

## war communism\*

The Bolshevik party seized power in Russia in October 1917. Historians use the term “war communism” for the economic system of Soviet Russia during the civil war that followed this revolution. This term, not used at the time, was first applied when the civil war had already drawn to a close. In the spring of 1921, advocating a shift towards a more liberalised internal market, Lenin described the system as “that peculiar war communism, forced on us by extreme want, ruin and war”. He went on to define its core as the centralised system of confiscating all of the peasants’ food surpluses, and more, to feed the urban workers and the soldiers of the Red Army. He meant that war communism was a temporary phenomenon: not real communism, just a necessary evil required by wartime circumstances. He intended thereby to distance himself from it, and to inaugurate a more relaxed regime later known as the “new economic policy” or NEP.

A few years later, however, Stalin adopted policies that resembled the war communism in several features, including specifically the confiscation of peasant food surpluses. Consequently many historians now reject Lenin’s claim that war communism was an unintended consequence of special circumstances, and argue that the Bolsheviks always intended to build a society based on centralisation and force.

It took more than six months for a full-scale civil war to break out after the October 1917 revolution. The Bolsheviks did not try immediately to centralise the economy. They negotiated for a separate peace with Germany to take Russia out of the World War. They brought representatives of the non-Bolshevik left into a coalition government. While they legislated to nationalise the landed estates of the aristocracy, they sought a coexistence with capitalist and commercial private property with state regulation and workers’ rights of inspection.

The results, however, threatened the Bolsheviks with a loss of control on each front. The peace treaty signed with Germany in March 1918 provoked military intervention by Russia’s former Allies. Its humiliating terms drove the Bolsheviks’ coalition partners towards the monarchist counter-revolution. Under the treaty Russia lost the Ukraine; this cut the food available to Russia’s non-farm population. The wartime system of food distribution that the Bolsheviks had inherited from the imperial government was ineffective: while the urban population was entitled to receive a food ration at low fixed prices, at the same prices the peasants would not sell food to the government for distribution. As the situation worsened many groups of workers blamed the factory owners, expelled them, and declared the factories to be state property. In the countryside, instead of the great estates being taken over by the government, the peasants everywhere divided the land among themselves.

With 1918 the Bolsheviks began to travel a path of extreme political and economic centralisation. They nationalised the banks in January.

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In April they enacted state monopolies in foreign trade and also internal trade in foodstuffs. In June they brought the “commanding heights” of industry into the public sector. This path ended in a one-party state underpinned by a secret police and a demonetised command economy with virtually all industry nationalised and farm food surpluses liable to violent seizure. The Bolsheviks travelled willingly, justifying all their actions in the name of socialism. They blamed their difficulties on a minority of speculators and counter-revolutionaries with whom there could be no compromise. This intensified the polarisation between Reds and Whites that ended in civil war.

Food shortages drove this process along. Shortages were felt first by the towns and the army, because peasants fed themselves before selling food to others. Shortages arose primarily from the wartime disruption of trade, the loss of the Ukraine, and the government’s attempts to hold down food prices. The Bolsheviks themselves overestimated peasant food stocks; this meant that when they failed to raise food they blamed the peasants for withholding it. They specifically blamed a minority of richer peasants, the so-called kulaks, for “speculating” in food by withholding it intentionally so as to raise its price. Between April and June of 1918 they slid from banning private trade in foodstuffs to a campaign to seize “kulak” food stocks and then to confiscate their land as well. Since rural food stocks were smaller and more scattered than the government believed, such measures tended to victimise many ordinary peasants without improving supplies.

Under war communism between the summer of 1918 and the spring of 1921 goods were distributed by administrative rationing or barter; with more than 20 percent monthly inflation, prices rose in total by many thousand times and the money stock lost most of its real value. The government seized food from the peasantry, but there was not enough to meet workers’ needs so black markets developed where urban residents bartered their products and property with peasants for additional food. Industry was nationalised far more widely than the “commanding heights” listed by the June 1918 decree; by November 1920 public ownership extended to many artisan establishments with one or two workers. Public-sector management was centralised under a command system of administrative quotas and allocations.

War communism was not an economic success. Food procurements rose at first, but industrial production and employment, harvests, and living standards fell continuously. The fact that the Bolsheviks emerged victorious from the civil war owed more to their enemies’ moral and material weaknesses than to their own strengths. Despite this, they did not abandon war communism immediately when the war came to an end. By the spring of 1920 fighting continued only in Poland and the Caucasus. Still war communism was upheld. While Lenin defended the system of food procurement against its critics, other Bolsheviks advocated extending control over peasant farming through “sowing plans” and over industrial workers through “militarisation” of labour.

Such dreaming was rudely interrupted in early 1921 by an anti-Bolshevik mutiny in the Kronstadt naval base and a wave of peasant discontent centered on the Tambov province. It was not the end of the

civil war, but the threat of another, that brought war communism to an end. This does not prove that the Bolsheviks had always intended to introduce something like war communism. It does show that Lenin was disingenuous to suggest that war communism was only a product of circumstances. In the case of war communism the Bolsheviks willingly made virtues out of apparently necessary evils, then took them much further than was necessary. Moreover, one product of civil-war circumstances was never abandoned: the one-party state underpinned by a secret police.

## Related topics

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new economic policy

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