

1 (a) Write an account of War Communism.

War Communism was an economic and political system implemented by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War (1918–1921). War Communism aimed to support the Red Army (By making sure that the army was fed and equipped during the civil war), maintain control over industry and food supplies, and ensure the survival of the Bolshevik regime (by introducing a system of Communism).

War Communism meant that industry was nationalized. In line with Marxism, all major industries were brought under state control. Private ownership of factories and enterprises was abolished. (Factories with more than 10 workers were taken over by the state.) The state dictated what should be produced. A Supreme Council of National Economy decided, what each factory should produce, and where it should be distributed. Workers were placed under strict discipline, and strikes were made illegal. (Strikers could be shot.) Many of the previous workers' committees were dissolved or absorbed into state structures. The aim was to ensure maximum efficiency and direct all efforts toward the war effort.

So, the economy was managed centrally through Supreme Economic Councils (Vesenkha), which oversaw production and distribution. However, the lack of skilled administrators, poor infrastructure, and chaotic conditions often led to inefficiencies and confusion.

To feed the cities and the army, the Bolsheviks also requisitioned grain. Peasants were forced to give all surplus produce to the government. (They were no longer allowed to sell surplus for a profit.) Squads were sent out to the countryside to seize grain and food from peasants. This policy was very unpopular and often met with resistance. Peasants were allowed to keep only a small portion of their harvest, leading to reduced incentive to produce surplus food.

In the cities, food was rationed. Furthermore, private trade was abolished. The state attempted to control the distribution of goods. (This led to the emergence of a black market, as people sought alternative ways to acquire food and necessities.) To meet expenses, the government printed masses of money. This caused inflation - the government allowed money to lose its value. Many money payments were abolished (e.g. rents and fares) and people were encouraged to barter good instead.

Through War Communism, the government was able to feed and equip the army. Unfortunately, War Communism was very unpopular because it had mainly negative consequences for the people of Russia. Firstly, it caused economic collapse. By 1921, industrial output had fallen to a fraction of its pre-war level. The result was hunger, low wages and discontent among the workers.

Moreover, famine gripped much of the countryside. This was because peasants stopped producing surplus since they were no longer allowed to sell it for profit. This resulted in food shortages (1919-1920), and a full scale famine (1921) that was made worse by bad weather and disease. Seven million people died as a result.

War Communism helped the Bolsheviks consolidate power and crush opposition, but the people of Russia did not like war communism. The harsh requisitioning policies led to widespread peasant uprisings. In 1921, sailors at the Kronstadt naval base, once strong supporters of the Bolsheviks, revolted, demanding more political freedom and an end to harsh economic measures.

Lenin realised that he had to make changes if the Bolsheviks were to stay in control. Consequently, in 1921, due to the severe economic and social crises, Lenin abandoned War Communism and introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP allowed some private trade and small-scale private enterprise, and replaced grain requisitioning with a tax in kind.

War Communism was a drastic and often brutal attempt to impose centralized control during the Russian Civil War. While it helped the Bolsheviks win the civil war, it came at immense social and economic cost, and its failure ultimately forced a shift toward a more pragmatic capitalist approach in the early years of Soviet power.