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# THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

ON THE COURSE AND OUTCOME OF  
WORLD WAR 1 1917-1922



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# Timeline of the **RUSSIAN REVOLUTION**

**1905**

## **The 'Dress Rehearsal':**

- Revolutionary disturbances led to Bloody Sunday - the Tsar ordered troops to clear the streets. Over a thousand were killed. This was the trigger for revolution: Troops mutinied. Mass strikes spread. Committees of workers, soldiers and peasants, called Soviets, seized control of towns and cities. Tsarist forces repressed the revolution. The Bolshevik party was forced underground but the memory of the mass power exercised by the Soviets remained.

**1914**

- Russia, as part of the Triple Entente with Britain and France, became heavily involved in WW1.

**1917**

By this point, over two million Russian soldiers had died as a result of the war and almost as many civilians. Alone the Bolsheviks opposed the war. There were two revolutions in 1917.

## **FEBRUARY The First Revolution:**

On International Women's Day (23 Feb), women textile and munitions workers demonstrated. The Tsar ordered the troops to clear the streets but the troops mutinied. The following day the capital was in the hands of the people.

## **FEBRUARY-OCTOBER 'Dual Power' Period:**

The Tsar resigned. Power was handed to a Provisional Government composed of existing ministers but parallel to this, Soviets were elected across Russia as an alternative source of power. The Provisional Government continued the war.

**APRIL** Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders returned from exile. Lenin published the Bolshevik program 'The April Theses' arguing for the end of dual power and a people's revolution based on opposition to the war and an alliance between peasants and workers.

**JULY** The Provisional Government sought to halt the rising influence of the Bolsheviks. Britain and France demanded a new Russian offensive to relieve pressure on the Western Front, as the pro-war Kerensky was made Prime Minister. The July military offensive proved to be a disaster. Troops mutinied across the front. Kerensky ordered the suppression of the Bolsheviks, with Lenin and other leaders once more forced into exile.

**AUGUST** Kerensky gave military command to Kornilov to rally the officer corps behind the government. Kornilov then attempted a coup d'état. Kerensky was forced to enlist the support of the Soviets and the Red Guards to thwart the Kornilov revolt. Kornilov was defeated and imprisoned, but Kerensky's reliance on the Bolsheviks highlighted the ever-growing weakness of the Provisional Government. The following weeks saw mass desertion in the army, the decline of the Menshevik party in the Soviets and a split in the Socialist Revolutionary party. The popular mood was gravitating towards the Bolsheviks and their policies, summarised in the slogan 'Peace, Bread and Land'.

**SEPTEMBER** The Petrograd Soviet adopted a Bolshevik motion calling for the formation of a Soviet government and the ending of dual power. Similar motions won support in the Soviets across Russia and in the armed forces.

# 1917

## **OCTOBER** The Second Revolution:

- 7 October: Lenin returned once again to Petrograd.
- 9 October: The Petrograd Soviet voted to create a Military Revolutionary Committee.
- 10 October: The Bolshevik Central Committee voted for immediate preparations to take state power, which would take place over the next two weeks.
- 24 October: Kerensky made a final unsuccessful attempt to hold on to power.
- 25 October: On a signal from the Cruiser *Aurora*, Soviet detachments moved to take over the telephone exchanges, the electricity stations and transport. The ministers of the Provisional Government were later arrested during the storming of the Winter Palace.  
The revolution was almost entirely peaceful. An entirely new type of state power had to now be created. The Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets endorsed Lenin's motions of land to the peasants, the formation of a workers and peasants' government and the immediate opening of peace negotiations.
- 30 October: Kerensky attempted a counter-attack in Petrograd; the Russian Civil War had begun.

**DECEMBER** Negotiations began with German High Command.

The White Russian army was created under General Kaledin in the south to counter the revolution. This was established along with a 'government in-exile'.

# 1918

**MARCH** The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed ending Russia's participation in WW1. This treaty was unpopular among many because it gave away too much Russian land especially in Ukraine. Anti-Bolsheviks seized on this dissatisfaction to whip up support for their (White) side in the Civil War. The Red Army was created to defend the revolution. British forces landed in Murmansk to aid the Whites.

**APRIL** British and Japanese forces landed in the Far East at Vladivostok.

**MAY** US and French forces landed at Archangel.

**JULY** The new Russian constitution renamed the country the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR).

**AUGUST** US troops landed in the Far East. The Civil War waged on.

**OCTOBER** The short-lived German Revolution began, inspired by the Russian example.

**NOVEMBER** Armistice ended WW1.

# 1919

**MARCH** The First Congress of the Third International, or the Comintern, was held in Moscow, attended by representatives from over twenty countries.

The short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic was established.

# 1920

**NOVEMBER** The majority of the White Army surrendered - the Red Army was ultimately victorious by this point, though pockets of resistance remained for years afterwards. The Civil War and the Wars of Intervention, which included fourteen countries sending troops, armaments and money to aid the Whites, resulted in 10.5 million dead, as well as widespread devastation and starvation. The policy of foreign intervention in Russia was opposed by socialists and workers in many European countries.

NOTE: Throughout 1917 until January 1918 we have used the Julian calendar, then in use in Russia. There is a difference of 13 days between that calendar and our (Gregorian) calendar. An example is the day of the first revolution of 1917. It is dated as having occurred on International Women's Day which then in Russia was February 23rd, whereas for us it is March 8th. Soviet Russia abandoned the use of the Julian calendar in February 1918.

# SOVIETS

The first Soviet (or Council) was established in 1905 during a textile strike in Ivanovo (about 250 miles from Moscow). It began as a strike committee but developed into an elected body of the town's workers. During the 1905 revolution such Soviets of Workers' Deputies, formed as an alternative workers' government, were established in around fifty different towns including Moscow, St. Petersburg and Odessa. However, the defeat of the revolution and the re-imposition of the Tsarist autocracy led, inevitably, to the crushing of the Soviets.

Nonetheless the tradition of direct workers' democracy lived on, and hence Soviets were re-established during the February Revolution of 1917 and continued thereafter. The most important of these was the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Every battalion (250 men) had the right to elect one deputy in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg; its Germanic name was changed in 1914), whereas there was one deputy for every 1,000 workers. (It should be noted that by this time 15 million men had been conscripted into the Russian Army). During the period of the 'dual power' (February-October 1917), Bolsheviks did not have a majority on the Petrograd Soviet.

By June 1917 there were 400 Soviets in existence with Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) dominating at least three-quarters of them. This fact is borne out by looking at the figures of the respective parties at the First Congress of Soviets in June 1917. 1,090 delegates attended, of which 285 were Socialist Revolutionaries, 248 were Mensheviks and 105 Bolsheviks.

However, by the time of the October Revolution things had changed. The Mensheviks and SRs were increasingly unpopular mainly because of their continued support for World War 1 (WW1). By now there were over 900 Soviets in Russia and the discrediting of the rival parties enabled the Bolsheviks to gain majority control in all the Soviets in the major towns and cities. This included those in Petrograd and Moscow. This was a critical factor in ensuring the victory of the Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic (RSFSR).



Tsarist propaganda posters (above and opposite) in support of Russia's involvement in WW1 (Source: Sputnik)

## WORLD WAR 1 (WW1)

In 1914, WW1 broke out. This was not a 'Great War'; it was a conflict between rival imperialisms, and despite the fact that all participating governments appealed to patriotic sentiment, there was significant opposition to it, particularly in Russia. The war was fought initially between two power blocks; the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy) and the Triple Entente (Britain, France and Russia). These alliances were not stable. Turkey joined the Triple Alliance in October 1914, Italy changed sides in April 1915 and the USA declared war on Germany in 1917.

There have been unending debates among historians about the cause(s) of the war citing such issues as the thirty year Balkan crisis, the alliance system itself, massive investments in armaments (including the *Dreadnought* submarine race) and most importantly rival imperialisms. By 1914 the world had been divided up by the richest powers, with Britain, France and Germany having grabbed the lion's share. Any dissatisfaction about the apportionment of the world and its resources among the Great Powers (Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia) could only be settled by re-division: inevitably this meant war. Whichever side won would be able to re-divide the world in their favour as was clearly shown in the series of treaties ending the war which addressed the dismemberment of the vanquished Ottoman, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. This drive for territory helps to explain the lack of war aims, the shifting alliances and the secret treaties extant during WW1.

War disrupts society. WW1 was no exception, but far from disrupting the existing trends within the labour movement it had the effect of stimulating them. The pre-war militancy of sections of the working class, women's and labour movements in many European countries continued unabated, whilst the exigencies of war gave some labour leaders the chance to become fully enmeshed within the state apparatus. The gulf between the two widened to such an extent that it was difficult for both to co-exist within the same organisations, and hence there was a split in many European Social Democratic parties on the issue of support versus opposition to the war.



This division was not reflected in the stance of the Second (Socialist) International (1889-1916) which failed to live up to its earlier anti-war declarations. The resolutions of the Second International, in condemning colonialism (1907 Stuttgart Congress) and calling for workers to oppose war (1910 Copenhagen Congress), were promptly forgotten in the rush to arms. In consequence, the International itself collapsed during WW1.

However, divisions over the issue of the war were especially marked in many individual countries whose labour movements had affiliated to the Second International. This was particularly the case in Russia where it was a significant factor in accounting for the success of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. The war also divided the labour movement, the women's movement and socialist parties in Germany and Britain. In Britain, the 'unofficial' opposition, reflecting the chasm between the leaders and the led, generated its own structures in the form of the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committees Movement. Although no longer unofficial, the shop stewards of today can trace their origins to this wartime period during which rank and file workers kept effective trade unionism alive in the face of their leaders' surrender.

Thus, WW1 with its devastating number of casualties polarised opinion to such an extent that it led to revolutions in three countries and uprisings in many

others. After four years of bitter battles on the eastern and western fronts, the total number of military and civilian casualties was more than 38 million. It is estimated that there were over 18 million deaths and 20 million wounded, ranking it among the deadliest conflicts in human history.

## RUSSIA AS PART OF THE TRIPLE ENTENTE

The Triple Entente was formed between France, Great Britain and Russia as a response to Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy's Triple Alliance (the Central Powers). After Russia went to Serbia's defence during the final Balkan crisis, it then became embroiled in hostilities against Germany and Austria-Hungary who had shared aims in the Balkans in opposition to Russia. This was the spark which inevitably led, via the alliance system, to the greater war against the Central Powers. As the war dragged on, however, Russian people, including the soldiers themselves, began to question the undeclared aims of the war and the colossal devastation and senseless human sacrifice engendered by it. In short, the call for peace became an ever more persistent rallying cry. Russia's participation in the war left millions of their own soldiers dead. The campaign was chaotic, as many of the soldiers were dispatched without enough arms or food, leading not only to war weariness, but to outright opposition to the conflict. The Provisional Government when appointed after February 1917, continued Russian involvement in the war.



'Entente under the mask of peace' (Source: Sputnik)



## THE FIRST REVOLUTION: FEBRUARY 1917 INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY (IWD) IN RUSSIA AND THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION

Although International Women's Day had been inaugurated in 1910, it was not celebrated in Russia until 1913. The issue of support versus opposition to the war accentuated the class divisions in the already fractured women's movement. The bourgeois feminist movement supported WW1, whereas working women, influenced by their Bolshevik sisters were opposed to it. This led in 1917 to IWD marking the first revolution.

By 1917 a vast number of women were working in factories replacing conscripted men. On February 23rd, 1917 (March 8th in our Gregorian calendar), IWD was marked by strikes and huge demonstrations of women. The Bolshevik paper *Pravda* reported that this led to revolution:

'...the first day of the revolution was women's day...the women...decided the destiny of the troops; they went to the barracks, spoke to the soldiers and the latter joined the revolution... Women, we salute you.'

The result was the overthrow of the Tsar and the establishment of a bourgeois Provisional Government under the leadership of Prince Lvov and later, Kerensky.

## LENIN'S ARRIVAL IN PETROGRAD AND THE APRIL THESES

The day after his arrival in Petrograd from exile, Lenin published an important document, known as the April Theses. This set out the Bolshevik policy to transform the current Russian bourgeois republic into a socialist state. In effect, it turned into the demands around which revolutionary workers, soldiers and peasants rallied. These were the main points:

- Oppose WW1.
- The February revolution is a transitional stage to a full socialist revolution and thus a Soviet republic must be established.
- The unelected Provisional Government should not be supported.
- Landed estates and banks will be confiscated and nationalised.
- Production and distribution to be under the control of workers' Soviets
- A new International will be established

## SYKES-PICOT AGREEMENT 1916 AND REVELATION OF THE SECRET TREATIES 1917

Britain and France concluded a secret agreement in May 1916 known as the Sykes-Picot agreement, after the British and French representatives who negotiated it. The agreement related to the Arab territory in the Ottoman Empire which Britain and France aimed to dismember after WW1 and divide the vast territory ruled by the Turks between them, as shown in the map above. Russia was made privy to this secret treaty partly because it was as one of the Entente powers, but also because it had an interest in Jerusalem as a 'protector' of Orthodox Christians. A copy of the secret Sykes-Picot treaty was shared by France and Britain with Russia's Foreign Office. When the Bolsheviks took power in Russia in November 1917, Trotsky, as Commissar for Foreign Affairs, discovered the Sykes-Picot treaty in Tsarist files. Realising the potential impact of disclosure, he published a summary of the Sykes-Picot text in the government newspaper *Izvestiya* on November 22nd, 1917. The disclosures created a sensation both inside and outside the corridors of power.

## DUAL POWER (February-October 1917)

Lenin referred to the period between the February and October revolutions of 1917 as the phase of the 'dual power'. Although the unelected Provisional Government *de facto* ruled Russia after the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy, at grass roots level the elected Soviets of workers and soldiers, within the towns especially, were exercising an increasingly important influence on the daily lives of the Russian people. This is clearly seen in the mass demonstrations that took place on May Day and in July 1917.



May Day 1917 in Petrograd (Source: MML)

'In what does this dual power consist? In the fact that side by side with the Provisional Government, the government of the bourgeoisie, there has developed another government, weak and embryonic as yet, but undoubtedly an actually existing and growing government — the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.' (Lenin)

## THE JULY OFFENSIVE AND THE JULY DAYS

Persuaded by his Entente partners, war minister Kerensky launched a military offensive in Galicia in July 1917 which had disastrous consequences. Its objective was to strengthen the weak Eastern Front and to improve troop morale and discipline. On both counts it had the opposite effect. The Russian army was forced to retreat from the German advance. Russian soldiers mutinied in protest against their appalling conditions and calamitous military leadership. In early July, the refusal of a machine-gun regiment to be dispatched to the front lines began a protest during which workers and soldiers in Petrograd staged armed demonstrations calling for the Provisional Government to step down. The Bolsheviks were reluctant to support these calls as they were not yet in a position to take power. In response to the demonstrations, the Provisional

Government announced a crackdown on the Bolsheviks and many were attacked or arrested by those troops still loyal to the government. This led to the banning of the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda*. Lenin disappeared into hiding. Kerensky became Prime Minister and continued participation in the war.



Shooting of Bolsheviks in Petrograd on July 5th, 1917 (Source: MML)

## ATTITUDE OF RUSSIAN SOLDIERS

The Provisional Government continued the war, which was now extremely unpopular amongst troops and civilians. After the devastating failure of the July Offensive, morale amongst Russian soldiers was even lower and soldiers refused to move to the front lines or simply deserted. More and more soldiers joined the Soviets, demanding peace. The Bolshevik promise of peace negotiations gave them majority support amongst soldiers. Thus, the Bolshevik recognition of the need to end the war was a key factor in the success of the October Revolution.

## RABOTNITSA & THE ROLE OF WOMEN



Lenin actively supported campaigning among working women and was among those who advocated the publication of a new paper, *Rabotnitsa* (*The Woman Worker*) which first appeared in 1914. However, the outbreak of WW1 meant that it was

supressed. In 1917 Bolsheviks were heavily engaged in agitational work among women assisted by the re-appearance of *Rabotnitsa* which came out several times a month with a circulation of 40 – 50,000.

A commonly accepted view is that Russian women featured only twice in 1917. The first time was in Petrograd on February 23rd as harbingers of the revolution which established the Provisional Government.

The second time, bourgeois women played a reactionary role as part of a battalion defending the Winter Palace, the seat of government, against Bolshevik attack on October 25th.

Both these events occurred, but lazily citing only them fails to do justice to the enormously important role of women throughout the revolutionary process as midwives of the revolution. They were present at the birth and were crucial in the final stages of delivery. In addition, they played a vital role in defending the revolution during the Civil War.

## THE SECOND (SOCIALIST) REVOLUTION; OCTOBER 1917

The October Revolution was the culmination of popular sentiment directed against the Provisional Government which was achieving little for the majority of people to satisfy their need for change from its Tsarist past. In particular, the unelected body continued to participate in the very unpopular WW1 opting, as seen in the July Offensive, for participation in further military campaigns which had provoked outrage amongst soldiers and workers alike.

After the February Revolution which had established the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks gradually gained in strength and influence during the period of the dual power, especially in the Soviets and in the army after July.

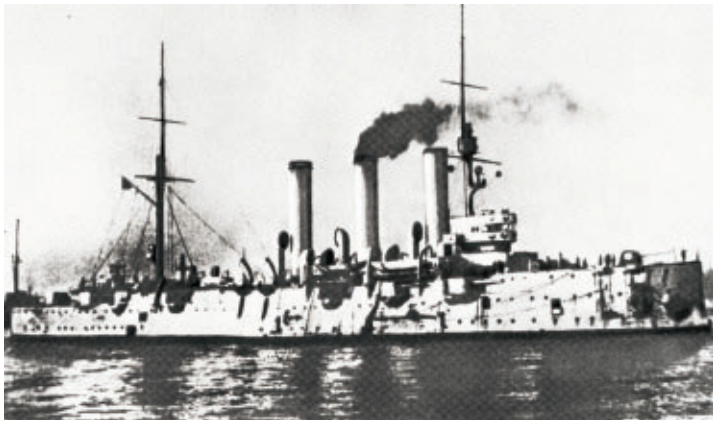
The Bolshevik slogan 'Peace, Bread and Land' summarised their programme and was increasingly popular. They established their headquarters in the Smolny Institute. This was a former girls' convent school which also housed the Petrograd Soviet. The Provisional Government now headed by Kerensky, was still officially in power and under pressure from the nobility and industrialists, Kerensky was persuaded to take decisive action against the Bolsheviks. Thus, on October 22nd he ordered the arrest of the Bolshevik Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) which had been established within the Petrograd Soviet on October 12th and was led by Trotsky. The government was aware of the unstated purpose of the MRC which it feared, correctly, was to prepare for armed insurrection. The next day, October 23rd, the government attempted to close down the Bolshevik newspapers and cut off the telephones to the Smolny Institute. However, soldiers and Red Guards ultimately thwarted all Kerensky's plans.

Following this, a long debate took place at a secret meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee. At this meeting the main issue centred around Lenin's proposal that the Bolsheviks should take action before the elections for the Constituent Assembly; in other words, the socialist revolution should proceed without delay. Zinoviev and Kamenev dissented, but importantly the MRC had already deployed commissars to all garrison units. In essence this was both a measure of defence and, at the same time, a preparation for attack.

Lenin, Trotsky and others urged the overthrow of the Provisional Government. Thus, orders were given for the Bolsheviks to occupy the railway stations, the telephone exchange and the State Bank. In the early morning of October 25th, armed workers started occupying key points of Petrograd in conjunction with pro-Bolshevik sailors landing at the city's harbour. Power stations were seized and strategic bridges were held. These instances produced very little resistance and were not met with violence.

Women's Militia 1919 (Source: SCRSS)





Source: MML

A blank shot from the Cruiser *Aurora* (pictured above) in the evening signalled the siege of the Winter Palace, which was to be the final offensive of the revolution. Crowds of Red Guards and insurgents surrounded the palace and secured entry, leading to the surrender of the remaining government officials in the early hours of the morning. Members of the Provisional Government that had not already fled the capital were imprisoned. Kerensky had managed to escape from the city.

The revolution itself was brief, being almost entirely peaceful in its execution. Posters were distributed across the city declaring that 'the Provisional Government is overthrown' and 'Long live the Revolution of Workers, Soldiers and Peasants!' Lenin emerged from the revolution as one of its most notable strategists and a potential leader in the new era.

On October 26th 1917, the second All-Russian Congress of Soviets met and handed over power to the Soviet Council of People's Commissars. Lenin was elected chairman. Among other appointments, Trotsky was appointed Commissar for Foreign Affairs and Alexandra Kollontai Commissar for Social Welfare. Two decrees were adopted at the first session: the Decree on Peace, which authorised negotiations with Germany to enable Russia's withdrawal from the war in order to bring about 'a

just and democratic peace'; and the Decree on Land, which proposed to transfer land away from landowners and the church to peasant committees. In addition, the Council of People's Commissars nationalised the banks, and workers control of factory production was also introduced. 'Peace, Bread and Land' was thus transformed from a slogan into a living reality.

The army was demobilised in December and the Soviet Government announced that it planned to seek an armistice with Germany. In the same month, Trotsky led the Russian delegation at Brest-Litovsk to negotiate peace terms with representatives from Germany and Austria-Hungary. Thus it was that the full Bolshevik programme, as outlined in Lenin's 'April Theses' was implemented within three months of the successful socialist revolution.

## DECREE ON PEACE

(abridged translation from *Izvestia* article)

'The workers' and peasants' government, created by the Revolution of October 24-25th ... calls upon all the belligerent peoples and their governments to start immediate negotiations for a just, democratic peace. [This] means an immediate peace without annexations.... and without indemnities. The government considers it the greatest of crimes against humanity to continue this war over the issue of how to divide among the strong and rich nations the weak nationalities they have conquered... At the same time the government abolishes secret diplomacy, ... and [will] conduct all negotiations quite openly in full view of the whole people.'

## BREST-LITOVSK

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was the peace treaty signed on March 3rd, 1918, between the new Bolshevik government of Russia and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey). It ended Russia's participation in WW1. The chief negotiator was Trotsky. This treaty was unpopular among many because it gave away too much land especially in the Baltic States and Ukraine, thereby losing almost a third of its rich agricultural production and almost a quarter of its total territory. The Soviet Government, despite deep dissatisfaction with the German terms, had no option but to accept; they had no troops able or willing to continue an unpopular war. Anti-Bolsheviks seized on this discontent at the loss of territory to whip up support for their (White) side in the Civil War.



The Storming of the Winter Palace (Source: Sputnik)



'Solemn Promise on Joining the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, 1919'  
(Source: Sputnik)



Defend Petrograd 1917 (Source: Sputnik)



Registration for active service  
(Source: Henry Sara collection, MRC)

## RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR

It was almost inevitable that the October Revolution would lead to a devastating Russian Civil War waged by forces hostile to socialism. Indeed, Lenin had predicted this very outcome. At the end of October 1917, a military advance by troops loyal to Kerensky reached the outskirts of Petrograd but was defeated by Red Guards organised by the MRC.

Just after October 1917, with Bolshevik power apparently secured in Petrograd and other cities, a coalition of monarchists, anti-Bolsheviks, liberals and regional forces came together to form the White Army. The Whites established a 'government in-exile' in the east under the command of Kolchak. In the Northern Caucasus, the Whites were supported by some Cossack troops and attacked newly-established Bolshevik strongholds. The Bolsheviks defended the revolution using the newly formed Red Army.

The Whites, with the help of the Czech Legion (a unit of the Russian Imperial Army during WW1), began gaining important territory and mobilising other forces. The Red Army grew to over a million men owing to the introduction of conscription in June 1918. (By 1920 it had grown to over four million). But by late 1918, the situation for this new army was looking bleak, as their strongholds were being surrounded by the Whites

aided by foreign powers. Indeed, the survival of the revolution appeared inconceivable at this stage.

However, despite the initial successes of the Whites, by March 1919, the Red Army could record some victories. They had defeated Kolchak's forces in the east, although General Denikin, having captured much of the south and Ukraine pushed northwards in conjunction with General Yudenich (assisted by Estonian troops). These armies reached the outskirts of Petrograd from different directions by October 1919. The Red Army managed to repel both these attacks. This would prove to be the closest the Whites would come to tipping the war in their favour.

In Ukraine, Denikin deliberately carried out anti-Semitic pogroms, linking Jews to the 'evil' of communism and presuming that targeting them could be used to appeal to the local population. A British war correspondent, John Hodgson, who travelled with Denikin's forces, noted:

'I had not been with Denikin more than a month before I was forced to the conclusion that the Jew represented a very big element in the Russian upheaval. The officers and men of the Army laid practically all the blame for their country's troubles on the Hebrew.' J.E. Hodgson *With Denikin's Armies* (Temple Bar, 1932), p.32.



Russia Allied White Offensive Map  
 (Source: J Swettenham *Allied Intervention* (George Allen and Unwin, 1967)).

By the end of 1919, most of the Whites in the east surrendered. Kolchak was handed over to the Reds and executed. Wrangel replaced Denikin as leader of the White Army, but their numbers were now dwindling. In late 1920, remnants of the White Army fled, leaving the Bolsheviks to conquer the remaining regions. Pockets of resistance to Bolshevik control remained but the bloodiest parts of the Civil War were over by 1922.

The Whites failed for a number of reasons, having less political unity and general organisation than the Reds for much of the period. In addition, they failed to represent all anti-Bolshevik forces in a unified front. The Reds' build-up of a tightly-run army with strict discipline gave them the advantage in most battles against the Whites, leading to their ultimate victory against a variety of opposing forces which included intervening world powers. The Red Army suffered devastating losses too, but despite this and many other problems, morale amongst the Reds remained high during this destructive war. The Civil War and the parallel Wars of Intervention were seen as a necessary defence of the October Revolution. The Bolshevik victors were then faced with the enormous task of rebuilding a ravaged and starving country.

## WARS OF INTERVENTION

Immediately after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks kept to their promise of peace by opening negotiations at Brest-Litovsk with Germany to secure Russian withdrawal from WW1. This was a blow for the remaining Entente powers who were reliant on Germany having to fight on two fronts – west and east. With Russia now out of the war, the Allies drew up plans to intervene militarily in Russia. As early as December 23rd 1917, the Allied Supreme War Council suggested that anti-Bolshevik troops, and any other forces who wanted to continue the fight against Germany in Russia, should be fully supported. The British War Cabinet decided to provide the White General Kaledin, and other successive white forces, with financial support. For their own reasons the Germans agreed with an anti-Russian interventionist policy and participated fully until November 1918; the end of WW1.

Thus, surprisingly, during the first six months of the intervention, the two opposing sides although still locked in conflict in WW1, were nonetheless united in their desire to crush Bolshevism. The Germans, having gained vast swathes of Russian territory (including the Baltic States and Ukraine) as a result of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, were anxious to capitalise on their territorial advantages by exploiting Russian weakness. However, this alarmed the Allies, who gained support from like-minded anti-Bolshevik countries. By the



Germans at Kiev 1918 (Source: MML)

spring of 1918, Britain, France, the United States, Japan and ten other nations were actively sending troops into Russia to intervene in support of the White Army. Britain, assisted by American troops, occupied Murmansk and Archangel in the north and together proceeded southward towards the Caucasus regions where White Armies had a stronghold. Japanese forces occupied Vladivostok and, aided by the Czech Legion spread across large parts of the Far East and Siberia. Allied pressure intensified after the armistice ended WW1. The French fleet entered the Black Sea and French troops landed at Odessa and the Crimea. Of equal importance to the deployment of troops was capitalist allies' mass supply of arms, equipment and cash to the Whites. Thousands of tons of supplies and equipment were sent to the White Army, to General Denikin in the south and to Kolchak in the east, originating mainly from Britain.

The aim of these interventionist powers in assisting the Whites was three-fold. Initially, it was predicated on the assumption that ousting the Bolsheviks would mean that Russia would re-enter WW1 and thus ensure that, once again, German troops would be forced to fight on two fronts. Secondly, and more importantly, after WW1 ended the interventionist capitalist countries were motivated by the desire to prevent the spread of communist ideology and practice, which was becoming popular and influential within sections of the labour movement in their own countries. Finally, those capitalist countries which had invested heavily in the industrialisation of Russia during the Tsarist years were anxious to recoup their massive financial speculation.

Ultimately it became clear to the interventionist powers that their efforts were not able to overthrow Soviet Russia. Not being prepared to intervene on a much larger scale, the French withdrew their soldiers in April 1919. Towards the end of 1919, the Red Army pushed the Whites out of many areas and had them on the retreat. By 1920, the last British and American troops had left Russia, unsuccessful in their task of bringing the White Army to victory. Japanese occupation in the Far East remained for a further two



Send off ceremony for the Red Army going to the Polish front, August 1920 (Source: Sputnik)

years, as they had gained disputed land which they laid claim to for many years afterwards.

Of the major powers, Britain put the most effort into the Wars of Intervention. This was not popular even among some of the higher echelons of the British State who were in charge of administering government policy in Russia. This was revealed in January 1919, when *The Times* published a correspondence between Rear-Admiral J. W. Kemp and the British Consul at Archangel, Douglas Young. Archangel was the Russian port where Britain was officially attempting to channel its armed forces into an offensive against the Red Army. Kemp repeated the establishment line that Britain should continue attempts to intervene against the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. The Consul, Young, denounced the British Government's policies in Russia. His outspoken critique of British state policy led to attempts by the Foreign Office to stifle his protests and eventually he was forced to resign from the Diplomatic Service. For Young's honesty in exposing Britain's intervention in Russia, writer Andrew Rothstein dubbed him *The Consul Who Rebelled* in a later book.

British soldiers also displayed opposition to the government's intervention policy. Again, Andrew Rothstein chronicled this in his book *The Soldiers' Strikes of 1919*. Rothstein, the son of exiles from Tsarist Russia, had been drafted to serve the British Army as a corporal from 1917-19. Upon news that his unit was to be dispatched to the port of Archangel to fight the new Soviet government, he refused and the majority of his regiment followed his lead. This was the first of many soldiers' rebellions and mutinies against British Army intervention in Russia.

Churchill (then Secretary of State for War) personally viewed communism as a dangerous threat to Western society, infamously stating in 1919 that the Bolsheviks

'have driven man from the civilisation of the 20th century into a condition of barbarism worse than the Stone Age, and left him the most awful and pitiable spectacle in human experience, devoured by vermin, racked by pestilence, and deprived of hope.'

A war-weary British public, and especially its labour movement, were increasingly disinclined to support intervention. Ultimately this meant that material aid and troop support was withdrawn. However, a last attempt at ousting the Bolsheviks was made by proxy via Poland's ambitious aggression.

Poland had been re-constituted as an independent country by the Treaty of Versailles. Its new head of state, Pilsudski, was not only fiercely anti-communist but also wished to re-establish Poland's pre-partition 1772 borders. This included parts of Ukraine and Belarus: Soviet territory. In April 1920, the Poles in alliance with White Ukrainians launched a devastating attack, backed with British munitions, and by May had captured Kiev, Ukraine's capital. However, the Red Cavalry counter-attacked with great success and pushed the Poles back almost as far as Warsaw. Poland conceded the battle and made peace with the Bolsheviks, with stipulations that Poland would remain independent but Belarus and Ukraine would fall under Soviet control.

## THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OUTSIDE RUSSIA

While capitalist countries opposed the Bolshevik revolution, this was in sharp contrast to the attitude of labour movement organisations. There was widespread support for the Russian Revolution in many countries especially in Europe. This took several forms. In some countries, notably Hungary and Germany the Russian example inspired similar, albeit short-lived revolutions. In many countries, the left in the trade union and labour movement, stimulated by the Russian example, was strengthened, resulting in challenges to the existing order and the labour leadership itself. There was also extensive opposition to the Wars of Intervention waged against Soviet Russia by fourteen capitalist countries.

## BRITAIN: SHOP STEWARDS, STRIKES & SCOTLAND

In defiance of the leadership of the British labour movement who supported WW1 and supported the government's ban on strikes, rank-and-file trade unionists elected shop stewards who played an increasingly important role during the war. A national network of shop stewards' committees was formed on the model of the inaugural and most militant one – the Clyde Workers Committee (CWC), in which Willie Gallacher and John MacLean played prominent roles. The CWC was strongly anti-war and enthusiastically supported the Russian Revolution. In fact, MacLean's agitational and educational role led to his being appointed by Soviet Russia as the Bolshevik Consul for Scotland.



Source: MML

1919 witnessed the broadest and most serious strike wave yet seen. Thirty-five million working days were lost in strike action - six times as many as in the previous year. This included strikes of those normally relied upon to carry out the repressive functions of the state - the police and the armed forces. Miners, transport workers, printers joined those

who had been taking action throughout the war. Their mood was influenced by the news of the workers' risings in Germany and Hungary and their strong support for the fledgling Soviet Russia. At the forefront was, once again, the CWC which organised the mass strike in January 1919, accompanied by mass picketing, for the forty-hour working week.

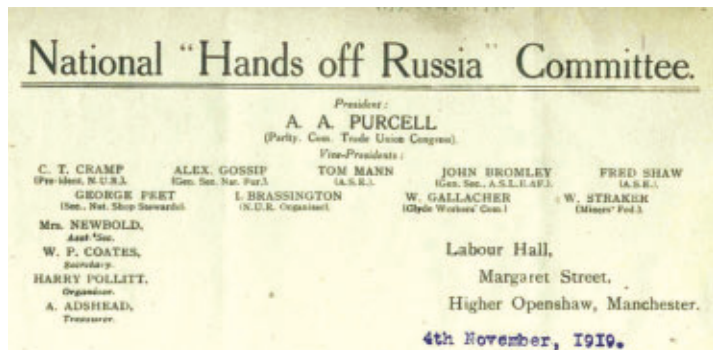
Unlike the wartime strikes, this one was not defensive - it was a political offensive against the power of capital. It was all the stronger for its well-established links with discharged soldiers and sailors. Women too were fully involved in the action and on the picket lines. The huge demonstration in George Square, Glasgow, resulted in a battle with the forces of law and order, supported by young troops sent there by a panic-stricken government anxious to nip the Bolshevik spirit in the bud. Strike leaders were arrested and Glasgow fell under virtual military occupation. That is not to say that the CWC was not a highly political organisation, but its limitations were inherent in the fact that it remained a loose federation of workplace organisations which, while having a clear line on the daily struggles, had little in the way of a clear revolutionary perspective beyond a general support for socialist principles. This point was later expressed thus by Gallacher:

'We were carrying on a strike when we ought to have been making a revolution.' W. Gallacher  
*Revolt on the Clyde* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1936).

## PEOPLES' RUSSIA INFORMATION BUREAU (PRIB)

One of the first organisations in Britain to support the Russian Revolution was the Peoples' Russia Information Bureau established in September 1918 by the veteran women's suffrage campaigner and socialist feminist, Sylvia Pankhurst. As early as 1917, the weekly paper she edited, *The Workers' Dreadnought*, carried articles wholeheartedly supporting the October Revolution. The purpose of the PRIB was to publish reliable and supportive

information about Soviet Russia. In fact it was the only body in Britain to do so. Much of the information it published came from Soviet Russia and was translated into English. Weekly newsletters and at least a hundred (possibly more) pamphlets were published on different aspects of Soviet politics, economics and ideology including a unique first; a smuggled edition of an English translation of the Russian Socialist Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) inaugural Constitution. The PRIB was a broad left organisation which included affiliates from a range of labour movement organisations.



Source: MML

## HANDS OFF RUSSIA

The founding conference of Hands off Russia (HoR) was held on January 18th 1919 at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, London, attended by 350 delegates from various socialist organisations. Its purpose was to call a General Strike to oppose continued military and economic intervention by Britain and other allied countries against Soviet Russia. Although HoR attracted widespread support, this did not include the leaderships of either the Labour Party or the TUC which both ardently supported WW1 and thus opposed Russia's withdrawal from it. In fact, the Labour Party even invited Kerensky, the former head of the Russian Provisional Government, deposed by the October Revolution, to address their 1918 conference. As a consequence, the TUC and the Labour Party held aloof at this stage from either supporting the revolution or opposing Allied Intervention. It took them some while to change their minds on intervention but when they did it was owing to pressure from below.

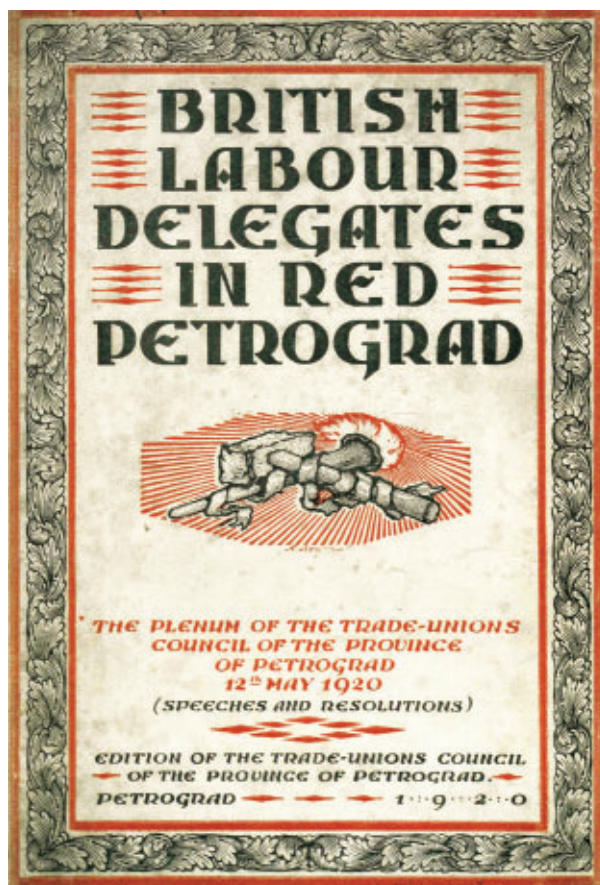
## JOLLY GEORGE

Pressure from below was the critical factor in inducing a change of attitude by labour movement leaders. The most important trigger for this was the refusal of the London dockers and coal heavers, in May 1920, to load the *Jolly George*, a munitions ship bound for Poland for use against the Red Army. Harry Pollitt, who helped to lead the Hands off Russia movement, along with Sylvia Pankhurst, led the dockers in their action. Pollitt (in his autobiography *Serving My Time*) noted that it had proved difficult to persuade trade unionists to take strike action beforehand but:

'The strike on the *Jolly George* had won its greatest victory. It was the action which completely changed the international situation—a change that was forced on the British Government'.

## COUNCILS OF ACTION

The consequence of the *Jolly George* success was an intensification of the anti-intervention campaign which ultimately, by August 1920, drew in official Labour Party and TUC support. The reason for the volte-face was the increasing strength of the Hands off Russia movement. But it was also due, ironically, to the success of the Red Army which by July 1920 had driven the Poles out of Russia. The British and French governments, alarmed by this Soviet success, announced that they would declare war on Russia if the latter invaded Poland thus engendering the widespread fear that munitions would be supplemented by sending troops. They warned that the danger of war was 'extremely menacing'. Therefore the Labour and TUC leaderships were at last prompted to take action. They called upon the industrial power of the labour movement to prevent war. The chosen means for organising such a response was the establishment of Councils of Action in August 1920. The national Council of Action authorised the formation of local bodies and around 400 were formed throughout the country largely on the initiative of local Trades Councils, or sometimes by the Labour Party branch in the area.



Source: MRC

# 1920 BRITISH LABOUR DELEGATION

Acting in response to a resolution passed at a special Trades Union Congress on December 10th 1919 for 'an independent and impartial inquiry into the industrial, political and economic conditions in Russia', a delegation of representatives from the TUC and Labour Party visited Russia in May 1920. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, the labour delegation did not leave 'a good impression in Russia'. Not only did they demand to go where they wanted 'and to see what and whom they chose without interference' but one of them 'bolstered up her prejudices by visits to counter-revolutionaries and anti-communists'. Sylvia Pankhurst *Soviet Russia as I Saw It* (Workers' Dreadnought Publishers, 1921).

## THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OUTSIDE BRITAIN

### GERMAN REVOLUTION

In 1918 Germany was in turmoil with strikes, mutinies and uprisings in almost all cities. Inspired by the Russian Revolution, Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were formed. This led to the formation of a Republic with Ebert (SPD) as Chancellor in alliance with the Independent Social Democrats (USPD). This was opposed by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht who led a left breakaway from the USPD - the Spartacus League - in November 1918. It was later the core of the

German Communist Party (KPD). The split between left and right was so intense that the right social democrats (now in power) were determined to crush the revolution and used a private mercenary army (Freikorps) to do this. In January 1919 the Freikorps murdered Luxemburg and Liebknecht, and the army commenced the brutal suppression of the workers' revolution.

### HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hungary transitioned into a Republic with a very active Communist party. Against a background of popular unrest, in March 1919, the liberal President of Hungary resigned and a Communist coalition came into power. Known as the Hungarian Revolution of 1919, it was a short-lived attempt at a socialist state, led by Béla Kun. The Hungarian Red Army was formed and attempted to win back some of the land lost as a result of WW1. After some military successes, the Communist government became vulnerable internally and the hostility of the Romanian Army led to its downfall a few months later.

### THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL

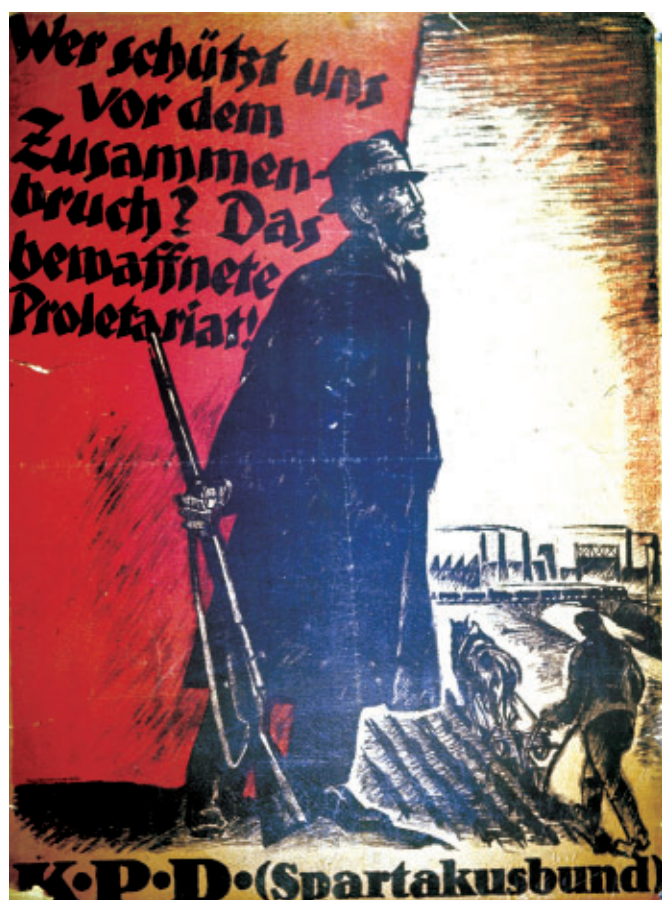
The Third International, also known as the Communist International (Comintern), was established as a result of the victory of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. Its purpose was to assemble revolutionary movements worldwide that could work together to 'hasten the victory' of international socialism and the dismantling of capitalism. It was created as a response to the failure of the Second International, which broke up by 1916 over the issue of WW1, with the revolutionary wing opposing it and the reformists supporting it.

The First Congress of the Comintern was held in Moscow March 2nd-5th 1919, whilst the Russian Civil War was ongoing. Thirty-five organisations from over twenty countries were represented at this founding congress, despite many logistical difficulties.

The Second Congress of the Comintern occurred in July 1920, and over sixty organisations were represented from forty countries, including many from outside Europe. Here, the twenty-one conditions on being admitted to the Third International were established, and a solution was sought on how to reach the international proletariat who sympathised with the Russian Revolution but still followed centrist leaders. Historian E. H. Carr described this congress as

'the crowning moment in the history of the Comintern as an international force, the moment when the Russian revolution seemed most certainly on the point of transforming itself into a European revolution.' Carr *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923 Vol. 3* (Macmillan & Co, 1953), p. 196.

The Comintern continued to hold meetings until it was formally dissolved in 1943.



German Communist Party poster, 1919 (Source: Sputnik)

'Year of the Proletarian Dictatorship, October 1917-1918' (Source: Sputnik)



'Under the Flag of Lenin, Forward to World revolution!' (Source: MML)



'Keep the Revolutionary Pace, Restless Enemy is Not Asleep' (Source: Sputnik)



'Four Years' (Source: Sputnik)

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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