

The Eastern Front and the Russian Revolution, 1917

History

Lesson 1 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

Enquiry: Why did WWI end in November 1918?

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WWI by 1917

By 1917, the war had been underway for 3 years. Fighting in Europe took place in two key areas - the Western Front and the Eastern Front. The Western Front ran from the coast of Belgium through north eastern France down to Switzerland. The fighting in the Western front involved trench warfare and stalemate. This was because the British and French were unable to make any significant advances against German troops. The Eastern Front was more fluid, with the frontline changing regularly. The Eastern Front, went across Eastern Europe, here the Russians and Romanians fought against the Germans, Austro-Hungarians and the Ottoman Turks. Due to the length of the Eastern Front breakthroughs were more likely and the advantage seemed to change more often.



Home Fronts by 1917

With the war lasting far longer than anyone had expected, resources on the **home fronts** were beginning to become scarce. As a nation that relied on **imports**, Britain by 1917 faced a food shortage due to a combination of a bad harvest and German submarine warfare. French soldiers on the frontlines were concerned about the conditions for their wives and children at home and were becoming tired with the war. As a result of the British Blockade of German ports, the winter of 1916-1917 became known as the “Turnip Winter”. This was because German **civilians** had to eat turnips as there was a lack of potatoes and meat. In Russia, the situation was far more unstable than in the other countries.



Russia by 1917

The peasants and working classes of Russia had been unhappy with its ruler, the Tsar, for a long time. Russia was led by an **autocratic monarch** - all power and wealth in the country was controlled by the Tsar. Prior to WWI peasants were treated badly by landowners, and industrial workers faced poor working conditions. There were already food shortages and the Russian military had suffered defeats in the early 1900s. Russian involvement in WWI made these problems worse. Russians had supported the war in 1914 but their attitude quickly changed as economic and military problems worsened.



Russia by 1917

On the homefront shortages were extreme. Rural areas could barely feed themselves. When the Germans took control of the seas surrounding Russia this prevented imports so the situation became worse. The cost of items increased meaning many people couldn't afford to buy them, and more and more workers went on **strike**. Large sections of the population began to turn against the Tsar and his government.

Many began to question whether the Tsar was the right person to lead Russia through the war. In response the Tsar took control of the army to try and improve morale. Because of bad decision making by January 1917 the Russian army had suffered 6 million casualties. The Tsar was to blame.



Revolution!

As a result of the ongoing difficulties ordinary Russians started protesting in the major cities. The Tsar attempted to return to the capital city (St. Petersburg). Upon seeing the scale of the protest, he realised he no longer had the support of his people or his army. He was forced to abdicate his throne (The February Revolution). Confusion followed as different groups tried to use the opportunity to take control.

Out of the confusion the Bolsheviks were successful (The October Revolution). Their leader, Vladimir Lenin seized power in the name of the workers. Russia became the first Communist state.



What did Communism look like in Russia?

Lenin and the communists wanted to make Russia a completely equal society. They also wanted their revolution to spread around the world. Here are some of the things the communists did:

- The workers took control of the factories and the peasants took the land from the landowners, sharing it amongst themselves.
- Political parties were banned, except the Communist Party.
- People who were powerful before the Russian Revolution became known as 'former people.' Their wealth of 'former people' was confiscated by the state.
- Ended Russia's involvement in the war.



Reaction to the Revolution

Countries around the world were concerned by the Russian Revolution. Many countries had become industrial societies with lots of workers in factories working long hours in poor conditions to help the war effort. Power in countries like Germany, France, Britain and the United States, was still held by traditional rulers. In all these countries there was a big divide between the richest and poorest in the country and this had been made worse by WWI. These countries began to think - if the people in Russia had become fed up enough to remove their leader and replace it with a communist society, why couldn't it happen in other countries?



Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 1918

Now he was leader of Russia, one of the priorities for Lenin was to end their involvement in WWI. An **armistice** between Russia and the Central Powers was called in December 1917. A formal treaty signed in March 1918 called the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The terms of the treaty were considered very harsh on Russia but Lenin was so desperate to avoid conflict that he agreed to the terms. These included giving up land that included $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population and industry of the Russian Empire, and giving most of their coal mines to the Central Powers.



Glossary

Abdicate - to give up your claim to being the monarch or your country.

Armistice - an agreement to stop fighting between countries.

Autocratic monarch - a ruler whose power has no legal limits upon it, by a parliament or anyone else.

Civilians - someone who is not a member of the military or the police.

Homefront - the experience of non-combatants in countries who are at war.

Imports - to buy or bring in goods from another country.

Strike - to refuse to continue working because of an argument with your employer, usually about working conditions or pay.



Questions

1. What were the two fighting fronts in Europe during WWI?
2. What were conditions like in the home fronts by 1917?
3. Why had the Russians become angry with the Tsar by 1917?
4. Why were other countries alarmed by the Communist Revolution in Russia?
5. What was the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918?

