voice spoke in tones of an imminent upheaval. General Krimov told a Duma delegation: 'The spirit of the army is such that the news of a coup d'etat would be welcomed with joy. A revolution is imminent and we at the front feel it to be so.' The peasants were saying: 'When ten or fifteen generals are on the gallows we shall begin to win.' A Police Department report noted 'a marked increase in hostile feelings among the peasants not only against the Government but also against all other social groups...'. The same report stated:

The proletariat of the capital is on the verge of despair... the mass of industrial workers are quite ready to let themselves go to the wildest excesses of a hunger riot... The prohibition of all labour meetings... the closing of trade unions, the prosecution of men taking an active part in the sick benefit funds, the suspension of labour newspapers, and so on, make the labour masses, led by the more advanced and already revolutionary-minded elements, assume an openly hostile attitude towards the Government and protest with all the means at their disposal against the continuation of the war.\(^2\)

In a word, the war had utterly destroyed any confidence that still remained between the Government and the people.

The revolution began on 23 February 1917 (8 March old style). This would be the revolution that had been talked over

and fought for during the best part of a century. Many of those who had done the fighting and the talking, the plotting and the propaganda, who had printed the illegal leaflets, served their term in Siberia, and run the gauntlet of the secret police, would not of course have recognized their progeny in November 1917. But that is the way of history.

It began in a small way, spontaneously, almost, one might say, unpolitically. It was confined at first to Petrograd – St Petersburg’s wartime name. There were strikes, housewives’ demonstrations, mutinies among the troops and police – a collapse of all authority. The movement took the revolutionaries by surprise as much as anyone else. Public buildings were taken over against very little opposition, prisoners released, and police stations and barracks captured. The army refused to open fire on the demonstrators.

Side by side with the slow, elemental, mass movement went the ‘official’ revolution. This was compounded of the aspirations of the Russian Liberals, certain court circles, and British diplomacy, anxious to rid the country of an ineffectual government and to promote the war more effectively. On 12 March (27 February old style) the Premier, the senile Prince Golitsin, informed the Duma that the Tsar had decided on its prorogation. But the deputies refused to disperse and formed ten of their colleagues into a Provisional Government dominated by the Liberals and including also three right-wing members and one leftist, Alexander Kerensky, as Minister of Justice. On 15 March (2 March old style) the Tsar abdicated in favour of his brother, the Grand-duke Michael. But the Grand-duke refused the throne, after due consideration. For the first time in three centuries, Russia was without a Tsar.

More significant was the absence of a centre of power. The Provisional Government could not fill the gap. It was more a testimony to the patent inability of the Imperial Cabinet to carry on in the face of a disastrous war and a demoralized home front, rather than a harbinger of the new world of the masses.

Into this vacuum of power flowed irresistibly, inevitably, the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. This was a rebirth of the Soviet of 1905. Its members were elected by their workmates in barracks, factories, workshops, and public enterprises. It was not long before similar soviets were formed in Moscow and the provincial towns, and also in the countryside. In some places they even controlled food distribution. They undoubtedly enjoyed incomparably more support than the official Government. ‘The Provisional Government’, said one minister, ‘possesses no real power and its orders are executed only in so far as this is permitted by the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, which holds in its hands the most important element of actual power, such as troops, railroads, postal and telegraph service.’ The Soviet’s ‘Order No. 1’ enjoined all soldiers to obey only the Soviet and to safeguard their arms lest they fall into counter-revolutionary hands.

But the Petrograd Soviet made no real use of its power and even supported the Government. There was, it is true, a certain identity of policy between the two bodies. The Government proclaimed an amnesty for political prisoners, abolished discriminatory legislation, inaugurated the eight-hour day, restored the constitution of Finland, promised the Poles independence, undertook to arrange the election of a constituent assembly which would consider the peasant question – with all this the Soviet was in agreement. But as yet it did not go beyond this point, and hence no real conflict developed with the Provisional Government.

The first cleavage came in April when the Minister of War, Guchkov, had to resign. Milyukov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, soon followed. In an incalculable note to Russia’s allies he had ventured to state that Russia stood by its obligations, i.e., pursued the same policy that had already taken the country into the abyss of revolution. It was thus that the Provisional Government moved more to the left. It had to, merely in order to survive. Six socialist ministers joined with the Cadets – Kerensky, who was associated with the Social-Revolutionaries, became Minister for War; Tseretelli, a Menshevik, Minister of Posts and Telegraphs; Chernov, a Social Revolutionary, Minister for Agriculture; and Skobelev, at one time an associate of Trotsky, Minister of Labour. Prince Lvov remained Premier.

But this leftward shift of power was dwarfed by events in the
countryside. Here a genuine and immense agrarian revolution was in progress. They were at last fulfilling their age-long yearning. They were simply expropriating the large estates. Every month the total rose. It was only 17 in March 1917. In April it jumped to 204, in May to 259, in June to 577, and in July to 1,122. By March 1919 virtually all the usable land was in peasant hands. The peasants were not socialists, of course; but it was this elemental movement that was indispensable to the victory of Bolshevism. It was this movement, as much as any other factor, that led to the disintegration of the Russian armies.

'ALL POWER TO THE SOVIETS'

The second stage in the revolution began with Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station in Petrograd on 2 April 1917. From the first Lenin had been in no doubt that the imperialist war must be turned into a civil war. But he had no idea that the transformation was so imminent. At late as January 1917 he was telling his audience at a Zürich meeting (Lenin spent the bulk of the war, from September 1914 to March 1917, in Switzerland), that 'we of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution'. And when the first news of the formation of the Provisional Government reached Zürich, Lenin, like the other revolutionaries, did not anticipate all the possibilities that were opening up. None the less, he was all agog to return to Russia. When he did so, it was under the aegis of the German Government. This contrasts ironically with Lenin's view that 'the German proletariat is the most trustworthy, the most reliable ally of the Russian and the world proletarian revolution'. In reality, the contrary was true.

From 1915 onwards the Germans, like the Japanese in 1904-5, had been fishing in the waters of the Russian left-wing Parties. They promoted revolutionary propaganda in Russia as an act of political warfare. Through Stockholm, in the main, funds flowed into Russia and were used, it may be conjectured, for the publication of pamphlets and the financial support of left-wing groups. At the end of September 1917, on the eve of the October revolution, Kühlmann, the German Secretary of

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State, summed up these activities with pardonable self-congratulation:

The military operations on the Eastern front ... were seconded by intensive undermining activities inside Russia on the part of the Foreign Ministry. Our first interest in these activities was to further nationalist and separatist endeavours as far as possible, and to give strong support to the revolutionary elements. We have now been engaged in these activities for some time, and in complete agreement with the Political Section of the General Staff in Berlin.... Our work together has shown tangible results. The Bolshevik movement could never have attained the scale or the influence which it has today without our continual support. There is every indication that the movement will continue to grow, and the same is true also of the Finnish and Ukrainian independence movements.¹

But this is to anticipate. In March 1917, as one item in this policy, the return of Lenin and a group of other Bolsheviks and revolutionaries was decided on, for the purpose of facilitating further disintegration in Russia. (The Germans little suspected that the boot would soon be on the other foot!) Thirty-two people in all left Switzerland — nineteen Bolsheviks, six Bundists, three Mensheviks, and four miscellaneous. The most important were Lenin, Krupskaya, and Zinoviev.

The journey to Petrograd took Lenin and his party through Germany, Sweden, and Finland. Tumultuous crowds greeted Lenin in Petrograd, the Marseillaise thundered forth from a thousand voices, a searchlight played over the faces of the throng, Bolshevik posters and slogans decorated the platform walls and station buildings. A curious and significant encounter then took place in the waiting-room, normally set aside for the Tsar's personal use. Chkeidze, the Menshevik president of the Petrograd Soviet, welcomed Lenin with the assertion that the principal task of the workers was now to defend the revolution, and for this unity was the requisite of the day. But Lenin's reply spoke of the Russian revolution as the harbinger of world revolution. It was not something that had come to a full stop. Its greatest hour was still to come.

This preliminary brush was but a foretaste of the thunderbolt that Lenin was preparing to hurl into the Bolsheviks’ ranks. After a triumphal procession with speeches at every street corner, Lenin, in an armoured car, eventually arrived at Bolshevik headquarters, the sumptuous house of Kshesinskaia, prima ballerina and one-time mistress of the Tsar. Here there was a reception, snacks, more speeches. It was late at night before Lenin proclaimed the policy that he had been slowly hatching both before and during the return from Zürich. The following day, at the Tauride Palace, he presented this policy to a congress of Bolsheviks in the famous ‘April Theses’. He demanded the overthrow of capitalism as the only way to end the war; no further support must be given to the Provisional Government; the power of the soviets must be built up, and the power of the Bolsheviks inside the soviets; there must be no parliamentary republic; the land and the banks must be nationalized; the soviets must take production and distribution into their own hands; a new International must be founded to replace the defunct Second International.

This programme met instant opposition. Only Alexandra Kollontai, the future Bolshevik Ambassador to Sweden, supported Lenin. Of the others, Molotov stood closest to him. But to the majority he was a ‘Bakunin’, a ‘madman’, a dealer in ‘abstractions’. Yet the key to the Theses is clear enough – that the bourgeois-democratic phase of the revolution was concluded and that what must now be prepared was the transition to the socialist phase, which would be incorporated in government by the soviets. All that Lenin left open was the timing of the socialist revolution. For the moment the slogan was – ‘All power to the Soviets’.

After the first upheaval, the new line was adopted at the Petrograd Party conference, and then by the 150 delegates to the All-Russian Party conference. Kamenev, who had been released with Stalin from Siberian exile at the time of the February revolution, was the heart of such opposition as there was. But it never amounted to more than a handful of votes. Thus, by the end of April 1917, the Bolsheviks had committed themselves to opposing any collaboration with the Provisional Government and to transferring power to the soviets. This was not yet the call for an immediate revolutionary transformation. That would come later.

In the meantime, Kerensky helped to dig his own grave. To some extent, of course, he was the prisoner of the Allies in the matter of war aims and the secret treaties. After America’s entry into the war in March 1917, he tried to secure President Wilson’s intervention, through the journalist Lincoln Steffens, in favour of the abrogation or at least revision of the treaties. He, Kerensky, would then be able to consolidate the Provisional Government and to pursue the war on terms that might make more appeal to the demoralized Russian army and people. But Wilson denied official knowledge of the treaties; and Kerensky’s similar pleas to the British and French Governments were also shrugged off.

None the less, Kerensky went ahead with the preparation of an offensive on the south-western front in Galicia. This was in fulfilment of a Russian pledge to the Allies. Some early successes were secured; but this was largely because the Austrian armies were almost as war-weary and mutinous as the Russians. When the Germans rushed up reinforcements, the offensive turned into a disorderly rout.

In Petrograd, meanwhile, the failure of the offensive sparked off an open insurrection against Kerensky. Demonstrators, mutineers, deserters, unemployed workers thronged the streets. But the movement had no clear political aims. The Bolsheviks were at first indifferent. Later they tried to lead it to success. But in four days it petered out. All the same, it gave Kerensky occasion to suppress the Bolsheviks as deserters and agents of the Germans. Pravda was banned. Lenin and Zinoviev fled to Finland. Kamenev was arrested. Trotsky (who had returned from New York at the beginning of May), Kollontai, and Lunacharsky were arrested shortly afterwards. Kerensky himself, after a prolonged ministerial crisis, became a sort of dictator, dedicated to saving the country from Bolshevism.

The Bolsheviks were now weaker, both in the capital and the provinces, than at any other time in 1917. They owed their rehabilitation to the failure of the insurrection attempted by
General Kornilov, the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief. Politically naïve, Kornilov became a front for right-wing influences to which certain Allied elements were sympathetic. This was a foretaste of the intervention to come. Kornilov tried to march on Petrograd. But his movement disintegrated long before it reached the capital. A determined propagandist onslaught, in which the Bolsheviks cooperated with the Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries, undermined his troops. The railwaymen tore up the tracks and mass insubordination wrecked the whole enterprise. Kornilov himself was arrested, but released later in the year.

The episode — it was no more — brought the Bolsheviks a tremendous access of strength. Within a week they had majorities in the soviets of Petrograd and Moscow. Trotsky, on his release from prison, was elected chairman of the former. This pattern was followed in many local and provincial soviets. In the countryside also, as peasant disorders spread, Bolshevik influence grew. The number of Party members increased some tenfold to 200,000 between January and August 1917.

Revolution was now on the agenda. The moment anticipated in Lenin's 'April Theses' was approaching rapidly. Lenin himself wrote on three successive days in mid September to the Party's central committee, urging that the moment had come. At the end of the month he moved from Helsingfors to Vyborg, nearer the Russian frontier. 'History will not forgive us if we do not seize power now.'

On 20 October (10 October old style) the supreme decision was taken. Lenin emerged from hiding to take part in the debate. By a majority of ten to two — Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and seven others against Zinoviev and Kamenev — it was resolved to initiate an armed insurrection. On 29 October (16 October old style) the Petrograd Soviet established a Military-Revolutionary Committee, under the presidency of Trotsky by virtue of his chairmanship of the Soviet. It included forty-eight Bolsheviks, fourteen left Social-Revolutionaries, and four Anarchists.

A week later the Committee had its plan ready. Insurgent troops, numbering some 20–25,000, would be used to occupy the key points in the capital. The date for the uprising was fixed for 6–7 November (24–25 October old style), the day before the second All-Russian Congress of Soviets was scheduled to meet.

Early in the morning of the crucial day the Central Committee, except for Lenin, Zinoviev, and Stalin, met for the last time before the night of decision. Their headquarters were at the Smolny Institute. It had been in former days a convent and school for young ladies; now it resounded to the final orders for the uprising. Trotsky assigned to each of his colleagues responsibility for supervising key services — food supplies, posts and telegraphs, railways, and liaison with Moscow. Trotsky himself directed the overall strategy of the coup. Lenin, back in hiding, once again urged immediate action. 'We must at all costs, this very evening, this very night, arrest the Government ...' Later that night, disguised by a bandage wound round his face, Lenin arrived at Smolny.

Early the next morning revolutionary troops and Red Guards went into action. They met no resistance. They methodically occupied one key-point after another — the railway stations, the power station, the telephone exchange, the State Bank, the bridges over the Neva. It was almost bloodless.

Kerensky fled in a car placed at his disposal by the United States Embassy. He hoped to find troops to lead an attack against the revolution. This was about ten in the morning. At about the same time, Trotsky's posters appeared on the streets: 'To the citizens of Russia — the Provisional Government has been overthrown.' This was not quite true. The Winter Palace was still occupied by those ministers who remained, guarded by about a thousand officer cadets and a women's battalion. Not until early the next morning had enough Red Army soldiers infiltrated the enormous building and its grounds. Kerensky's ministers were finally arrested by Antonov-Ovseyenko, a man wearing pince-nez and a broad-brimmed hat. To the last the coup was bloodless. But it still remained a coup. Before the Bolsheviks held firm power, much blood would be shed.
CHAPTER 16

The Bolsheviks Conquer Power, 1917–20

So far the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd had been exemplary and bloodless. In Moscow, fighting lasted about a week. But in the capital it had not interrupted the opera or the ballet, the theatres, schools, or such government offices as were still functioning; and what met the eyes of the British Ambassador, Sir George Buchanan, as he walked towards the Winter Palace on the afternoon of 7 November? 'The aspect of the quay was more or less normal', he remarked, 'except for the groups of armed soldiers stationed near the bridges.' Since the beginning of the year so many upheavals had swept over the capital that each one made less and less impression. The next morning, 8 November, it still seemed as if nothing had happened. Anti-Bolshevik newspapers appeared on the streets, reporting the arrest of the Government and Kerensky's flight. But they anticipated no more than a temporary reversal. The same views were held in Cadet and official circles.

To all such hopes the lie was being given in Smolny, while naval guns were still using blanks to bombard the Winter Palace. Late that night the second All-Russian Congress of Soviets met to the sound of continuing shell-fire; and this sound mingled with Menshevik denunciations of the coup d'état. The Bolsheviks and their supporters, the left Social-Revolutionaries, had a considerable majority in the Congress—about 380 out of 650 deputies—and this was sufficient to confirm in office an exclusively Bolshevik Government. There were, it is true, certain Bolshevik leaders, of whom the most prominent was Kamenev, President of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet, who urged that Mensheviks and S.R.s be invited to share office with the Bolsheviks. They argued that a one-party Government would be able to maintain power only 'by means of political terror'. But this was anathema to Lenin and Trotsky. Had they seized power in order to share it with their opponents? Those opponents whom Trotsky now consigned to the 'dustbin of history'?

In any case, scruples such as those of Kamenev belonged rather to the future than to the present. And the present belonged indisputably and unchallengeably to the Bolsheviks. When Lenin, in his capacity as President of the newly formed Council of People's Commissars (as the Bolshevik Government was named), rose to address the Congress, he was greeted with an indescribable ovation. There he stood, in John Reed's description—

a short, stocky figure, with a big head set down in his shoulders, bald and bulging. Little eyes, a snubbish nose, wide generous mouth and heavy chin.... Dressed in shabby clothes, his trousers much too long for him. Unimpressive, to be the idol of a mob, loved and revered as perhaps few leaders in history have been... .

These were the halcyon days of the Revolution. But, as the Russian proverb has it: 'Don't praise the day till evening comes.'

Lenin, in his first public appearance since his flight to Finland in July, would now read out the first two historic decrees of the Council of People's Commissars—the decree on peace and the decree on land. The first invited 'all the belligerent peoples and their governments to open immediate negotiations for an honest democratic peace', that is, a peace without annexations or indemnities. The Soviets also abolished all secret diplomacy and undertook to publish all the wartime secret agreements from which they would, Lenin declared, refuse to derive any territorial gains. For the general purpose of the decree, Lenin proposed an immediate armistice to last not less than three months. He ended with an appeal to the working classes of Britain, France, and Germany to support the Soviets' peace policy. This was a disguised appeal for a European revolution, belief in which had been one of Lenin's foremost motives in urging on a Russian revolution in September and October.

After peace came land, Lenin’s second decree abolished without compensation and nationalized all private property in the form of landowners’ estates, and appanages belonging to the Crown, monasteries, and the Church. Local land committees and peasant soviets would take into custody all such land, together with all livestock and implements, for distribution among their members. The decree prohibited the use of hired labour and also the sale, mortgaging, leasing, or alienation of the land. This was seemingly the most far-reaching agricultural reform in Russian history. In actual fact it merely recognized a fait accompli. The peasant seizure of the land had been in full spate for months before Lenin spoke and would continue throughout the early part of 1918. It was a movement, unchallengeable by any force that the Bolsheviks could conceivably have mustered. It expressed, as nothing else could have done, the dual nature of the October revolution. On one side, the Bolsheviks — on the other, the peasants.

In order to realize the Soviet State [wrote Trotsky] there was required a drawing together and mutual penetration of two factors belonging to completely different historic species: a peasant war — that is, a movement characteristic of the dawn of the bourgeois development — and a proletarian insurrection, the movement signifying its decline. That is the essence of 1917.

It is not necessary to accept Trotsky’s historical framework to perceive the justice of this analysis. The Bolsheviks’ attitude to the land question was probably the crucial factor in the Civil War. Could the White generals offer anything more than the return to a landlord economy? And who would fight for that? On the other hand, so many peasants returned from the towns to secure their share in the distribution that the average holding increased only very slightly. Land-hunger was by no means appeased, and Bolshevism found itself saddled with about twenty-five million smallholders working tiny plots by the most inefficient methods.

On the morrow of the revolution, Lenin’s land policy was primarily of political importance in consummating the separation of the left Social-Revolutionaries from their mother-party.

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The latter tended more to the right and to represent the interests of the larger peasant-proprietors. This accretion of Bolshevik power and influence was of considerable help in the struggle with the Constituent Assembly. This threatened to be the main internal obstacle to the Bolshevists. Like all Parties, the Bolshevists had vigorously campaigned for the summoning of the Assembly. It had been one of their chief weapons in belabouring Kerensky that he was purposely delaying its convocation. Now, however, when the elections were held in mid November, the Assembly might show itself to be too much of a good thing. The Council of People’s Commissars wanted no rivals for power.

The election results confirmed this fear. Less than half the electorate of more than ninety millions actually voted, so the results have to be interpreted with some caution. But it is still clear that the Bolsheviks were in a minority. They received about a quarter of the forty million votes cast and 175 seats. The left Social-Revolutionaries got forty, the right Social-Revolutionaries 370. There were fifteen Mensheviks, seventeen Cadets, and about eighty representatives of national groupings, most of whom were anti-Bolshevik. The pro-Bolshevik votes came from the industrial centres and the army, particularly those units stationed in Petrograd and Moscow.

Hardly had the Assembly met in January 1918 than it was dispersed by trigger-happy Red Guards, on the instructions of the Council of People’s Commissars. At the time, not many dogs barked. Lenin argued that the soviet form of democracy represented a higher type than mechanical and formal majorities. Be that as it may, the forcible dissolution of the Constituent Assembly was not only a break with the great bulk of the revolutionary aspirations of the nineteenth century; it also widened the gap between the Bolshevists and all the other left-wing Parties and groupings, apart of course from the left Social-Revolutionaries.

The Bolshevists had now disposed of what constituted as yet their most serious internal danger. They now turned to the greatest external menace — the German and Austrian armies on the soil of what had once been the Empire of All the
Russias. At this time the German lines ran southwards from east of Riga to east of Lvov. They then sloped gently south-eastwards to the Black Sea, to include most of Romania.

Lenin’s original peace decree had brought no response from either the Allied or the Central Powers. This did not prevent him from taking the policy a stage further. About a fortnight afterwards, the Bolshevik Government ordered fraternization on all fronts and instructed General Dukhonin, the Russian Commander-in-Chief, to propose to the Germans an immediate cease-fire. On the same day, Trotsky, the Soviet Foreign Commissar, informed the Allied Ambassadors in Petrograd of the Russian peace move. But Dukhonin rejected the order and the Allied Governments refused to entertain Trotsky’s plan.

The Allied military missions accredited to Dukhonin’s headquarters at Mogilev (except for the U.S. mission) threatened that ‘the gravest consequences’ would follow any unilateral Russian violation of the treaty of 5 September 1914. Trotsky denounced this as intervention in Russian domestic affairs. ‘The soldiers, workers, and peasants of Russia’, he said, ‘did not overthrow the Governments of the Tsar and Kerensky merely to become cannon fodder for the Allied imperialists.’ Dukhonin was replaced by the Bolshevik, Krylenko. Krylenko left for Mogilev on 23 November. He took his time on the journey in order to depose en route as many hostile generals as possible. He did not arrive until 3 December. A few hours later Dukhonin was killed by his troops. The Allied military missions had left for Kiev, where White resistance to the Bolsheviks was already building up. Relations between the Allies and the Soviets were further inflamed through the Soviet repudiation of all Tsarist debts to foreign Powers; 1 and also through Trotsky’s calculated publication of all the secret Allied agreements that he found in the archives of the Foreign Ministry. Matters such as the Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907 and the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1915 for the carve-up of Turkey’s Arabian Empire seriously compromised and discredited the Allied

1. This undertaking had first been given in 1905 when the French made what was up till then their largest loan to Tsarist Russia.

**Bolsheviks Conquer Power, 1917–20**

cause, especially in the United States. Wilson’s Fourteen Points could hardly redress the balance.

In the meantime, the Germans had agreed to negotiate with the Bolsheviks and a Russo-German armistice was signed on 15 December. The ensuing Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was finally ratified by the Fourth Congress of Soviets on 16 March 1918. This long interval was due in part to Trotsky’s stalling tactics. He hoped to use the negotiations to stimulate revolution in Germany and Austria so as to take the weight off Russia. But nothing came of his efforts, apart from a wave of fairly widespread strikes. At one time there was also a Russian hope that aid might be forthcoming from the Western Powers. But this was even more of an illusion. In fact, Trotsky already thought that the Allies and the Germans might be collaborating against the Russians, though this did not mature until a year or so later. In the end, the Soviets had no chance but to accept a truly draconic peace. They had to yield up Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russian Poland to Germany and Austria, to recognize the independence of the Ukraine, Georgia, and Finland, and to evacuate the areas of Kars, Ardanah, and Batum in favour of Turkey. In addition, reparation payments of 6,000 million marks had to be made. In concrete terms, this meant that Russia lost one-third of its agricultural land and its population; more than four-fifths of its coal-mines; over half its industrial undertakings. Geographically speaking, Russia was pushed back from the Black Sea, and virtually cut off from the Baltic. It was almost the Grand Duchy of Muscovy ever again.

No wonder the acceptance of these terms gave rise to the most violent polemics inside the Bolshevik Party and the Government! In the crucial Central Committee meeting of 23 February, the voting went seven for acceptance, four against, and four abstainers. A left Communist group led by Bukharin and Radek split off from the main Bolshevik Party so as to be free to urge forward a campaign for a revolutionary war against the Germans. Similarly, the left S.R. members of the Council of People’s Commissars resigned their posts and denounced the treaty as a ‘betrayal of the international proletariat and of the socialist revolution begun in Russia’.
BOLSHEVIKS CONQUER POWER, 1917-20

Bolsheviks were rapidly developing the two characteristics of a stable State — a police force and an armed body of men, in other words, the Cheka and the Red Army. The one defended the régime against its internal, the other against its external, enemies. Censorship of the Press was introduced in March 1918. Also, of course, the Government was rapidly taking over control of the country's economic life. All large-scale industry was nationalized in June 1918. The model here was what Lenin called 'the state capitalism' of wartime Germany. Labour discipline and duties were enforced, strikes being declared treason to the State and the industrial equivalent of mutiny in the army. Private trade and banks were nationalized. Most important of all, in the spring of 1918 the State formed 'Food Armies' in order to requisition grain for the urban workers and Red Army.

All these developments stemmed originally from the need to consolidate the revolution. But they were given tremendous impetus by the forces of counter-revolution and of foreign intervention.

During 1918 the two movements became inextricably intertwined. At first intervention attempted at helping those forces opposed to the Germans. But as the White generals were at the same time opponents of the Bolsheviks, the two movements inevitably coalesced into one. Even after the armistice of 1918, when there could no longer be any question of reviving an Eastern front against the Germans, intervention was not simply anti-Bolshevik tout court. Each of the interventionist Powers - Great Britain, France, the United States, and Japan - had its own axe to grind, and this disunity helped the Bolsheviks to survive. During the whole campaigning period of some two years, the Bolsheviks had fast to the historic heartland of Russia, the territory around Moscow and Petrograd. They were thus able to concentrate their forces at any threatened point on the periphery. On the other hand, the Whites had the advantage of surprise and also of access to the sea.

The first White Army formed in the territory of the Don Cossacks. It was led by Generals Kornilov, Denikin, and Alexeyev, the former Tsarist Chief of Staff. But it was not from

To all such arguments Lenin reiterated his complete and utter disbelief in any further Russian capacity to fight. Moreover, to attempt to fight would be, he believed, jeopardize the revolution. 'Germany', he said, 'was only pregnant with revolution.' But to the Bolsheviks quite a healthy child had been born - 'which we may kill if we begin war'. Who would risk a live child for one as yet unborn, all the more so as Russia could act as the German accoucheur? This was Lenin's conclusive argument. Russia sacrificed space in order to gain time. Russia won a breathing-space that would enable it to consolidate the revolution in preparation for the imminent struggle for the world. Russia accepted Brest-Litovsk in the same spirit in which the Germans had once accepted the Peace of Tilzit - 'and just as the Germans freed themselves from Napoleon', wrote Lenin in Pravda, 'so will we get our freedom.'

A curious situation now arose. In order to help stimulate revolution in Germany, Adolf Joffe, the first Bolshevik ambassador in Berlin, was actively in touch with the German left. He aided them with pamphlets and funds. In Moscow (whether the Soviet capital had been transferred in March) these activities were held to be so important that the reparations installments due to Germany continued to be paid even after the German request to the Allies for an armistice. The aim was to minimize any danger of a Russo-German rupture that might unseat Joffe.

Similarly, the German Ambassador to Moscow, Count Mirbach was exhorted to continue to give financial support to the Bolsheviks.

Please use larger sums [he was adjured by his Foreign Minister in May 1918] as it is greatly to our interests that Bolsheviks should survive. ... As a party, Cadets are anti-German: Monarchists would also work for revision of the Brest peace treaty. We have no interest in supporting Monarchists' ideas, which would reunite Russia. On the contrary, we must try and prevent Russian consolidation as far as possible and, from this point of view, we must therefore support the Parties furthest to the left. 1

This analysis is as understandable as it is fallacious. The Bolsheviks were the very antithesis of disorder and chaos. The

here that the first blow came — it was from the Czechoslovak Legion of about 30,000 men.

This was formed originally of prisoners taken from the Austro-Hungarian Army. The idea was that they should be evacuated from Russia to join the Allied forces fighting against the Germans. But in view of the Bolshevik assumption of power and the consequent collapse of the Eastern front, the Entente, on which the Legion was financially dependent, hoped to be able to use the Legion inside Russia — whether against the Bolsheviks or the Germans is not clear. In this state of indecision and confusion, with the Legion strung out along the Trans-Siberian Railway, a rumour that it would be disarmed and shipped back to Germany was enough to precipitate a full-scale revolt. Within a matter of weeks, a row of towns from Samara on the Volga to Vladivostok on the Pacific coast was in Czech hands. Had the Legion been able to cross the Volga, they might have swarmed across the unprotected plains to Moscow. In actual fact they were stopped at Kazan, where Trotsky, now Commissar for War, personally intervened in the battle, rallying the demoralized and retreating Red forces.

This was a strictly limited defensive victory. It did not prevent American, Japanese, and small British, French, and Italian detachments landing at Vladivostok. The pretext was: 'aid to the Czechs'. Thence the interventionists moved westwards into Siberia, where, with British and French support, a Government under Admiral Kolchak, the former commander of the Black Sea Fleet, was established.

In the meantime, Allied troops were landing at the White Sea ports of Murmansk and Archangel. Simultaneously, an anti-Bolshevik Government consisting mostly of Social-Revolutionaries was set up in Archangel under the leadership of Chakhovsky, the former Populist. A White Russian Government was set up under British aegis at Ashkabad in Turkestan. The British troops had advanced through Baku and Persia, and occupied the Transcaucasian area. By August 1918 about thirty different Governments were functioning on Russian soil.

Superimposed on the turmoil, that same summer, was an anti-

Bolshevik revolt of the left S.R.s. They hoped to embroil the country in a renewal of the war against Germany. A series of assassinations gave the signal: that of Count Mirbach, the German ambassador; of Uritsky, the head of the Petrograd Cheka; and an attempt on Lenin's life by a Jewish girl, Dora Kaplan. Associated risings took place in Moscow and Yaroslavl. The conspirators were helped by the French Ambassador. But the attempt failed. Its sole sequel was to intensify the terror wielded against the enemies of the régime.

The main threat to the Bolsheviks still came from outside the country. It was in these circumstances that Chicherin, a former Menshevik, who followed Trotsky as Commissar for Foreign Affairs, approached the Germans with a proposal for their collaboration in parrying the Allied forces in the north. The Germans, Chicherin proposed, should advance to prevent a possible southward advance of the British in Murmansk, while the Soviets withdrew their troops around Vologda in order to protect Moscow. But nothing came of this. The Germans by now had troubles enough of their own.

The end of the war in the West to some extent freed the hands of the Entente in its dealings with the Soviets. In December 1917 an inter-Allied agreement at Paris, signed by Milner and Lord Robert Cecil for England and by Clemenceau and Foch for France, had divided Russia up into Franco-British spheres of interest. The French were allotted Bessarabia, the Ukraine, and the Crimea. To the British fell the Cossack lands, the Caucasus, Armenia, Georgia, and Kurdistan. Pursuant to this agreement, both Powers sent ships to Novorossisk with arms for Denikin. Later, a French naval division landed at Odessa and British troops moved into Batum and Baku, attracted, it has been said, 'by the smell of oil'. Other White generals to be helped by the Allies were Miller in north Russia and Yudenich in the west.

As the war in the West ended, with the Soviets hemmed in on all fronts and under increasing Allied pressure, Lenin expected a concerted attack by world capital. The answer to world capital was world revolution. This was not an unreasonable gamble on empirical grounds alone, to say nothing of its theoretical justi-
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of the Armistice agreement with Germany, tried to ensure that the German troops on the Eastern front would return only to 'within the frontiers of Germany as soon as the Allies shall think the moment suitable, having regard to the internal situation of these territories'. (This condition was repeated vis-à-vis the Baltic countries in Article 433 of the Versailles Treaty.)

In early 1919 Kolchak, to whom the Allies looked to form the future non-Bolshevik Government of Russia, moved westwards across the Urals in the direction of Moscow. This was the opening move in a year of incessant campaigns that would reach its climax in the autumn. At first Kolchak's three armies rapidly advanced. Ufa fell and then, in April, Samara and Kazan were menaced. The bulk of the Red Army was in the south, holding the line against Denikin. But by the end of April Kolchak had reached his farthest point westwards. His southern wing, with its over-extended external lines, was outflanked in a wide sweep ordered by S. Kamenev, the Soviet commander on the eastern front and one of the 30,000 former Tsarist officers mobilized by Trotsky for service with the Red Army. Kolchak was forced back from Ufa and eastwards across the Urals. He lost pitched battles at Chelyabinsk and Omsk. By the end of the year, Kolchak's troops had simply disintegrated and he himself had fallen into Red hands. He was executed early in 1920.

Hardly had the main threat from Kolchak been repelled than the southern front under Denikin came alive. Here a virtual state of chaos prevailed. Guerillas, partisans, peasant anarchists under Machno, and Ukrainian nationalists led by Petlura, were all indescribably and inextricably intertwined. The peasantry had no love for the Bolsheviks, and Denikin at first made good headway. By the end of June he had taken Kharkov and Tsarkitsyn (now Volograd), and Kiev by the end of August. By mid October Denikin was in Orel, a bare 250 miles south of Moscow. At the same time, a diversionary attack was launched by General Yudenich against Petrograd. His base was in Estonia and he enjoyed British advice. This was the second such attack. The first had been thrown back in May under Stalin's leader-
ship. Soon Yudenich was in the suburbs of the city and, but for the railway link with Moscow, had cut it off from the outside world. So critical was the situation that Lenin contemplated abandoning Petrograd and withdrawing to Moscow. This time Trotsky rallied the defenders. Yudenich was not strong enough to besiege the city, and since he could also not advance, he had no choice but to retreat. A month later he was back in Estonia, where his army broke up.

This reverse severely weakened Denikin in the south. He was no more popular with the local population than the soviets. Like that of all the White armies, his administration was marked by corruption, brigandage, and political reaction. The end of the year saw him inexorably on the retreat. He withdrew, with British aid, to the Crimea, and turned over his command to General Wrangel.

But Wrangel had no hope of resuming the struggle. All the more so as both the British and French had pulled out of the Black Sea and Transcaucasian area and were preparing to lift the blockade. This was in fact withdrawn in January 1920.

The last throw in the civil war came from Poland. In April 1920 Piłsudski advanced eastwards into the Ukraine, and on 7 May took Kiev. Here he received a congratulatory telegram from King George V. But a Ukraininan revolt, on which Piłsudski had counted, did not materialize. The telegram was also of no great help. A swift turn came in the tide of battle. The Poles had to evacuate Kiev, and soon the Russians, carried forward on a swell-tide of traditional patriotism, were on the River Bug, the rough ethnographical barrier between Russian Ukraine and Poland proper. It was at this time that Brussilov, the former Tsarist Commander-in-Chief, offered his services to the Red Army. Lenin, desperate at the continued isolation of the Russian revolution, now gambled for the highest stakes. He would take the revolution Westward by force of arms, 'probe Western Europe with Russian bayonets', as he put it. The target was Germany.

At this time the Second Congress of the Comintern was in session and the delegates could see pin-pointed on a map the advance of the Russian armies.
CHAPTER 17

Economic Experiments

When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, they found a country on the verge of economic collapse.

The cultivated area had been reduced by the war by a sixth, the number of horses available for agriculture by nearly a third, the cereal harvest was down by fourteen per cent... The product of industry was a little more than three-fourths of what it had been in 1913. The railway system had suffered severely from the strain of war, and from the lack of replacements and repairs.... The money in circulation was twelve times as much as in July 1914. In the country, the paper rouble was worth from a tenth to an eighth of the pre-war rouble.... A fall in real wages, calculated at twelve to fifteen per cent, had occurred: and the cost of living in October 1917 was five times that of a year earlier.

This was no favourable background for the construction of socialism. But far worse was to come.

The Bolsheviks had at first no intention of aggravating these conditions by any drastic intervention in the Russian economy. The aim was simply to keep what industry there was in operation and to control such key sectors of the economy as would prevent any reversion to the previous régime. The nationalization of the banks, of key enterprises engaged on war work, and the State monopoly of the grain trade did not go much beyond the economic policies of the belligerent Powers in the First World War. Not until May 1918 did the Bolsheviks nationalize a whole industry. The first was sugar, then came oil, and then the establishment of State monopolies in foreign trade and in such commodities as spices, yarn, coffee, and matches.

This change in policy stemmed from two main causes. First, an effort had to be made to curb anarcho-syndicalist tendencies.

ter and shape as a Socialist organization the property which it was compelled to seize.' In Lenin's words, war communism was 'dictated not by economic, but by military needs, considerations, and conditions'.

A further complication came from the position of the peasantry. The peasant revolution of 1917, however welcome to the Bolsheviks for its disintegrating effect on the old bourgeoisie and landowners, was no part of their calculations. It was no part of Bolshevism to create and accept a system whereby a class of twenty to twenty-five million smallholders were tilling tiny plots with scarce and primitive equipment. Here was a true anomaly. War communism emphasized the contradiction. The urban workers' alliance with the peasantry remained as urgent as ever – if not more so. Yet it had to be strained to the uttermost, if not actually broken entirely, through the need to force grain into the towns. This took place at a time when the cultivated area had decreased, with a consequent decrease in the size of the agricultural product. When, in 1919, a Government decree brought the millions of peasant allotments under State control and carried out the policy of requisitioning all produce surplus to the needs of subsistence, and peasants found themselves with no incentive to produce anything more than they themselves could consume.

The effects of this policy, combined of course with the devastation and destruction of seven years of war, soon showed themselves in every aspect of agricultural life. By 1921 stocks of cattle were less than two-thirds of their 1913 total; sheep were about fifty-five per cent, pigs forty per cent, horses seventy-one per cent. The sown area was just under half of what it had been in 1913; the same held good for the total of grain crops (which includes potatoes).

The industrial picture was even worse. By 1920, in the textile industry, only six per cent of the spindles were in operation, as compared with pre-war; the steel industry produced less than five per cent of its pre-war output; the Donetz coalmines ten per cent. Manufactured consumer goods amounted to about thirteen per cent of their pre-war total. An almost complete breakdown in transport brought all semblance of normal life to a standstill.

Hand in hand with economic collapse went the depopulation of the larger towns. Moscow and Petrograd each lost several hundred thousand inhabitants. A pitiful mass flight to the countryside took place, where the food situation was relatively easier. Those workers who remained in the towns fell victim to every form of demoralization. Productivity fell catastrophically, as wages covered a bare fifth of the cost of living and the worker had to spend at least half his time trading on the black market. The goods he dealt in were those he stole from his place of work. Small wonder that Lenin told the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921: 'The poverty of the working class was never so vast and acute as in the period of its dictatorship. The enfeeblement of workers and peasants is close to the point of complete incapacitation for work.' The human tragedy reached its climax in an unprecedented drought in the lower Volga region in 1920–1. This caused the death of about five million people. Altogether, the seven years of war, civil war, famine, and starvation left Russia with a population deficit of about twenty-eight million.

The political consequences of this collapse had been steadily becoming more and more evident since the autumn of 1920. Peasant disturbances had begun in September with the first releases from army service. They gathered strength all through the autumn when, as Lenin admitted, 'tens and hundreds of thousands of disband ed soldiers' were taking up arms against soviet society by way of banditry, highway robbery, and political revolt. At the beginning of 1921 the Tambov area was for a few months completely in the hands of peasant guerilla forces, led by a former Social-Revolutionary.

The fact is that the alliance of workers and peasants which had, albeit for differing reasons in each case, carried the Bolsheviks to success in the civil war, was not only breaking up but was also leaving the Party isolated. The peasants had been quite willing to support the Party so long as it was a question of retaining the land. But they were otherwise politically apathetic, and in a state of near-revolt at the policy of grain requisitioning.
The existence of a cleavage between the industrial workers and the Party came to the fore in the Workers’ Opposition. This claimed a greater role for the proletariat in the work and control of industry. It opposed Trotsky’s policy of forming labour brigades of militarized workers and putting the railway trade unions under martial law.

Finally, there came, in Lenin’s words, ‘the flash which lit up reality better than anything else’. This was the Kronstadt revolt of March 1921.

It began early in the month with a demand for ‘Soviets without Communists’ in which peasant interests were prominent. Many of the Kronstadt sailors and Red Army men who led the revolt were in fact recent drafts from the countryside and brought with them the current political attitudes. They demanded, in essence, more freedom for the peasant and for the small-scale industrial producer. Politically, the movement aimed at breaking the Bolshevik monopoly of power, the Bolshevik dictatorship, by securing freedom of speech, Press, and assembly for the trade unions, left-wing socialists, and peasant organizations. It was supported not only by Anarchists and Mensheviks, but also by Bolsheviks. There was a call for a ‘Third Revolution’.

The revolt broke out a few days before the opening of the Tenth Party Congress. Trotsky ordered the insurgents to surrender. They refused. At once stern military measures were taken. Loyal troops, led by Tukhachevsky and spurred on by Trotsky, advanced, camouflaged in white overalls, across the frozen Bay of Finland. Had Trotsky not acted quickly, the ice might have melted and made a land-based attack impossible. As it was, the fighting, in bitter, blinding snow storms, lasted for ten days. A measure of the crisis is the fact that many of the Party delegates in session were sent from Moscow to Kronstadt to participate in the final storming of the base.

The immediate crisis passed, but it left with Lenin the conviction that the alliance with the peasantry – the alliance that had been the very foundation of the revolution – must be re-established. Late in February 1921, Lenin had already submitted to the Party Central Committee a project for a new economic policy. A few weeks later this emerged, after due discussion by the delegates, as the starting-point of an economic programme that entirely scrapped the policies of war communism. It began primarily as an agricultural measure that would give an incentive to the peasant to produce more food for the towns; it then broadened out into a medium for the development of commodity exchange between town and country; and, lastly, into an encouragement to industrial productivity.

At the back of it all was the necessity of saving the revolution. This was the point that had been reached. It had always been held by Lenin that in Russian conditions – that is, in a country where bourgeois capitalism had never developed – there could be no direct transition to socialism. The accomplishment of a socialist revolution would depend, Lenin argued, either on a socialist resolution in the more advanced countries of the West or on ‘a compromise between the proletariat which puts its dictatorship into practice or holds the State power in its hands, and the majority of the peasant population’.

In the absence of the first of these conditions, the second automatically moved into first place. To this necessary compromise Lenin’s New Economic Policy (or N.E.P. as it soon came to be known) made its own specific contribution.

What it did initially was to replace the requisitioning of the peasants’ surpluses by a graduated, agricultural tax in kind (from 1923 onwards in money only). This latter was calculated as a proportion of the surplus left over after providing for the minimum subsistence needs of the peasants’ family and dependants. The new policy did indeed contain a residue of the previous requisitioning element. But it had a vital difference in that, since it took only a fixed proportion of the surplus, it gave every incentive to the peasant to produce to the maximum and thus to increase his share of the surplus; or, as the official decree put it – ‘every peasant must now realize and remember that the more land he plants, the greater will be the surplus of grain which will remain in his complete possession.’ In 1925 the wealthier peasant, the kulak, was further favoured in being allowed to use hired agricultural labour.

But what would happen to the peasants’ surplus? It was here
that N.E.P. developed its second arm. It implied that there was a right of free trade in agricultural produce. In other words, the market was re-created. It was at first limited to local fairs and markets. This limitation later fell away and a class of so-called Neapmen came into existence. They dominated retail distribution and also played an important role as wholesalers. In 1922–3, for example, private traders controlled about seventy-five per cent of the retail trade of the Soviet Union. The share of State and cooperative trading respectively was about fourteen per cent and ten per cent. The Neapmen functioned as the medium through which trade between town and country was re-established.

The New Economic Policy signified in essence a Communist going to the peasant Canossa, a partial surrender to the vast peasant majority. On the other hand, the State retained what Lenin called 'the commanding heights' of the economy. These were primarily the largest industrial installations. According to a census of 1923, although quantitatively the share controlled by the State was comparatively small — of 165,781 enterprises eighty-eight per cent belonged to private individuals, 8.5 per cent to the State and three per cent to cooperatives — qualitatively the share of the State enormously outweighed that of its partners. Thus, the eighty-eight per cent privately owned enterprises employed only 12.5 per cent of the total number of workers employed in industry, whereas the State-owned enterprises employed just over eighty-four per cent of all industrial workers. Put in another way, the average number of workers in a State-owned enterprise was 155; in cooperative and private enterprises it was fifteen and two respectively. The latter, it is clear, was not much more than a tiny workshop or something similar. Altogether, private enterprises accounted for only five per cent of gross production.

Moreover, the State controlled all such auxiliary services as credit and banking, transport, and, of course, foreign trade. All these remained State monopolies. The overall consequence was a strangely mixed economy in which the State virtually monopolized industrial life, whereas agricultural production was controlled by some twenty-five million small producers. This was
CHAPTER 18

The New Economic Policy and the Rise of Stalin

Despite all the penury and hardship, all the cleft between the dream of abundance and the reality of hardship, it still seems true that in many respects the twenties were the halcyon days of the revolution. In the social field there was steadily increasing expenditure on social insurance, sanatoria, workers’ housing, hospitals, convalescent centres, and general welfare. Given the circumstances of the time, this was to be sure aeons away from socialism. But it was a beginning. Educationally, progressive methods in schools and the treatment of orphans and delinquents made Soviet Russia a centre of experiment and research. Even in the sphere of intellect, private publishing houses still continued to operate; non-Marxist historians still enjoyed positions of prominence and freedom of publication, provided, of course, that their work did not contradict the policy of the new régime. There was as yet no Government-inspired historical schema. In the arts, Trotsky was foremost in pouring scorn on the idea of a proletarian culture, and it was still possible for the ‘Serapion Brotherhood’, poets such as Mayakovsky and Esenin, novelists and short-story writers such as Isaac Babel, Pilnyak, Vsevolod Ivanov, and Leonid Leonov to choose and develop their themes with a broad degree of freedom — so broad, in fact, that in the cases of Pilnyak and Esenin, for example, their anti-industrialist leitmotif might strike at the roots of Soviet aspirations. Although many writers and intellectuals did indeed take to exile as escape from the Soviet régime, there was no profound break in cultural continuity.

The break with the past, intellectually speaking, was yet to come; and this was associated with the career of Stalin, the domination that the Party came to exercise, and the industrial and agricultural policies that were decided on.

Formally, of course, the Soviet Union was a democracy with the whole population (apart from the disenfranchised bourgeoisie and adherents of the Tsarist régime) represented in the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. This was the pinnacle of many thousands of soviets throughout the Union, elected indirectly on the basis of one deputy for each 25,000 urban voters and one deputy for each 125,000 rural inhabitants. But the All-Russian Congress met for only about one week in the year and consisted of almost 2,000 members. Its Central Executive Committee of about 300 members was scarcely less cumbersome. Thus power devolved automatically on to the ten-member Council of People’s Commissars elected from the Central Executive and the nearest equivalent to a Western European cabinet of ministers.

But virtually all the Commissars were members of the Communist Party and it was here, and particularly in the Politburo, that ultimate power had its abode. It was with this as a base that Stalin rose to dominant power, both in the Party and the country.

In the background stood two clashing elements: on the one hand, the renewed scope given to private enterprise in the N.E.P.; on the other, the continued isolation of Russia as the one communist Power in a capitalist world. Both these developments were as unexpected as they were unwelcome. The ban on the formation of opposition groups inside the Party was yet a third unwelcome factor. This was imposed at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, at the same time as the New Economic Policy was introduced. Lenin and Trotsky saw the immediate justification for the ban in the need to avert danger to the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the shadow of the Kronstadt revolt and the disruptive tension created by the concessions to the peasants — to say nothing of the weakened position of the proletariat — it was natural for the Party to close its ranks. Thus, the Congress prescribed ‘the immediate dissolution of all groups without exception forming themselves on this or that platform. … Non-fulfilment of this decision of the Congress must entail unconditional and immediate exclusion from the Party.’

There had previously been considerable freedom of grouping and discussion inside the Party. There had been an opposition movement in September and October 1917; a few weeks later,
dispute had broken out on relations with the other left-wing Parties; the decision whether to accept or to reject Brest-Litovsk had again given rise to intense argument. The years of civil war had naturally seen a closing of the ranks. Even so, there had been a military opposition directed against the use of bourgeois military specialists; and in 1920 the Workers’ Opposition had emerged to combat bureaucracy and centralist tendencies. In all these cases there had been full freedom to propose alternative policies. Thus, to outlaw the formation of internal groupings marked a significant turning-point.

This was all the more the case as it followed, by a few months, the final extinction of the Menshevik and Social-Revolutionary political activity. Until the autumn of 1920 these two Parties had still been able to lead a harassed but semi-independent life. By the spring of 1921, not only did no political body exist outside the Bolshevik Party, but also, within that Party, the expression of divergent viewpoints was severely restrained. It was not by any means repressed altogether. On the contrary, with the growth of Stalin’s opposition to Trotsky, later joined by Zinoviev and Kamenev, there was, in the middle and later twenties, as much passionate controversy as ever before. All the same, the decision of 1921 signified an irrevocable turning-point. Its consequences coloured the whole of the subsequent history of Soviet Russia.

The sequel to this development was all the more nefarious in that it coincided with the transformation of the Party from an élite group into a mass organization. Lenin said in August 1917: ‘If 150,000 landlords can rule Russia, why can’t 240,000 Bolsheviks do the same job?’ But by 1919 the 240,000 had become 313,000, by 1920 431,000, and by 1921 585,000. This growth accorded with the new tasks assumed by the Party. It had to provide leading personnel in the army (as political commissars), in the trade unions, in industry, and in every department of state, to say nothing of the manifold requirements of the cooperatives and local soviets. No wonder Party members were running into hundreds of thousands. As a corollary, the Party also developed its own apparatus, the men who lived from the Party, the apparatchiki. The instrument of power was becoming institutionalized. The transition was natural and probably inevitable. It corresponded, sociologically speaking, to the evolution characteristic of every large organization – the more members, the less individual power, and the greater the centralization of power. As a by-product of all this, the Party developed powers of appointment, promotion, and dismissal.

It was against this background – of tension generated through the operation of the N.E.P. in an ostensibly socialist society, of tension between a communist Russia and a capitalist world, and of tension between the free-thinking Bolshevik past and an increasingly centralized Bolshevik present – that Stalin rose to power.

At the end of the civil war he was Commissar of Nationalities – a post for which his Georgian origin made him eminently suitable – he was a member of the Politburo, and also Commissar of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate. This last, known as Rabkrin, had been established in 1919, as a supervisory body over the Soviet Civil Service. Its job was to eliminate bureaucratic abuses. It worked through teams of workers and peasants who were sent to inspect the work of government departments. Stalin also acted as liaison between the Politburo and the Orgburo, the body that directed the activity of Party members as the interests of the State demanded. In 1922 his power was further enhanced by appointment to the post of General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Party. (His staff already numbered more than 600.) This was a further creation designed to coordinate the Party’s top-level activities. But the general effect was something very different. The centre of gravity began to move away from the Politburo to the Secretariat, from the policy-making body to the body which supervised the execution of policy. The Politburo had originated at a time when the Party was an élite and when there could therefore be no problem in communication up and down the hierarchy. But when the élite became the mass and when the mass became burdened with a vast and complex burden of government in the worst conceivable circumstances, there was a proliferation of administrative bodies. These were Stalin’s element and here was his forte.
Stalin's accretion of power went largely unremarked until the last year or so of Lenin's life. Stalin was as powerful as ever when Lenin died in January 1924. The 'political testament' in which Lenin proposed that Stalin be removed from office, was virtually suppressed at the subsequent meeting of the Central Committee. This had the support of Zinoviev and Kamenev.

The struggle for the succession to Lenin had already broken out in 1923: it now came into the open. Stalin was at first allied with Zinoviev and Kamenev against Trotsky. This first phase of the conflict began in 1923 and came to an end in January 1925. Trotsky was then forced to resign his post as Commissar for War and his presidency of the Revolutionary-Military Council. A few months later he was appointed to a post in the Council of National Economy, with largely nominal duties in the field of foreign concessions, electro-technical development, and an industrial-technological commission.

In the middle of 1925 Zinoviev and Kamenev in their turn broke with Stalin, and early the next year formed a bloc with Trotsky. As a result, Zinoviev was removed from the Politburo, and later from his post on the Executive Committee of the Communist International. At the same time, Trotsky and Zinoviev were likewise removed from the Politburo. The climax came in November and December 1927, when the three disaffected leaders and seventy-five of their followers were expelled from the Party. Early in 1929 Trotsky was sent into exile and deported from Odessa.

Hardly had this, the so-called 'left opposition', been dealt with, than a 'right opposition' emerged in the Politburo. This was led by Bukharin, the editor of Pravda and secretary of the Comintern, Tomsky, head of the trade unions, and Rykov, Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars. By 1930 all three had been removed to lesser posts. Stalin now dominated the Politburo, seconded by Molotov, Voroshilov, and Kalinin.

The plethora of debate and controversy in these years surpassed anything in the Party's previous history. Here it cannot be followed in detail. Suffice it to say that it embraced every aspect of foreign and home policy. Had Stalin bungled the German revolution of 1923 and then the chances of the Chinese
CHAPTER 19

The Second Revolution

The Intra-Party struggle of the middle and later twenties produced one novel doctrine — the doctrine of socialism in one country. This was Stalin’s creation and contribution to the great debate. It signified a more or less complete break with everything that Bolshevism had previously proclaimed. The new theory decisively broke with the hitherto axiomatic view that socialism in Russia could be achieved only as part of an international, or at least a European, revolution. But this departure is unimportant. The point is that Stalin’s discovery did in fact give a new raison d’être to the revolutionaries. They had seized power and grimly fought for power in the expectation of world revolution. But when this failed to materialize, Bolshevism found itself in a cul-de-sac. Furthermore, the revolutionary ebb was accompanied by some considerable improvement in the Soviet relationship to the capitalist world. This situation, however welcome as a tribute to the consolidation of Soviet power, was also embarrassing. Where do we go from here? This question inevitably arose.

Stalin’s answer, therefore, that it was possible to construct socialism in Russia, leaving the international revolution to take care of itself — for the time being anyway — met a profound psychological need. It was a much more tangible concept than its only competitor — Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. It gave new impetus as well as new direction to the whole of the subsequent history of Soviet Russia. Moreover, the implications of the concept do not end there; it also revived, and very strongly, the whole aura of Russian universalist messianism. Backward Russia would yet lead the world! This was the truly inspiring vision that Stalin was ultimately to evoke.

Stalin first propounded his doctrine, buttressed with a few selected gobbets from Lenin, in the autumn of 1924. Then, a year later, the Fourteenth Party Congress resolved that “in the sphere of economic development, the Congress holds that in our land, the land of the dictatorship of the proletariat, there is “every requisite for the building of a complete socialist society” [Lenin]. The Congress considers that the main task of our Party is to fight for the victory of socialist construction in the U.S.S.R.”

By now the teaching of socialism in one country had imposed itself as the key tenet of Bolshevist doctrine. It had rapidly replaced the more far-flung aims of the revolution, and, as it were, nationalized them, rooted them in Russian soil.

But what did it mean in practice? What specific developments flowed from the doctrine? The answer in one word is — industrialization. As Marxists, the Bolsheviks were in any case committed to the belief in man’s power to control his environment, to cast aside the chains of economic bondage, and to realize the freedom of abundance. This infallibly entailed industrialization, the means to the production of man’s worldly goods. Socialists in the West could say with some show of justification that capitalism had solved the problem of production; it was now for socialism to solve the problem of distribution. But in Russia this theory was meaningless. There the problem was one of production first and last. Given the extremely low standard of living, the primordial requisite of any advance to socialism could only be industrialization.

But it would be absurd to pretend that this was the sole or even the most important motive of Russian industrialization. It was not undertaken, at least not in the first instance, for consumptionist purposes, but much more for the purpose of turning Russia into a great Power with a strong industrial base. This was nowhere argued more cogently or eloquently than by Stalin in a famous speech to industrial executives in February 1931, at the height of the First Five-Year Plan.

It is sometimes asked whether it is not possible to slow down the tempo a bit, to put a check on the movement. No, comrades, it is not possible! The tempo must not be reduced....

To slacken the pace would mean to lag behind; and those who lag behind are beaten. We do not want to be beaten. No, we don’t want to... [Russia] was ceaselessly beaten for her backwardness.
She was beaten by the Mongol Khans, she was beaten by Turkish Beys, she was beaten by Polish-Lithuanian Panis, she was beaten by Anglo-French capitalists, she was beaten by Japanese barons, she was beaten by all — for her backwardness. For military backwardness, for cultural backwardness, for political backwardness, for industrial backwardness, for agricultural backwardness ... You remember the words of the pre-revolutionary poet: 'Thou art poor and thou art plentiful, thou art mighty and thou art helpless, Mother Russia!...'

We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years. Either we do it or they crush us....

In the somewhat calmer atmosphere of the post-war period, Stalin said:

The Party knew that a war was looming, that the country could not be defended without heavy industry, that the development of heavy industry must be undertaken as soon as possible, that to be behind with this would be to lose. ... Accordingly the Communist Party of our country ... began the work of industrializing the country by developing heavy industry.

The first intimation of comprehensive socialist planning goes back to 1920, when the State Commission for Electrification was established in order to draft a programme for the electrification of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. Then, in 1921, the State Planning Commission — Gosplan for short — was set up to draft a unified economic plan for the whole country. It started with a staff of forty economists and certain technical personnel. Their number increased rapidly and so did the scope of the work, with the establishment of many regional planning offices throughout the Union. But this was still far from constituting a plan in the modern sense. Gosplan conceived its task somewhat on the model of capitalist economic planning and limited itself in the main to the forecasting of trends and the analysis of the socialist trade cycle. Also, of course, Gosplan could not but point to the inherent contradiction in attempting to plan an economy in which the agricultural sector was totally unamenable to planning.¹ All

¹ See pp. 283 ff. for a fuller discussion of this point.

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the same, the control figures that Gosplan produced from 1925 onwards as an extrapolation of current trends, did in fact serve as a preparation for socialist planning. By 1927–8 they already filled a thick volume of 500 pages. The leitmotiv of Gosplan thinking was that once the pre-war rate of production had been achieved, only limited progress could be expected thereafter.

But in December 1927 the whole leisurely tenor of Gosplan's activity was revolutionized. It was instructed by the Fifteenth Congress of the Communist Party to produce a five-year plan for the overall development of the Soviet economy. This followed the truly epoch-making Party decision of December 1926 that demanded 'the transformation of our country from an agrarian into an industrial one, capable by its own means of producing the necessary equipment'.

The same Party Congress of 1927 that authorized the drafting of the plan for industrialization also decided 'to pursue the offensive against the kulaks'. What was the connexion? Simply that no plan of intensive industrialization on the scale projected could conceivably be undertaken without bringing agriculture within its scope.

It must not be forgotten [said Stalin in referring to reduced grain deliveries from country to towns] that in addition to elements which lend themselves to planning, there are elements in our national economy which do not as yet lend themselves to planning; and that, apart from everything else, there are hostile classes which cannot be overcome simply by the planning of the State Planning Commission.

Now the chickens of 1917 were coming home to roost. Had the Mensheviks been right in arguing that in such an economically backward country as Russia a proletarian and socialist revolution could not be carried through? An inevitable question as soon as the régime began seriously to deal with the problem of large-scale industrialization. A vicious circle existed. Apart from German credits, no worthwhile foreign loans or investments were available. Thus the imports of capital equipment essential to industrialization could be covered only by increased agricultural exports. But the type of land division that had been sponsored — willy-nilly — by the Bolsheviks in
1917 made any considerable increase impossible. That was the position in a nutshell, at least as it presented itself to the Soviet Government. Moreover, not only was it impossible to exercise economic control over some twenty-five million peasant households, but, apart from a small group of wealthier farmers, the vast majority of peasants had insufficient land to employ modern agricultural machinery profitably. In existing circumstances all that such peasants could manage was to market a very small proportion of their produce. They lived barely above subsistence level.

There were two basic reasons why the Government could not back the kulaks, the wealthier peasants. First, since the kulaks were the only group able to market substantial surpluses of grain, they stood for high prices, whereas the interests of industrialization required low prices to benefit the town workers. Second, such a policy would have given a class hostile to Soviet power even more influence than it already enjoyed. This conjunction of ideological and economic needs made the elimination of the kulaks inevitable.

Also inevitable, given the inefficiency of an agricultural system split up into millions of self-sufficient smallholdings, was the process of collectivization. This would serve the dual purpose of creating larger units producing marketable surpluses, and also releasing manpower for the demands of town and factory. The overall picture, as it presented itself to Stalin, is clearly evident in his remarks to a conference of students of agrarian problems.

Can it be said [he asked] that our overall peasant farming is developing according to the principle of expanded reproduction?... Not only is there no annual expanded reproduction in our small peasant farming, taken in the mass, but, on the contrary, it is not always able to obtain even simple reproduction. Can we advance our socialized industry at an accelerated rate, having to rely on such an agricultural base?... Can the Soviet Government and the work of socialist construction be, for any length of time, based on two different foundations – on the foundation of the most large-scale and concentrated socialized industry, and on the foundation of the most fragmentary and backward, small-commodity, peasant farming? They cannot. Sooner or later the end must be a complete collapse of the whole national economy. What, then, is the solution? The solution lies in enlarging the agricultural units, in making agriculture capable of accumulation, of expanded reproduction, and in thus changing the agricultural base of our national economy. But how are the agricultural units to be enlarged? There are two ways of doing this. There is the capitalist way, which is to enlarge the agricultural units by introducing capitalism in agriculture – a way which leads to the impoverishment of the peasantry and to the development of capitalist enterprises in agriculture; we reject this way as incompatible with the Soviet economic system. There is a second way – the socialist way, which is to set up collective and State farms, the way which leads to the amalgamation of the small peasant farms into large collective farms, technically and scientifically equipped, and to the squeezing out of the capitalist elements from agriculture. We are in favour of this second way.

The whole process of Soviet industrialization and collectivization was analogous to the enclosure movement in England – the creation of a more productive agriculture and the driving of the agricultural population into the towns of the industrial revolution. An even closer analogy is with the pattern of nineteenth-century Russian economic development. Then, the iron and steel industry, the oil-fields, the manufacturing installations, had been largely financed by foreign capital, the interest on which came from Russia’s favourable foreign trade balance – and this depended on the export surplus of grain. The grain-producers, the peasants, were squeezed by high indirect taxes so that they had to sell their produce even though they themselves were forced to live below subsistence level. (There was a higher per capita grain consumption in the importing countries than in Russia, the country where the grain was actually produced.)

The Stalinist policy of industrialization and collectivization derived from somewhat similar principles. Its rationale owed something to the theories of the noted Trotskyite economist, Preobrazhensky. In his New Economics, published in 1924, he had argued, roughly speaking, that industry in such an economically undeveloped country as Russia could not, in the first instance at any rate, produce enough surplus to finance its
further development. This would therefore have to be secured by squeezing agriculture and depressing the living standards of the workers — which is what actually happened. But Preobrazhensky had proposed fiscal measures and the manipulation of prices as the means to this end. There was no conception that industrialization might take place at the breakneck tempo that Stalin initiated.

THE BATTLE FOR AGRICULTURE

By 1928 a crisis was visibly approaching. Abroad, the war scare of 1927 had revived an ineradicable fear of attack. At home, the political crisis came to a head with the exile of Trotsky to Soviet Central Asia. Economically, in both agriculture and industry, pre-war production levels had been reached. In normal circumstances, therefore, a much lower rate of growth would be expected than had characterized the previous six or seven years. To this it may be added that now that Stalin had defeated the main Trotskyite opposition he had to justify his victory, to say nothing of reaffirming his supremacy.

By now also, the private sector of the economy in trade and small-scale industry had been severely reduced through the Government's discriminatory measures. The stage was set for a further advance on the lines laid down by the Party Congress of December 1927, i.e. the planning and creation of a socialist industry and measures ‘to restrict the development of capitalism in the countryside and guide peasant farming towards socialism’. Both these objectives were inextricably intertwined, as explained above. Neither could be achieved without the other, at least in the planners' view.

It is quite possible, of course, to imagine that the agricultural problem might have been tackled differently. In the natural course of events the development of individualist farming would have produced growing surpluses and those peasants dispossessed would have migrated to the towns. But the political objection to fostering the growth of private property, with — as its probable corollary — the emergence of a competing political party, seems to have made this approach unacceptable. At any rate, it was never seriously tried. What actually resulted was enforced collectivization. The measure of this tumultuous upheaval can be gauged from Stalin's later admission to Churchill that the tension was as great as in any of the wartime crises.

The first moves towards collectivization were comparatively mild. At the end of 1927 the Party Congress proclaimed collectivization by example, and also imposed limits on the leasing of land by kulaks and their hiring of labour. Everything suggested that Stalin, as well he might, was approaching the peasant question very gingerly.

The first clashes came at the beginning of 1928. These were produced by a short-fall in grain deliveries to the towns. There is no reason to suppose that political motives had any part in this — merely peasant dissatisfaction with the prices fixed by the State. The Government replied with emergency administrative measures. Search parties were sent to the countryside to confiscate hidden stocks of grain, and the recalcitrant kulaks were imprisoned. At the same time, Committees of Poor Peasants were formed to denounce the hoarders. This encouragement of class war led to further violence in the villages and to a further reduction in the sown areas.

Even so, at the end of that year the first Five-Year Plan did not propose any radical change. In fact, its original version spoke frankly of ‘the unusual difficulties [that] are involved in the problem of reorganizing farming on a collective basis. . . . The fact must be frankly faced that in this field we are still feeling our way. . . .’ The object was to encourage the poorer peasants to enter collective farms, which would be favoured with financial and technical aid in the form of tractors and modern agricultural machinery; similarly, the middle peasant would be encouraged to improve his agriculture; and the kulaks would be crushed by additional taxes and other measures of financial discrimination.

This policy had at first some success. The number of collective farms between 1 June 1928 and 1 June 1929 rose from 33,000 to 57,000, embracing respectively 417,000 and more than a million peasant homesteads. But this success applied over-
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whelmingly to the poor peasants, those without land, horse, or cow. Those peasants who had something to lose – the kulaks and the less poor peasants – were unresponsive or hostile to the Government’s plans. The autumn sowing of 1928 and the spring sowing of 1929 gave further evidence of the peasant intention to put pressure on the Government by restricting food supplies. This development was all the more unwelcome, intolerable even, as it coincided with an unexpectedly rapid increase in industrialization and the number employed in heavy industry.

Would industrialization be held up by an unregenerate, hostile peasantry? This was the prospect that opened up before Stalin. The answer came in the summer of 1929:

... We must break down the resistance of this class [the kulaks] in open battle and deprive it of the productive sources of its existence. ... This is the turn towards the policy of eliminating the kulaks as a class ... the present policy of our Party in the rural districts is not a continuation of the old policy, but a turn ... to the new policy of eliminating the kulaks as a class.

Spurred on thus by Stalin, terror and repression came to the countryside. It was indeed 'open battle', akin to civil war. On the one side stood the power of the State, embodied in the dispatch of picked Party members to the countryside, and with the occasional use of Red Army units and police detachments. Also, the Government encouraged poor peasants and village soviets to seize from the kulaks machinery, cattle, and farm appliances for the benefit of the new collective farms. All this gained added bitterness from the urge to work off old grudges and resentments. The kulaks for their part retaliated by killing their cattle, burning their crops, and destroying their homesteads. All this they would rather do than let their property fall into the hands of the State. The frantic pace, but not the human tragedy, can be seen in the statistics: between 20 January and 1 March 1930, the number of collective farms almost doubled and the percentage of collectivized peasant homesteads rose from 21.6 per cent to fifty-five per cent. This went far beyond the totals envisaged in the Plan. In March 1930 Stalin himself called a halt to the turmoil. From now on, he declared, making an unprecedented volte-face, collectivization must be carried out on a voluntary basis and excessive socialization of property halted. The next few years did in fact see significant relaxations. When the collective farms had delivered their fixed quotas, they were allowed to sell surplus wheat, meat, vegetables, and fruit on the open market; and those peasants who so desired were allowed to withdraw from the collectives with their land and stock. In two months, March and April 1930, about nine million households took advantage of this freedom.

This was only a temporary retreat on the Government's part. By the end of 1932 there were again some fourteen million collectivized peasant households, more than half the total number. This followed in part from renewed governmental coercion, and in part from a certain relaxation in the collective system. The collectivized households, for example, were allowed to retain for family use their homes, small plots, cattle and poultry, and some small agricultural implements.

Hand in hand with the collectivization of agriculture went the establishment of machine-tractor stations. These had more or less a monopoly of agricultural machinery, with which they ploughed the collectives' land in return for a proportion of the crop. But their total was quite inadequate.

It was many years before Russian agriculture made its recovery from the turmoil and destruction of 1929–32. Not until 1934 did Stalin reveal the cost of the 'advance' to large-scale farming. There were thirty-three million horses in 1928 – and fifteen million in 1933. The respective figures for horned cattle were seventy million and thirty-four million; for pigs, twenty-six million and nine million; for sheep and goats, 146 million and forty-two million. This is to say nothing of the millions of kulaks and their families deported to forced-labour camps and new industrial locations beyond the Urals. In some areas the actual loss of life reached unimaginable proportions. This applied to the Ukraine, for example, where famine conditions prevailed in 1932 as a direct result of the disorganization of peasant agriculture. In Kazakhstan, where the depletion of livestock was probably greater than anywhere else (seventy-
three per cent of the cattle, eighty-seven per cent of the sheep and goats, eighty-eight per cent of the horses) 'the number of Kazakhs ... was less by one million or more than the number that would normally have been expected in 1939'.

THE BATTLE FOR INDUSTRY

The revolution in industry was comparable to that in agriculture. But there it made a more obviously purposeful impact – and not only in Russia, but also on the whole of the Western world. By a strange coincidence, the communists, through the First Five-Year Plan, seemed to be mastering their fate at precisely the same time as the rest of the world fell a hapless victim to the Great Depression. It was a grandiose, striking contrast – on the one hand, a nation in arms against poverty and insecurity; on the other, a world shaken hither and thither by economic collapse and catastrophe. This is an overstatement, of course, an overdrawn contrast. But it had sufficient validity to put Russia, a country standing only a decade earlier on the brink of dissolution, in the forefront of world economic development.

The heart of this effort was the Plan, a six-volume work, the result of two years' study by Gosplan. It went into operation on 1 October 1928, on a scale not easily analysed or described. The whole of Russia was hurled into a gigantic struggle to build socialism, to transform Russia from a backward agricultural into an advanced industrial country. Class A industries – coal, iron, steel, oil, and machine-building – were scheduled to triple their output; Class B industries, producing consumer goods, were to double their output. Overall, the gross output in 1932-3 was scheduled to rise to 236 per cent of the output of 1927-8. To support this effort the production of electrical power was to rise by 600 per cent. Almost no foreign capital, as distinct from foreign technicians, was available (owing to the reluctance of governments and banks to sanction loans to the U.S.S.R.). All was achieved through the ruthless accumu-


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lation of capital, the ploughing back of surplus, and the limitation of personal consumption and amenities.

In this way were created the vast ironworks and blast furnaces of Magnitogorsk beyond the Urals, the hydro-electric plant on the Dnieper (under the direction of an American engineer, Hugh Cooper), tractor-works at Kharkov and Gorki, the Ukrainian industrial area based on the coal of the Donetz Basin, the iron-ore of Krivoi Rog and manganese and other mineral deposits, railways in Turkestan, oil refineries and pipelines in the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, machinery works in Smolensk and throughout the central Moscow industrial region. The Chelyabinsk tractor plant alone covered an area larger than all the old city of Chelyabinsk.

Side by side with this development went the vast enlargement of towns, not only of such old-established urban centres as Moscow, Leningrad, and Kharkov, but also of lesser centres such as Tashkent, Minsk, Vladivostok, Voronezh, Sverdlovsk, Novosibirsk. Living conditions were deplorable and standards of comfort and amenities non-existent, especially in the new towns. The only comparison is with the worst years of the Industrial Revolution in England. John Scott, an American engineer who worked for five years at Magnitogorsk in the thirties, writes:

I was going to be one of the many who cared not to own a second pair of shoes, but who built the blast furnaces which were their aim. I would wager that Russia's battle of ferrous metallurgy alone involved more casualties than the battle of the Marne. All during the thirties the Russian people were at war. . . . In Magnitogorsk I was precipitated into a battle. I was deployed on the iron and steel front. Tens of thousands of people were enduring the most intense hardships in order to build blast furnaces, and many of them did it willingly, with boundless enthusiasm, which infected me from the day of my arrival.

Labour policy went into the melting-pot, as did everything else during these early thirties. The unemployment of the N.E.P. period suddenly gave way to labour shortages, which were in part overcome by sheer coercion, in part by a disguised

form of direction of labour, and in part by sheer patriotic upsurge. Clearly, the last was the most important impulse, at least in the early years of industrialization, and it was fanned and fostered by every device of mass communication. Not since the days of the First World War had such attention been paid by government propaganda to the common man in his role as producer. In any Russian newspaper of the time, it has been said.

the workers speak with their own voices and write with their own pens; on four pages of very poor paper, with very poor print, the vocal soldiers of industry shout themselves hoarse, with boasting, with exhortation, with criticism of failures, with challenges to socialist competition, with offers of ‘low-ropes’ to less forward enterprises, with promises, with indignation... Next we come upon a grave article upon the problems of technical construction in the coal industry... Our correspondent complains of short production of coal in the Donetz Basin, there is absenteeism of labour on a large scale... The repair of locomotives on the Murmansk line is unsatisfactory... A locomotive came back from the Volgga repair shop, after overhaul, with seventy defects... Next we have a page devoted to agriculture, with a great headline across it: ‘Quick collection of seeds shows Bolshevik leadership’...

And so it went on — an increasing flow of criticism and exhortation, always and everywhere associating and identifying the worker with the national effort.

An essential aspect of labour policy in these years was education. There was no reserve of skilled labour to draw on. Men had to learn their jobs, or even be taught them while they worked. At the lowest level factories would themselves set aside facilities for teaching illiterate adults to read and write. At a higher level, facilities for technical instruction multiplied vastly. Technical institutes, colleges and universities, factory schools, all were pressed into service to provide new cadres of skilled workers.

On the other hand, precisely because the labour force was so undisciplined and untrained and had no traditional labour mores, the Soviet Government had to bring into play all sorts

CHAPTER 20

A Totalitarian Society

The fear of war, the need to prepare for war, had been one of the mainsprings of Soviet industrialization. "The industrialization of the country," said Voroshilov, the Commissar for Defence, "predetermines the fighting capacity of the U.S.S.R." This fear was not only an obsession born of past foreign intervention, it was not only the conviction of isolation and exposure, it also drew its strength from the Marxist analysis that capitalism and war were inseparable. Hitler's assumption of power could not but deepen this fear and give it manifest shape.

The fear of war, with its socio-industrial consequences, superimposed on the collective values inherent in Bolshevism, combined to create a society that was more and more totalitarian. The process began in earnest with the First Five-Year Plan and developed at an accelerating pace during the Second and Third Five-Year Plans. This is a familiar accompaniment of great national efforts.

Take first the adulation of the leader and the led. Ever since Lenin's body had been embalmed in a mausoleum in Red Square, before the Kremlin, to become an object of pious pilgrimage, a strong urge towards the consecration of charismatic leadership, beyond criticism and even beyond history, had grown up. With the presentation of Stalin as Lenin's successor, and all the more when Stalin exacted greater and greater sacrifices, the adulation of the leader sank to greater and greater depths. His full-page portrait first appeared in Pravda in 1929. Thenceforward, both visually and verbally, through every medium of modern publicity, the words and idealized countenance of Stalin were used to spur on and galvanize a population that was barely beginning to become literate, barely beginning to handle machinery, work at an assembly line, or take part in modern industry. In a similar manner, the drive for increased productivity led to the glorification of the producer, the coalminer such as Alexey Stakhanov, say, who could hew ten tons where one ton was the norm.

Hand in hand with the State-inspired emphasis on the dignity of labour went the installation of a new respectability. There was a rehabilitation of virginity as an ideal, an end to easy divorce, the limitation of facilities for abortion, and the proclamation of the virtues of a stable family and married life. Pravda once wrote: "... A bad family man cannot be a good citizen and social worker." In addition to exploiting the family as a unit of social service, the régime also sponsored the creation of youth groups such as the Young Pioneers, the Komsomol, and a number of part-time para-military organizations grouped together in the Osoaviakhim.

The new intelligentsia that developed in the thirties had none of the questioning character of its predecessors. It accepted its values ready-made, perhaps with a certain amount of cynicism, an inevitable reaction after the hectic pace of the First Five-Year Plan. Its task was not to question the obligations and tasks handed down from above. These people were primarily technicians in outlook, concerned with achieving results and not necessarily with the type of result achieved. They grew up in an atmosphere steeped in Soviet patriotism, to which the uninhibited study of history was sacrificed, and were sedulously flattered as the bearers of a new civilization. They were the men who benefited most from the new opportunities and prospects opened up by industrialization. Those who were Bolshevik Party members allowed the old cut-and-thrust of debate in the Party's erstwhile animated sessions to degenerate into sedate affairs where delegates listened in silence to set speeches. They limited their intervention to 'hoorahs' and applause.

Altogether, the superfluity of politics and of public and political discussion was one prominent characteristic of these pre-war years. There simply was no need for them, since the goals and values of society were already in existence. The Soviet system, as it developed out of the turmoil of industrialization and Russia's general thrust into the twentieth century, gave no scope for even limited discussion of the nature or aims.
of the new society. The national effort was so comprehensive and inclusive that there could be no questioning of its aims or methods. What sort of revolution could there be? What sort of revolution had there been? These questions no longer mattered. They belonged to the past. What mattered now was the urgency of building socialism - even though the precise meaning of the word might be conceived in practical terms without ideological content.

The climax to the growing totalitarian nature of Soviet society came with the great purges of the middle and later thirties. Here, too, the unremitting hostility of the Germans and Stalin's failure to achieve any working rapprochement with the Western Powers made their contribution to a reign of terror unparalleled in modern Russian history. The closest analogy is with Ivan the Terrible's persecution of the boyars in the sixteenth century. Perhaps, in sober fact, Stalin did identify himself with Ivan at this time. (He complained to Cherkesov, the actor who played the title role in Eisenstein's film, that Ivan's fault lay in not annihilating all his enemies: 'This was a mistake,' said Stalin.) Then, too, the isolation of Muscovy and the threat and even reality of war had created a dark atmosphere of tension and suspicion, justifying the wildest crimes. But Stalin's purges did of course also reveal the existence of widespread dissatisfaction and oppositionist sentiment. To deal with this was the raison d'être of the purges. All the 'confessions' of conspiracy and treason were extorted by various forms of pressure and torture.

A revolver shot in Leningrad on 1 December 1934 set off the machinery of terror. Nikolayev, a young dissident communist, fired the shot; it killed Kirov, a close associate of Stalin, in charge of the Leningrad Party organization.

That same evening, according to Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956, Stalin caused the following directive to be issued:

I. Investigative agencies are directed to speed up the cases of those accused of the preparation or execution of acts of terror;
II. Judicial organs are directed not to hold up the execution of death sentences pertaining to crimes of this category in order to

consider the possibility of pardon because the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee U.S.S.R. does not consider as possible the receiving of petitions of this sort;

III. The organs of the Commissariat of Internal Affairs are directed to execute the death sentences against criminals of the above-mentioned category immediately after the passage of sentences.

This directive, Khrushchev added, 'became the basis for mass acts of abuse against socialist legality'.

Nikolayev and such of his sympathizers as could be detected were tried in camera and executed. Zhdanov replaced the dead Kirov in Leningrad and went ahead with purging the Party organization of politically dissident elements. But so far he and Stalin limited themselves to deporting the suspects.

This took place in the early part of 1935. Some eighteen months later matters took a sensational turn when no lesser personalities than Zinoviev and Kamenev, together with some others, were charged with no lesser crimes than collaborating with foreign Powers to overthrow the Soviet State. They worked, it was alleged, under the leadership of the exiled Trotsky. The accused men confessed and were duly executed. Now the reign of terror began in real earnest, spurred on by Stalin and Zhdanov. In a telegram to the Politburo they demanded that Yezhov replace Yagoda as head of the secret police. 'Yagoda has definitely proved himself incapable of unmasking the Trotskyite-Zinovievite bloc. The O.G.P.U. is four years behind in this matter. This is noted by all Party members...'

The O.G.P.U. accordingly began to catch up on those four lost years. At the beginning of 1937 a further group of Old Bolsheviks trod the same path to death. They also confessed to incredible crimes of treason. Early the next year the purge reached out to the Red Army and swept away Marshal Tukhachevsky, Chief of the Red Army, and Admiral Orlov, Commander-in-Chief of the Red Navy; and in March 1938, a final group of twenty-one of the highest Soviet personalities, including Rykov, Bukharin, and Yagoda, was charged with collaborating with foreign Powers to dismember the U.S.S.R.,
overthrow socialism, and restore capitalism. They too were found guilty and executed.

The men in the dock were of course only the most notable victims. Unnumbered thousands of lesser people perished or were deported. Among the prominent victims were all the members of Lenin's Politburo (apart from Stalin himself and Trotsky), many ambassadors, most of the surviving Old Bolsheviks, the top leadership of the Red Army, the upper and middle levels of the Communist Party, and many members of the organization of Red Partisans. Those deported fell into the hands of a special department of the secret police set up in 1934. It bore the title: 'Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps and Labour Settlements.' By the end of the 1930s this body had organized a network of camps stretching across the north of European Russia and into the north-east of Siberia.

CHAPTER 21

Foreign Affairs

FROM ISOLATION TO THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS,
1921–34

During all these years of turmoil and upheaval on the home front, Russian foreign affairs pursued a comparatively untroubled path. Neither Chicherin nor Litvinov, the Commissars of Foreign Affairs, were ever members of the Politburo, so that the work of their department was not involved in the internal Party struggle to the same extent as was, for example, the pace of industrialization. Hence there is a continuity that was absent elsewhere. Foreign affairs, so to speak, were above controversy.¹

But to speak of foreign affairs in the conventional sense is already to prejudge the issue. Trotsky, the first Commissar, thought his job would be nothing more than to issue a few revolutionary proclamations and then 'shut up shop'. Trotsky, like all the Soviet leaders, hoped and fervently expected that revolution in Russia would be swiftly followed by revolution in Europe – first and foremost in Germany. In 1918 the direct revolutionary appeal was comparatively muted. But in 1919, as the wars of intervention got under way, it was inevitably stepped up. 'In that year [i.e. 1919] we sent fewer notes to governments but more appeals to the toiling masses,' said Chicherin, Trotsky's successor at the Russian Foreign Office.

These appeals to the toiling masses went largely unanswered. As in Britain, for example, they were not much more than some slight brake on interventionist and anti-Soviet policies. They never went further than that. By 1920, not only had the Soviet republics in Hungary and Bavaria shown themselves to be ephemeral creations, but throughout Europe as a whole the revolutionary tide had clearly ebbed. There was certainly no reversion to the stability of the days before the First World

¹ But see pp. 278–9.