

HIS 242 Unit 8

NEP and the Roaring Twenties

remarks by Professor Blois

The turn to NEP For Lenin, the most dire consequence of War Communism was that it threatened the support he and his revolutionary government had received from both peasants and workers. War Communism had won the Civil War (1918-1921), but only by bringing Russia to the brink of economic ruin. To cope with grain confiscation, the peasants had cut back sown areas to a subsistence level, inducing urban famine. The workers were increasingly restive because the Supreme Economic Soviet (VSNKh) was rigidly controlling factories. The drought and accompanying famine that began in 1920 added to these problems. It was clear that worker and peasant unrest over the economic collapse produced at least in part by the over-exuberance of state agencies had created the need for a policy change.

Lenin realized the need to concentrate on the internal state of Russia more or less to the exclusion of efforts to stimulate revolutions abroad when the German communist party's efforts to organize a general strike in March 1921 failed. Increasingly, the hopes for world revolution were becoming dim; the Communist International (Comintern), though active for another twenty years, was already becoming unimportant in the eyes of many Bolsheviks. The pragmatic side of Lenin further manifested itself through his move to secure trade pacts with England in 1921 and Germany in 1922. Already, the intention to construct socialism in one country could be seen emerging as an alternative to international revolution.

The final and most important problem that confronted the government before the turn to NEP was the Kronstadt uprising of March 1921. The call for "soviets without communists" issued by the revolutionary sailors represented a widespread public wish for an end to the crisis atmosphere of the Civil War period. The New Economic Policy had already been drafted by Lenin and presented to the Tenth Party Congress before the outbreak of violence at Kronstadt, but the insurrection hastened its introduction.

Return of Economic Vitality The NEP was a compromise designed to give Russia time to recover from the preceding seven-year period of war and violence. All of the compromise came in the economy; there was none in politics, where the party maintained rigid control. In peasant affairs the compromise took the form of a change in tax policy. Peasants were now taxed on the basis of percentages of their crop, encouraging production that had declined precipitously in the face of the punitive grain requisitions. In industry, firms were given their independence and allowed to enter into contractual agreements with other firms and trusts. The return of a large private sector in both agriculture and industry led to the appearance of petty traders, or Nepmen, and of capitalist farmer, or kulaks.

The NEP was a conscious policy of state capitalism, and was so referred to by Lenin. The return to capitalistic economic policies necessitated the return of a sound currency. All trade was re-monetized and the liquidationist arguments advocating a barter economy were jettisoned.

NEP culture Many prominent figures of the pre-revolutionary Russian cultural establishment emigrated in the wake of the October Revolution. This fact encouraged the Bolsheviks' inclination to have the revolution spill over from political and economic into cultural affairs. However, the Civil War prevented any meaningful attention from being given to cultural policy.

During NEP the Bolsheviks did turn some attention to cultural matters, but--as in other areas--the policy was an attempt at compromise. For instance, the NEP saw the complete disavowal of many extreme leftist attitudes that had arisen in the vacuum of the Civil War. Among these were Alexandra Kollontai's theories of sexual freedom and the cultural liquidationist views of the Proletcult group. In culture, as in economics, the party managed to maintain its ideological stand while still making use of bourgeois specialists and prerevolutionary cultural and scientific institutions. As proof of this, the party and the Soviet government supported openly both the old Imperial Academy of Sciences and the newly founded Communist Academy. These two organizations were enemies, at least theoretically, and party support of the old bourgeois academy was quite irksome to members of the new institution.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the old academy kept a low profile and continued scientific work, while the new academy principally engaged in striving for ideological purity and--when indulging in attempts at science--often supported tenuous (and sometimes embarrassing) projects such as the neo-Lamarckian Paul Kammerer's attempts to prove the theory of acquired characteristics. Had Kammerer been successful, it would have bolstered the notion that under socialism a "new man" would come about naturally, over time, and would be free of capitalistic inclinations. Unfortunately, as his work came under scrutiny and was shown to be falsified, Kammerer committed suicide.

Thus the Bolsheviks sponsored some cultural change, but the NEP's reputation as a period of great and free experiment stemmed mostly from benign neglect from the government. The great achievements of the government's cultural policy in this period were its efforts in worker and adult education and the extension of cultural facilities enabling mass participation and enjoyment. This was, therefore, a quiet revolution in

culture. The great landmarks in NEP culture--the poetry of Esenin and Mayakovsky, the musical compositions of Prokofiev, the novels of Zamiatin, the films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and Meyerhold's theater--came mainly without support from the state.

[insert a para about constructivist architecture, photography, etc & reference my visit to Vkhutemas in 2010]

Was the NEP mature Leninism? Lenin's equation for revolutionary success was always the maintenance of an alliance (smychka) between the workers and the masses of Russia's peasants. In 1917 the majority of the peasants were a revolutionary force, since they were land-hungry. Lenin had used this fact to great advantage. However, by 1921 there was a danger that the peasantry as a class would become counter-revolutionary, since they now had land but still possessed grievances against the government. Lenin compromised by turning to NEP to continue a policy he had no abandoning--the worker-peasant alliance. This alliance, more than any socialist dogma, was the irreducible core of Leninism, since it was the one datum of Lenin's political power.

Thus, if the Civil War is viewed as a struggle for political power from which Lenin emerged victorious, the NEP cannot be dismissed entirely as a compromise, since it was introduced at a time when Lenin had just vanquished his political enemies. The "peasant Brest," as one oppositional communist called NEP, can then be seen as indicative of mature Leninism. That is, Lenin was willing to take an extremely long road to socialism, perhaps akin to the slow pace soon to be advocated by Nicolai Bukharin, and described as moving toward socialism "on a peasant's nag."

But, while Lenin may have been willing to wait for socialism, the party was not. AS early as 1922 the party, in congress, began to set its sights on ending the NEP. While it was a move toward socialism in one country, both

its structure and pace were unacceptable to the party. The onset of Lenin's illness (1922) and death (January 1924) possibly avoided a showdown over basic policy decisions (which would come soon enough).

Recommended readings

list works by E. H. Carr, M. Dobb, A. Erlich, S. Fitzpatrick, S. Cohen, etc