

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Make brief notes describing conditions in Bolshevik cities during the Civil War.
- 2 How did different groups survive?

EMIGRATION

By the end of the Civil War, many of the 'former people' had fled abroad. Two to three million emigrated in the first years after the revolution. Groups of Russians arrived in countries throughout the world. Many *émigrés* settled in Germany, France and other Western European countries while sizeable communities developed in the USA and Australia. Berlin was the *émigré* capital at first. Then they moved on to Paris where Tsar Cyril I was acclaimed by *émigré* monarchists. Restaurants and hotels were staffed by the old *burzhui* and there were thousands of Russian taxi drivers in Paris in the 1930s.

Soviet Russia lost a great deal of mercantile and managerial talent, along with scholars, scientists and other skilled groups. Much of the top educational élite fled, many becoming prominent in Western universities and industry, such as Sikorsky who developed the helicopter for the USA.

I What was life like in Bolshevik cities under War Communism?

Life in Russia between 1918 and 1921 was a matter of survival. Less than a third of the urban diet came from state-provided rations; the rest came from the black market. 'Bag-men' travelled between villages and cities selling their produce. The urban workers eked out their rations by selling or exchanging handmade or stolen goods for food. Many travelled into the countryside with goods to barter for food. This became known as 'cigarette lighterism' since cigarette lighters featured in the products they made, along with shoe soles made from conveyor belts, penknives, nails and ploughs made from iron bars. This movement of people created chaos in factories in 1918 because at any one time a high percentage of workers might be absent. The railway system was choked with bag-men moving between cities.

The Bolsheviks did try to stamp out the free market under War Communism, but it was futile. The Cheka raided trains to stop bag-men travelling, and they raided markets where the goods were sold. But they could not be everywhere and it was always easy to bribe officials. Anyway, the Bolsheviks had little choice but to tolerate the black market or see the cities starve. Everybody hunted for food as prices rocketed. Horses disappeared from the streets only to reappear as 'Civil War sausage'. Wages in 1919 were reckoned to be at two per cent of their 1913 level and on average an urban worker spent three-quarters of his income on food. Fuel for heating was also critically short. In the freezing winter of 1919–20, some 3000 wooden houses in Petrograd were stripped to provide fuel. Trees disappeared. Sanitary conditions were appalling and water had to be collected from pumps in the streets.

The middle classes were in a worse position than the workers. They were the class enemy and were not allowed to work, although some were drafted back as managers in the nationalised industries or to work in the civil service. Most survived by selling clothes and jewellery, in fact anything they owned, for bread. One study in the 1920s found that 42 per cent of prostitutes in Moscow were from bourgeois families. Emma Goldman found young girls 'selling themselves for a loaf of bread or a piece of soap or chocolate' (*My Disillusionment in Russia*, 1923, page 11). Members of the nobility fared no better: Princess Golitsyn sold homemade pies, Countess Witte cakes and pies. For the 'former people' life was arduous, queuing up with the poor for food and fuel.

SOURCE 7.19 Middle-class women selling items on the street in order to survive



SOURCE 7.20 E. Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, 1923, pp. 8–9. Goldman is writing about the Petrograd she found on returning there in January 1920. She had lived there as a teenager in the 1880s but had gone to live in the USA. She was an anarchist with sympathies towards the Communist revolution

It was almost in ruins, as if a hurricane had swept over it . . . The streets were dirty and deserted; all life had gone from them . . . The people walked about like living corpses; the shortage of food and fuel was slowly sapping the city; grim death was clutching at its heart. Emaciated and frost-bitten men, women and children were being whipped by a common lash, the search for a piece of bread or a stick of wood. It was a heart-rending sight by day, an oppressive weight by night. It fairly haunted me, this oppressive silence broken only by the occasional shots.

The workers at least benefited from the social revolution insofar as the palaces and town houses of the rich were taken over and the living space divided up amongst poor families. One owner of a palace ended up living in his former bathroom. The houses were run by building committees, often under the control of former domestic servants who relished the opportunity to turn the tables on their former masters. There was a popular mood to humiliate the old bourgeoisie. City soviets rounded up army officers, civil servants, aristocrats, stockbrokers and other formerly wealthy people and made them clear rubbish or snow from the streets, much to the amusement of workers and soldiers passing by.

The workers were not so happy about the corruption that surrounded the Bolshevik Party. Many areas were run by local mafias of Bolshevik officials who lived well whilst others starved. It came from the top. Five thousand Bolsheviks and their families lived in the Kremlin and best hotels in Moscow with access to saunas, a hospital and three vast restaurants with cooks trained in France. In Petrograd, Zinoviev, the party boss of the city, lived at the Astoria Hotel, coming and going with his Cheka bodyguards and a string of prostitutes. The hotel, where many Bolsheviks lived, retained its old waiters, now 'comrade waiters', who served champagne and caviar in room service. Bribery and corruption was rife throughout the party. Almost anything could be had from corrupt Bolshevik officials: foodstuffs, tobacco, alcohol, fuel. The wives and mistresses of party bosses went around 'with a jeweller's shop window hanging round their necks'.

SOURCE 7.21 A. Ransome, *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*, 1919, p. 19. Arthur Ransome was a British journalist who later went on to write the famous children's book *Swallows and Amazons*

Rooms are distributed on much the same plan as clothes. Housing is considered a State monopoly, and a general census of housing accommodation has been taken. In every district there are housing committees to whom everybody wanting rooms applies. They work on the rough and ready theory that until every man has one room no one has a right to two . . . This plan has, of course, proved very hard on house-owners, and in some cases the new tenants have made a horrible mess of the houses, as might indeed have been expected, seeing that they had previously been of those who had suffered directly from the decivilizing influences of overcrowding.

SOURCE 7.22 L. de Robien, *The Diary of a Diplomat in Russia 1917–18*, 1969. De Robien was a French diplomat used to moving in court circles

Friday 8 February 1918

We are living in a madhouse, and in the last few days there have been an avalanche of decrees. First comes a decree cancelling all banking transactions, then comes another one confiscating houses. I have made no mention of taxes which continue to hit people from whom all source of income has been removed: 500 roubles for a servant, 500 roubles for a bathroom, 600 roubles for a dog and as much for a piano. All inhabitants under the age of 50 are forced to join the 'personal labour corps'. Princess Obolensky has been ordered to go and clear the snow off the Fontanka Quay. Others have to sweep the tramlines at night.

Why do you think Lenin's use of class warfare played so well with the workers and soldiers in Russian cities? Do you think the attitudes displayed by the workers and others towards the old bourgeoisie were reasonable and understandable?

ACTIVITY

- 1 What aspects of the experience of War Communism are revealed in Sources 7.20–7.22?
- 2 How reliable do you think these sources are? Consider the writers and their backgrounds. Do their backgrounds make them less or more reliable?