
UNIT 5 BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION AND ITS IMPACT

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

The Unit deals with major changes that came about in international relations as a result of the Bolshevik revolution, the first socialist revolution in the world. It also discusses the impact of Bolshevik revolution on anti-colonial struggles and workers and peasants struggles throughout the world. After going through the unit the students would be able to :

- explain the nature of the Bolshevik revolution and its impact on international relations,
- discuss the various steps taken by the new Soviet state to create a new system of international relations based on peace and non-aggression, free of exploitation and colonization,
- comprehend the impact of the Bolshevik revolution on anti-colonial struggles.
- evaluate Bolshevik contribution to international communist and workers movements.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Capitalism and industrialization rapidly advanced in Russia after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the defeat of Russia in the Crimea war (1856-59). The needs of sustaining itself as a strong continental power prompted Russia to undertake industrialization on a large scale. This was accomplished by the state playing a major role in economic activities, and with the advancement of capitalism there arose the need for raw materials and markets. In the third quarter of the 19th century, Russian imperialism had already colonised Central Asia and was competing with other imperialist powers for concessions in the Balkans and the far east. Russia, by the end of the century was an imperialist power with semi-feudal system of agriculture and an authoritarian state system. There was no popular government, no elected organ with real powers to make laws, and a total lack of civil rights and political freedom. The liberal groups were weak and compromised too frequently with the rulers. Marxism was becoming popular and was entrusted with the historic task of combining both the anti-feudal and anti-capitalist struggles.

The Marxists, or Social Democrats as they were known then, were divided into various groups and the ideological heterogeneity was too strong to be overcome. The Russian

Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), established in 1898, was split into two major groups : the Bolsheviks (Majority) and the Mensheviks (Minority). Though both the groups wanted a socialist revolution in Russia to be preceded by a democratic anti-feudal revolution, the former (Bolsheviks) wanted the working class to lead this democratic phase of the revolution. The Mensheviks, instead, wanted the bourgeoisie, i.e., the capitalists to lead it. The Bolsheviks under Lenin's leadership finally emerged as leaders of the revolution in October, 1917, with a successful strategy of workers-peasants alliance to head state power after the revolution. The Mensheviks who supported the bourgeois government and participated in it after the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917, had lost the support of the workers and peasants by October. On 7th November (25 October according to the old Russian Calendar) the Bolsheviks were triumphant after three days of armed uprising which led to the surrender of the provisional government set up in February 1917.

It was the First World War which finally sealed the fate of the Tsarist autocracy. The war exacerbated the crisis that had gripped the Russian state. Russian society was an ensemble of contradictions when the war began — contradictions between feudals and peasants, between peasants and capitalist farmers (known also as kulaks), between kulaks and the landless labour, between factory owners and workers, between the big bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie, and so on. Once the war came, all these contradictions sharpened. The enormous cost of the war was too heavy for Russia, which still was relatively backward as compared to other imperialist powers. The state could not sustain such an expensive war and the burden was borne by the working people and the peasants. Workers and even soldiers were up in arms against the State. A socialist revolution materialized for the first time in history and there was no better country than Russia which was the weakest link in the imperialist chain for the revolution to succeed.

The October Revolution heralded a new era by creating a state of the workers and poor peasants whose interest was opposed to economic exploitation wars, aggressions, colonization and racial discrimination. The revolution brought into existence a socialist state that could work as a bulwark against war and imperialism. It also began a process of creation of an alternative world socialist system based on equality and free of exploitation, renounced any form of aggression, colonization and racial prejudice, as opposed to world capitalist system that is based on colonization, economic exploitation, racialism, etc.

5.2 BOLSHEVIKS AND A NEW SYSTEM OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The October Revolution spread a new message of hope and liberation for the toiling peoples all over the world and the peoples of the colonies. It was a message of liberation from all forms of exploitation — national, social, economic and political. This was reflected in a series of declarations, legal pronouncements and diplomatic initiatives of the new Bolshevik government.

The Declaration of Rights of the Working and Exploited People adopted in the third All Russian Congress of Soviets in January 1918, reaffirmed an inflexible determination to deliver mankind from wars and to achieve at all costs a democratic peace among nations, without annexation or indemnities, on the principle of self-determination of nations. The declaration proclaimed Soviet State's "..... complete break with the barbarous policy of bourgeois civilization, which has built the prosperity of the exploiters belonging to a few chosen nations on the enslavement of hundreds of millions of working people in Asia, in the colonies in general, and in the small countries."

The new Soviet state took a determined stand against the prevailing system of international relations in which war and colonization were organic components. Instead, the idea of a just and democratic peace and the establishment of a system of international relations based on general democratic principles was advocated. The renunciation of secret diplomacy was a necessary corollary of Soviet international diplomacy.

5.2.1 Peace Initiatives of the Bolshevik Government

The Decree on Peace, one of the first major acts of the new Soviet State, proclaimed the abolition of secret diplomacy and in accordance with this law, the Soviet foreign ministry published the previous secret treaties signed by the Tsarist state (Russian emperors were called Tsars), including the Anglo-Russian secret treaty and convention of 1907 on "demarcation" of spheres of interests of both the Powers England and Russia in the Middle East; agreement to carve up Turkey between the above two and France concluded in 1916 etc.

The refusal of the Entente Powers (the ultimate victorious powers in the First World War) to negotiate a general peace settlement, forced Soviet Russia to enter into peace talks with Germany, Austria, Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria (the other camp in the war). The Soviet proposal included six points : no forcible annexation of territories occupied during the war; restoration of political independence to nations vanquished during the war; freedom of choice to the national minorities to either remain within a state or become independent through a referendum; safeguarding of the rights of the national minorities in a state by special legislation protecting their national culture and whenever possible, administrative autonomy; renunciation of war indemnities; and solution of colonial problems in accordance with the first four principles. Though imperialist Germany rejected the Soviet proposals and imposed humiliating peace terms on the latter, Lenin still agreed to sign the Peace Treaty of Breast-Litovsk on Germany's terms despite strong opposition within the Bolshevik party and government. Lenin firmly believed that war is detrimental to the interests of the toiling people.

5.2.2 Bolshevik Renunciation of Special Privileges in the Neighbouring Countries

The idea of national sovereignty and equality ran through the theory and practice of Soviet foreign policy, which aimed at reshaping international relations on democratic principles. The emergence of the first socialist state inspired formally independent small states, colonies and semi-colonies to struggle for and defend their sovereignty against oppression and encroachment by imperialist powers. In the process of evolving a new system of international relations, the Soviets attached special significance to relations with the Eastern Countries based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and friendship. The Soviet state was willing to give them friendly assistance in their struggle against imperialism. Despite its difficult economic situation, the new socialist state rendered not only political and moral but also great material support to countries such as Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran and others. In June 1919, the Soviet government abolished all special privileges for Russian nationals in Iran, renounced all concessions and control over Iran's state revenue, and handed over to Iran without demanding any compensation, the banks, the railways, highways and port facilities on Iran's Caspian coast and other property which had belonged to Tsarist Russia. A treaty of friendship with Iran was signed in February, 1921 (the first equal treaty between Iran and a European power), guaranteeing Iran's independence and security of her borders with the Soviet state. Similarly, a treaty of friendship and alliance was signed with Turkey, which received generous economic, financial and military aid from the Soviet state. A Soviet Afghan treaty was signed in Spring 1921 by which interest-free loans were given to the latter and Soviet specialists were assigned to work there.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answer with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What kind of an alternative system of international relations was created by the Bolsheviks?

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- 2) Discuss the peace policy of the Bolsheviks.
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5.3 BOLSHEVIKS AND ANTI-COLONIAL STRUGGLES

More lasting, however, was the inspiration provided by the establishment of the first socialist state which till then was regarded by many as a distant dream. The success of revolutionary ideas influenced the thoughts and actions of generations of freedom fighters in the colonised countries. It also provided great impetus for the growth of radical movements of the toiling peoples in the underdeveloped world. The victory of Russian workers over feudal and capitalist forces, convinced many in the colonies that the European imperialists and their local surrogates were not invincible against the combined strength of the oppressed. In the new socialist state's Appeal to the Toilers of Russia and the East, a direct call was given to "Persians, Turks, Arabs and Hindus" to lose no time in throwing off the yoke of their oppressors and making themselves the masters of their own lands. The appeal made a pointed reference to the rising tide of nationalism in India. Such declarations by the new revolutionary state further convinced the colonised peoples that they had now a powerful ally in the revolutionary government of Russia whose support they could count upon in their struggle against imperialists.

5.3.1 Spread of Socialist Ideas in the East

Under the impact of the October revolution, socialist ideas became widespread. These ideas influenced the view of many leaders of national-liberation struggles. In India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was particularly influenced by Bolshevik idea of scientific socialism and wrote in his *Discovery of India*, Marx's general analysis of social development seems to have been remarkably correct Lenin successfully adapted the Marxian thesis to some of these subsequent developments...". Acquaintance with scientific socialism provided a better understanding to the national intelligentsia about the political and social forces in their countries and outside that could be relied upon in the struggle for political independence and social progress. It also helped them to determine the ideology best suited to solve the pressing problem of national revival.

5.3.2 Unity of Nationalist and Socialist Forces in the East

Under the impact of the October revolution, socialist ideas spread that witnessed the creation of revolutionary groups and communist parties whose activities raised the consciousness of the working people and organized them against oppression, be it from imperialists or local oppressors. These groups were also active in arousing the masses to political activity and in preparing conditions for combining the struggle of the workers and peasants with that of national liberation and anti-imperialism. The October revolution showed the necessity of an alliance between the worker's movement and the peoples national liberation struggle to defeat imperialism. With the success of socialism in Russia and a setback to world imperialism, the national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America assumed greater scope and intensity, embracing more countries and greater masses of people. The national liberation movements became more profound in their content and goals, and more importantly became more and more successful. This was to a large measure due to the revolutionising effect of the new Soviet state's successful handling of the national and social question. In short, the October Revolution blazed the trail of socialism and national liberation all over the world. It stimulated the consciousness of the people in the colonies, widened the basis of the national movements and finally, hastened the process of growth of the left movement in the colonies and semi-colonies.

Inspired by the success of revolutionaries in Russia, the Indian revolutionary nationalists operating abroad formed contracts with Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership. Mahendra Pratap, Barkatullah, Obaidullah Sindhi, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, Bhupendranath Datta, Hardayal and M.N. Roy were the prominent names who went to Moscow to seek cooperation and guidance for India's liberation. Two great sons of India, Pandit Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore were greatly influenced by events in Russia and remained till the end of their lives most committed friends of the Soviet Union. Many of the Indian revolutionaries working abroad drew inspiration from the October revolution and adopted socialism as their programmatic goal. These included the young Muslim Muhajideens trekking through Afghanistan to Soviet Russia and the members of the Ghadar Party founded in USA before the First World War. The nascent working class movement in India led to the emergence of communist groups and to the formal launching of the Communist Party of India in 1925. Shaheed Bhagat Singh was being attracted towards socialism during his days in jail and one of his last political acts in prison was celebrating the Lenin Day.

5.3.3 Intensification of National Liberation Movements

The October revolution contributed to the quickening of the pace of national liberation movements by inspiring broader sections of the population in the colonies. In India, the closing months of 1918 and early 1919 witnessed a strike movement on a scale never before known in India. The Bombay textile workers strike involved 125,000 workers. The strike movement reached its peak in the first six months of 1920 with about 200 strikes involving one and a half million workers. It was in this situation that Gandhiji and the Congress decided to launch the "non-violent non-cooperation" movement, which marked a big step forward in mass mobilisation.

Some other countries also witnessed intensified struggles against imperialism. Irish militants under the leadership of Michael Collins continued to fight the British while the Sinn Fein Party proclaimed the creation of the Irish Republic. In Egypt, the Nationalist Party of Zaghlul Pasha was seriously challenging British rule and the deportation of Zaghlul in 1919 was followed by mass insurrections which the British savagely put down. Independence of Egypt was declared in 1920. In Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Pasha declared war against the allied occupation and set up a provisional government. China, not only refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles, but also witnessed a new phase in its struggle against imperialism. The May Fourth movement of 1919, which signalled this transition, resulted in mass participation of intellectuals and students, frontal assault on Confucianism and boycott of Japanese goods.

The nationalist leaders of the East responded positively to the message of the October revolution. Bal Gangadhar Tilak hailed the victory of Bolsheviks in his newspaper Kesari. Bipin Chandra Pal, another prominent leader of Indian national movement, was greatly inspired by the October revolution and its call against all forms of exploitation. Lala Lajpat Rai was all praise for the success of revolution in Russia and its policy towards East. The Russian revolution and its socialist achievements had a lasting impact on the political thinking of Jawaharlal Nehru and this led to a radical shift in the thinking of Indian National Congress.

Sun Yat Sen was the first of China's public leaders to call for the recognition of Soviet Russia by Asian states. This was also a response to the policies of the new revolutionary state towards China despite the hostility of then Beihing government towards the Soviet republic. In 1918, Soviet Russia publicly renounced all treaties, agreements and loans once imposed on China by the Tsarist government. The best minds of China saw the historical relevance of the October revolution for China's future. Li Dazhao and Lu Xin, the moving spirits behind the May Fourth Movement, that became the nucleus of China's communist movement, hailed the October revolution as the dawning of a new era.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.
ii) Check your answer with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

- 1) How did the Bolsheviks contribute to the anti-colonial struggles?

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- 2) Discuss the role of the Bolshevik revolution in uniting the socialist and nationalist forces in the anti-colonial struggles.

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- 3) Briefly discuss the impact of October revolution in intensifying national liberation struggles in the East.

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5.4 RISE AND GROWTH OF COMMUNIST AND WORKERS' MOVEMENTS

The October revolution not only had a great impact on the liberation movements in the colonies, it also paved the way for the rise and growth of the communist and workers' movement in the East. To unite various communist groups, parties and movements, to popularise Marxist-Leninist theory and to discuss the debate strategies and tactics of uniting with other nationalist non-communist forces against imperialism, a **Communist International** (also known as the **Third International of Comintern**) was formed in Moscow in 1919. The ideal that was embodied in the formation of the International was the unity of the working class in the developed West and the oppressed peoples of the colonies in their common struggle against imperialism. The **Communist International** became the co-ordinating centre of revolutionaries the world over. The problem of a united anti-imperialist front occupied a central place in the Comintern's theoretical and practical activities on the national and colonial question. The idea of the unity of all the anti-imperialist forces, in other words the unity between forces of socialism and the national liberation movement crystallised at the second congress of the Comintern in 1920.

Given the repressive nature of the colonial regimes, many communist parties of the Eastern countries were formed in the Soviet Russia under the auspices of the Comintern. Turkish communists were the first to organise a communist party in Soviet Russia, followed by Iranina, Chinese and the Koreans. The first group of Indian communists was formed in October 1920 following the arrival in Tashkent of Indians who had attended the second congress of the Comintern. On the initiative of M.N. Roy and H. Mukherjee this group of seven people proclaimed itself the Communist party of India.

Check Your Progress 3

Bolshevik Revolution and its Impact

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answer with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Discuss the importance of the Communist International?

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- 2) Briefly discuss the impact of Bolsheviks on the formation of Communist and workers' parties.

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5.5 LET US SUM UP

The Bolshevik victory and its support to the liberation movements created favourable conditions for the intensification of anti-imperialist struggles in the colonies. It not only inspired nationalists and communists all over the world but also helped to bring them together on the common platform of anti-colonialism. The Bolshevik policy of peace and renunciation of special privileges and secret diplomacy created an alternative system of international relations.

5.6 KEY WORDS

Imperialism: A system in which highly developed capitalist states colonise, underdeveloped countries for cheap raw material, labour and market, but more importantly, for exporting the surplus capital of the developed states to underdeveloped ones for higher profit.

Bourgeois system: Also called the capitalist system, in which land, labour and the products are marketable commodities, and the workers have no ownership or control over the means of production and as a result are exploited by the capitalists who are the owners.

Socialism: A system in which the worker are the ruling class the there is no private ownership over the means of production.

5.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Anhraf Ali & G.A. Syomin, (Eds.), 1917, **October Revolution and India's Independence**, Sterling Publishers, Delhi.

E.H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1921**, Penguin Books, London.

Milrokhin, L.V., 1981, **Lenin in India**, Allied Publishers, Delhi.

Patnaik, Ashok Kumar, 1992, **Soviets and The Indian Revolutionary Movement, 1917-1929**, Anamika Publishers, Delhi.

Pethybridge Roger, 1972, **The Spread of the Russia Revolution. Essays on 1917**, Macmillan, London.

5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1. See Section 5.2.1 and Sub-section 5.2.3
2. See Sub-section 5.2.2 and 5.2.3.

Check Your Progress 2

1. See Sub-section 5.2.3 and Section 5.3.1.
2. See sub-section 5.3.2 and 5.3.3.
3. See sub-section 5.3.3 and 5.3.4.

Check Your Progress 3

1. See Section 5.4.
2. See sub-section 5.3.2, 5.3.3 and section 5.4.

NOTES