Major Sources Of Discord Between The Bolshevik And European States Essay, Research Paper

Major Sources of Discord between the Bolsheviks and European States: 1917 to 1921

There were several major sources that created discord between the Bolsheviks and western states in Europe from 1917 to 1921. Conflicting ideologies that each attacked the very fabric of the other’s respective society led to the notion that capitalism and communism could not coexist. The attempts of both actors to hold control of their own political system and to expand their political ideas internationally led to major conflicts between them. Also, the lack of respect for the upstart Bolshevik government by the west led to misperceptions concerning the actions of the Soviets. Russia’s unsatisfactory involvement in World War I and their abrupt departure from the war which affected the western Allies war effort created much disenchantment between the two sides. The imperial and expansionist nature of both groups of actors led to conflict as the creation of both communist and non-communist blocs began with the independence of Poland as a free state in 1919. By using the Communist party as a vehicle to inject Communism into societies abroad, the Bolsheviks began to make free countries take notice of the threat that the “worker’s party” presented and began to act in strong opposition of Communism. The actions of both sides began a race for an expansion of two different ideologies which created conflict so strong that in due time another World War seemed inevitable. The “Cold War” had begun.

The fundamental difference between Russia and Europe was extremely contrasting views in ideology. The modernization of politics in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s had created similar political movements in both Europe and Russia meant to increase the authority of the masses over their own government. These movements replaced authoritarian regimes with political systems that were created to better the lives of the common people (Harris). Leading states of Europe such as France and Britain began to take the path of “social democracy” in which the working class would be given a voice through parliamentary elections (Harris). Also by organizing the proletariat through trade unions, social democracy allowed for collective bargaining to lead to improvements in working conditions, pay, benefits, and other factors that helped to limit the exploitation of lower class labor (Harris). On the other hand, the Bolshevik model for serving in the best interests of the common people was not to raise the level of the proletariat by giving them more rights and a stronger political voice, but to bring down the upper class that was exploiting them by destroying the caste system altogether. The goal of Bolshevism was to use a governing body to place the masses into one equal social class where everybody would work equally for the advancement of society as a whole (Harris). Communism under the direction of Lenin called for the abolishment of private property and the nationalization of all means of production thereby putting the state in control of all economics, politics, and social concerns (Harris). With the direction of the Bolshevik party, the Soviets were beginning to form a cohesive political machine that was to shape a new communist Russia, and eventually, a new communist world.

An intrinsic trait of Communist ideology was the opposition of the imperialist and capitalist ways of the west (Harris). The Bolsheviks contended that capitalism itself was one of the human race’s major evils and should be eliminated. Marxism states that inequality and lower class exploitation creates inter-class struggle which he felt was a major downfall of society (Harris). Fueled by materialistic greed, members of a capitalist society found themselves constantly trying to better themselves at the expense of others around them. The lower class of society such as the peasants and workers were being exploited by the upper bourgeois in the way that they were paid and how they were treated.

The Bolsheviks felt that the ultimate example of capitalistic evil was the Western imperialists who contended with one another for the accumulation of lands that they had no right to control (Harris). States such as Britain, Germany, France, and Austria-Hungary were proponents for the imperialist way which Lenin felt would lead to an inevitable World War between the imperialist states (Ulam, p. 79). Lenin’s idea was that the competition for lands and resources as well as the expansion of various political ideologies would lead to an inter-imperialist conflict as had happened in prior history (Harris). The outbreak of World War I in 1914 brought the idea of an inter-imperialist war to fruition.

Tsar Nicholas II led Russia into W.W.I. in 1914 with the prospects of defending itself from the expansionist Triple Alliance consisting of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy (Harris). Russia entered the war on the side of France and Britain in what became a very costly and unpopular World War. However, after the Bolshevik takeover of Russian government in 1917, Lenin’s main focus was to increase the stability of the new Bolshevik regime and raise the credibility of the new government in the eyes of the Russian people. In the years between 1914 and 1917, Lenin would try to find a way to stabilize the Soviet Union by getting out of World War I (Harris). Lenin contended that the Soviet Union would rather not participate in the war, but would rather “gain strength and maintain the oasis of Soviet power in the middle of the raging imperialist sea” (p. 79). He felt that fighting alongside imperialist countries such as Britain and France in an imperialist war was not something that was in the best interests of Communist ideology (Harris). In the early stages of Communist power, European states such as France and Britain would not even recognize the Bolshevik regime as a legitimate governing force (Harris). Many of these countries denounced the new Bolshevik government since the new regime forcefully uprooted the democratic provisional government that took over power after the revolution of February 1917 (Harris). Such an abrupt and rather uncouth upheaval gained little respect in the international political community and weakened the credibility of the new government (Harris). Western anti-ideological sentiment towards Russia would not come until after the conclusion of W.W.I. but the rigid west set the stage for future dealings with Russia.

The lack of Russian effort in World War I created much strife between Russia and the Britain/France coalition (Ulam, p. 90). Russia entered World War I in 1914 with the objective of protecting her own lands as well as the lands of Serbia, and stressed that acquiring land was not an integral part of Russia’s military agenda (Harris). However, the Triple Alliance was taking Europe piece by piece; fighting a two front war between the Allies of the west, and Entente forces from Russia and the east (p. 90). By focusing on attacking the Germans from both the east and western fronts, the Allies could cause the Germans to spread their forces thin and consequently take Europe back (Harris). Much to the dismay of France and Britain, Russia was not as strong an ally as they would have hoped. The Soviet Union spent a good deal of its resources to reinforce the British and the French against their enemies, yet well organized and efficient offensive attacks from the east was something the Russians could not execute (Ulam p. 89). Russia could not give the Allies much support since the war had taken a huge toll on Russia economically and the upheaval that occurred on the home front left much of Russia’s resources to be put to use domestically. The Allies became frustrated at the Soviets for not giving them the effort that they needed to defeat the Alliance (Ulam, p. 88). Russia’s rather ineffective involvement in the war came in 1918 when Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest Litovsk. The treaty that allowed Russia to achieve peace with Germany by giving concessions of land and heavy economic resources to the Germans.

To the Allies, it appeared that the Russo-German peace agreement simply saved Russia at their expense. Now the Allies were incapable of fighting the Germans as effectively as they could if Russia was involved in the war. It appeared that Russia had turned its back on France and Britain by saving itself. The Allies also began to explore the possibility that Russia had secretly aligned with Germany because the massive concessions given basically made Russia an economic slave to Germany (Ulam, p. 91). With Russia bowing out of the war, the Allies were on their own and they became more cautious in their future dealings with the Russian state.

The events of W.W.I also brought major sources of discord between Germany and Russia. Throughout the war, Russia chose to take more offensive positions against Austria-Hungary than towards the Germans (Ulam, p. 80). They tried to fight the Triple alliance, yet at the same time not acting in a way to infuriate Germany and cause a massive German assault on Russia (p. 89). Due to Lenin’s assumption that Russia would not be able to survive an all out German attack, he signed the rather costly Treaty of Brest Litovsk and thereby gave major concessions to the Germans in exchange for their neutrality (Ulam, p. 89). The “harshness” (p. 89) of the treaty that was dealt by the Germans created much disenchantment between the two sides (p. 89). The reparations called for the Germans to be paid 6 Billion German marks in gold and goods that would have inevitably made Russia an “economic satellite” of Germany (p. 89) After the treaty was signed, Germany created tension by not adhering to the treaty as they had agreed (p. 80). The Germans pushed the Bolsheviks out of Ukraine and Finland and in many instances failed to withdraw troops from the front lines (p. 80). Ironically, only an Allied victory of World War I saved Russia from Germany’s grasp. The Allies won the war in the end without the help of Russia and the fall of Germany allowed the reparations to be paid in Brest Litovsk to be null and void (Harris). However, the damage had been done. The Germans had little sympathy for a torn Russian state and exploited Russia for all that it could.

After the conclusion of World War I in March of 1918, the concern of a democratically driven counter-revolution became imminent. Lenin knew that division between the new Bolshevik regime and supporters of the provisional government known as “Kadets” drew a line through Russian society. The Russian people were becoming disillusioned with the new Bolshevik regime and a civil war between the “Whites” (socially democratic driven “Kadets”) and the “Reds” (Bolsheviks) consequently erupted in 1918 (Harris). Lenin felt control of Russia slipping away and knew that the focus of his regime had to be in the domestic rather than international arena (Ulam, p. 84). The Allies attitude towards Russia had changed as a result of World War I (Ulam, p. 84). By signing the peace treaty, for the first time the Bolshevik regime was seen as being the official government of Russia by most of the world, and free states of the west began to take notice of the ideological differences between themselves and the Russians (p. 80). In 1918, near the end of World War I, forces from the United States, France, and Britain gathered in Russia to “expand the eastern front” against the Germans (p. 84). The purpose of these interventions at first was to use Russian soil to win World War I, not to support either side of an ideological civil war that had just begun and was occurring simultaneously (p. 84). Before Russia made several questionable decisions in World War I, the ideology behind the Bolshevik regime was not challenged heavily by the west (Harris). Ulam states, “Until November 1918, the Allied intervention in Russia had nothing ideological about it. It was designed simply to give the Western Powers’ armies in France, which at the beginning of the German offensive in March 1918, were struggling desperately…” (p. 92). However, since the Allies already had troops in Russia already to fight the Germans, it became convenient to offer aid to the White armies (p. 84). After the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, Britain and France made several attempts to advance the positions of the White counter-revolutionaries in the civil war by giving aid in the form of troops, supplies, and arms (p. 91). The Allies felt they could also encourage White forces by having “a token troop presence that would stir up the “healthy elements” in Russia into vigorous anti-Bolshevik activity” (p. 91). However, the aid that the White armies received proved to be offset by the lack of discipline, political focus, and capable decision-making that inevitably doomed the White cause (p. 92). The western state’s interventions were also not of dynamic proportions. There were several instances throughout the civil war when the western powers felt the Whites were going to win convincingly (p. 92). The pro-White European states also were limited in the amount of aid they could give considering the monumental casualties that World War I had created, and getting heavily involved in another country’s own civil war would not be popular in their respective homelands (p. 86). The Allies also felt that as the Civil War went on “the mass of the population was turning against the Bolsheviks” (p. 92) , and the Kadet movement would at some time regain political power (p. 92). These miscalculations of the Allies helped contribute to the Bolsheviks winning the Civil War in 1921, but the intervention of the allies on Russian soil widened the gap between the west and Russia.

With the failure of the West to intervene and successfully defeat the Bolshevik government, Lenin felt the democratic countries would “compose their differences and attack [The Soviet Union]” (Ulam, p. 78). As a result, Lenin attempted to thwart further intervention by retracting his comment that communists could not coexist with capitalists (Harris). He also agreed to allow the French to take positions as they pleased and enacted plans for trading between Russia and Britain that would allow “people in the business community to have a stake in Russia free of Communists” (Ulam, p. 99). Lenin’s rather suave actions may have saved the Bolshevik regime by giving the Soviets time to establish themselves free of potent intervention by the West.

From 1917 to 1920, as Russia found itself torn between entrenching a new government, dealing with negative sentiments from Europe, fighting a massive world war, and suppressing counter-revolutionary movements, Lenin knew that the opportunity to expand communism into Europe did not exist at the time (Harris). However, as the Bolsheviks gained more stability in Russia in the early 1920’s, Lenin chose to push for the expansion of the Communist ideology on a nationwide scale (Harris). He knew that Bolshevism was fast becoming a political force in the international arena. Communists were gathering support around the world in all countries through the sympathetic ear of the proletariat, and the ideological curiosity of the intellectual. The success of the Bolshevik uprising and 1917 set an example to Communists everywhere that they could also create their own Communist state through a well organized revolutionary movement. Communism was injecting a fresh, utopian ideology into what was becoming a democratically driven world. They were fast becoming an enemy of social democratic states, and a threat to their way of life.

In his plan for worldwide communism, Lenin concluded that Germany (the country that he referred to as “the giant”) was the key to creating a Communist Europe (Harris). He felt that if Germany (which was a heavily industrialized state with a strong economy and a well educated population) would become communist, it would open the door for the communism to expand throughout Europe (Harris). After the conclusion of W.W.I the German regime was dissolved, and the Bolsheviks began to “woo the German socialists” (Ulam, p. 94) into creating a Communist revolution in Germany. The Bolsheviks tried to obtain more influence in German society by giving gifts and using the Comintern’s influence to create grass roots levels of revolution. However, when their labors did not yield a new Communist regime, democratic nations of the world took notice of the Bolshevik’s revolutionary tactics (Ulam, p. 94). By trying to use Germany as the spark to create a worldwide revolution the Soviets had failed, and in the process they created even more strife with the west.

Lenin further pushed for Communist expansion in the 1920’s by calling for a plan to expand Communism into imperial colonies using a model of “two stage revolution” (Harris). Lenin felt that imperial powers that controlled colonies were susceptible to creating grassroots communist movements because these states did not focus on educating their colonists and instilling them with a strong political ideology (Harris). Also, these colonies were mostly poor colonies that were made up mainly of poor, lower class peasants who could be sympathetic to the communist cause (Harris). Lenin’s two step plan called for colonies to free themselves of imperial control and establish their own governments (Harris). After their independence was established, Communist Party influence in these states would lead to organization of peasants and workers who would take over the state waving the Communist flag (Harris).

In 1919, Lenin had established an organization of worldwide communists known as the Comintern whose goal was to increase the influence of the Communist Party in nations around the world (Harris). The Comintern was created to allocate the resources and provide the organization required to create radical socialist revolutions on an international scale (Harris). Lenin began to use the Comintern vigorously in the 1920’s in an effort to increase the party’s influence in Europe. Lenin’s main goal was to create a total communist world and the fall of Europe from the hands of democracy was the key to achieving his goal. By making his motives clear on the expansion of Bolshevism, Lenin caused much strife between Russia and the west by encouraging the growth of the Communist movement on the soil of democratic European states (Harris). In many of these countries, the Communist party was soon banned and its members were arrested to curb any threat that the party held (Harris).

In 1920 it was well noted by the western democracies that “two stage revolution” was a real threat when Communist Party involvement was exposed in Turkey. Revolutionary leader Kemal Ataturk fought against imperialist control with the help of Russia. He used the Communist Party to build support for his movement, then later purged many of the members in order to gain more influence and sever his ties with the Communist Party (Harris). Even though communism did not reign in Turkey, it made the world realize the evident threat of communism developing on a grass roots level in their own country.

Along with the threat of the expansion of Bolshevism in the 1920’s, the imperialistic actions of Russia became the principle source of tension between Europe and the Soviet Union. A territorial concern that created much strife was over the Slavic area that lie between Russia and Germany. After World War I, Poland was created as an independent state out of the three empires that had once occupied it : Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary (Ulam, p. 107). Poland had also created its own democratic government with the support of the League of Nations (Harris). With Poland becoming its own free state, a buffer zone was created between the Soviet/German border that would make it difficult for the Bolsheviks to gain access to Germany and lead a Communist revolution (Harris). The Treaty of Versailles had also created the countries of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia and made careful arrangements to set up these counties as a bloc of democratic governments to curb Russian imperialism (Harris). Lenin’s plans for the expansion of Bolshevism into Germany became complicated by the new Polish state (Harris). They no longer had direct access to the German border. Russia also felt that Poland contained lands that were rightfully part of Russia. As a result, the Soviets invaded Poland in 1920 in an effort to reacquire lands that they had lost as a result of the Treaty of Versailles as well as regain access to Germany by taking further territory all the way to the German border (Harris). Upon their planned occupation of Poland, the Soviets intended to gather the support of the workers and lead a Communist revolution in Poland thereby destroying the Pole’s newly established non-Communist regime (Harris). Poland eventually defeated the Russians with the help of French troops in 1921, and the upstart attempt to create Communist revolution in the remains of a war tattered Europe failed (Harris). In 1921, Poland mounted its own offensive that pushed Russian troops all the way east to the city of Kiev. The expansionist actions of the Soviet Union undermined the peace negotiations that ended W.W.I. and caused much anti-Communist sentiment among the nations of free Europe (Harris).

With the Russian Bolsheviks coming to power in October of 1917, the spread of communism on a worldwide scale began. The idea of the expansion of Marxist thought became a source of tension that pitted Russia and its experimental communist society against states of democracy and capitalism in Europe. The strife that developed between Russia and Europe was the result of expansionist movements by the Communist Party either directly or by encouraging grass roots communist growth within (Harris). Also, the questionable actions of both the Bolsheviks and the western Europe during World War I as well as the Russian Civil War created much hostility between the new Russian state and the establish states of the west. The actions taken by the Western states to hold back Bolshevik expansion clashed with the Communist’s revolutionary aspirations and dreams of global dominance. The struggle between two entities: one of rebellion and growth, and the other of maintaining social order and suppression become prevalent, and subsequently the “Cold War” had begun.

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