

## TREATY OF BREST-LITOVSK

### TREATY AT A GLANCE

#### *Completed*

March 3, 1918, at Brest-Litovsk, Russia (present-day Brest, Belarus)

#### *Signatories*

Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey and  
the Russian Federal Soviet Republic

#### *Overview*

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, concluded between the Central Powers and the new Soviet government of Russia, ended Russian participation in World War I, with the Soviets agreeing to huge territorial losses. The treaty freed Germany from its two-front war, allowing the transfer of troops to the Western Front and a prolongation of the conflict, while presenting the Allies with the difficult question of how to handle Soviet Russia in peacetime, a question that was the haunt most of the 20th century.

### Historical Background

World War I had begun in August 1914 with a spectacular German push to the west, toward Paris. When the German armies failed to reach the French capital, however, the war settled into a long, grinding stasis, as trench-bound forces killed one another without achieving any major strategic objectives. With the approach of 1917, all of the belligerents were nearing exhaustion.

England, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey, however, would survive their 1917 crises; Romanov Russia would not. From the beginning, the war had gone very badly for Russia. Its army was enormous: Russia had mobilized roughly 10 percent of its population, putting in excess of 15 million citizens under arms. But they were poorly equipped and even more poorly led. By 1917 the Russian army had been "turned over" three times, its losses estimated at nearly 8 million men, half those mobilized. Morale was so bad that officers refused to lead their troops into battle for fear of being shot in the back. Desertions assumed overwhelming proportions, and whole regiments—often on orders from their officers—surrendered en masse to the Germans.

The man in charge of the disaster, Nicholas II, announced he was leaving his government in the hands of his wife, the emotionally distraught Empress Alexandra, to go to the front and direct the fighting himself. Alexandra turned the reins of power over to

the "debauched monk" Rasputin, who wrecked what little chance the czarist regime had of surviving, much less winning, the war, before he was assassinated by Grand Duke Dmitry, Nicholas's nephew, and Prince Yusupov, the husband of the czar's niece. Meanwhile, industrial mobilization had thrown the economy completely out of whack; farmers could not export their produce and refused to sell food on the open market; the ruble was nearly worthless, and there was precious little room for barter; the railway system had collapsed, and what few supplies existed could get through neither to the front nor to the towns; and Russia's industrial cities, including Petrograd (the Russian name the czar decreed in 1914 to replace the Germanic "St. Petersburg"), were threatened by famine.

It was no accident, as the marxists would say, that 1917 became the year the great Russian Empire heaved one final huge sigh—and vanished. But during the so-called February Revolution, when workers poured spontaneously onto the boulevards from every factory in Petrograd and Moscow, no one seemed to understand what was going on—not the czar at the front, not the liberal and aristocratic Cadets who had been agitating for reform, not the revolutionary leaders exiled in Siberia. Only Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov—a.k.a. "Lenin," the acerbic leader of a splinter from the marxist revolutionary Union of Russian Socialist Democrats Abroad, called the Bolshevik Party, who was cooling his heels in Switzerland—seemed to notice that power

lay in the frozen streets of Petrograd that winter, just waiting for somebody to pick it up. And he said so, doing everything in his power to book passage for Petrograd's Finland Station.

On February 22, 1917, there were mass demonstrations in Petrograd. Two days later, the leaderless workers of the city went out on general strike, fighting bloody battles in the street with the czar's police. By February 27 the army had gone over to the proletariat, and the powerful Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was formed. A day later Moscow created its own soviet. Even Nicholas II realized the matter was hopeless. He abdicated—officially—on March 3.

The Russian parliament, or Duma, formed a provisional government. Prince Gyorgy Lvov was appointed prime minister, but the two leading figures in the government were Aleksandr Kerensky and Pavel Milyukov. As political liberals they valued Russia's ties to Britain and France, and—Russia having been promised Constantinople by the Allies as an enticement to continue fighting—they looked forward to capturing the Turkish capital as a means of legitimizing their regime. Kerensky reassured the entente powers in mid-March that his government would fight “unswervingly and indefatigably” till victory was achieved. The words bitterly disappointed German foreign service officers, who had long dabbled in various revolutionary intrigues, hoping to shatter Russia from within and thus force it out of the conflict. Now, so it appeared, the czar's regime had indeed been shattered, but Russia remained a belligerent.

Germany did not give up. Since 1914 the foreign office had both collaborated with nationalist agitators among Russia's Baltic, Finnish, Georgian, Polish, and Ukrainian peoples and supported the conspiracies of Russian social revolutionaries. One of these was Lenin. Living in Kraków when the war erupted, he was immediately arrested. Then an Austrian Social Democrat named Victor Adler persuaded Austria's minister of the interior that Lenin, as leader of the most militant of the Russian marxists, could be an asset in the fight against the Romanov Empire. The minister saw to Lenin's release and deportation to Switzerland, where he continued his insurrectionary correspondence with the Bolshevik underground back home. Meanwhile, in Constantinople another Russian émigré socialist, Alexander Helphand, had caught the eye of Germany's ambassador to Turkey. Impressed with Helphand's revolutionary credentials and connections, the ambassador had him shipped off to Berlin to brief the foreign office.

In March 1915 the foreign office set aside 2 million marks to spend on subversion in Russia. By 1917 the amount had swelled to 41 million marks, much of it going to Helphand's seditious organization, which sowed revolutionary and pacifist ideas among Russian

soldiers, workers, and peasants. Then came the fall of the czar's government and Kerensky's declaration of support for the Allied war effort, and the German foreign office figured it needed more radical help than Helphand could offer. Germany decided to facilitate Lenin's return to Russia. On April 9, 1917, the Germans placed Lenin and his comrades, Leon Trotsky among them, on a sealed train in Zurich and cleared the tracks for a night run across Germany. A boat waited in Sweden to whisk the group to the Finland Station at Petrograd.

Once landed, Lenin lost no time. He began pushing the Bolsheviks steadily toward a takeover from his very first speech, which called for all power to the soviets and for social revolution. The Germans loathed Lenin's ultimate goal—he wanted to transform the European war of nations into an international class war—but they loved his current program for a revolutionary Russia: an immediate armistice, an end to secret diplomacy, and the negotiation of a peace involving, so his slogan said, “no annexations, no indemnities.” Such brilliant sloganeering—“Peace, Bread and Land” was another Bolshevik cry—caught the imagination of the masses, of the common soldiers, urban workers, and poor peasants to whom the Bolsheviks pitched their message. Scarcely a month after Lenin's arrival, Prince Lvov was forced to accept as official Russian foreign policy the revolutionary no-annexation-no-indemnities formula. On May 15 Milyukov, in disgust, resigned as foreign minister; in short order, Prince Lvov's government collapsed.

The Petrograd soviet called for the abolition of the officer corps, and the new provisional government abolished courts-martial and issued a Declaration of Soldier's Rights. Nevertheless, this government too failed. Indeed, throughout the spring and summer and on into autumn, no fewer than four more governments—all with Kerensky's backing—would form and fall, at the rate of nearly one a month. The hungry and toiling masses moved further and further left, further left than Lenin, who warned them against anarchy. They demanded food and freedom from want, a living wage, and an eight-hour workday, but most often and most loudly they called for an end to the senseless slaughter of World War I. And because it was the one demand Kerensky would not accept, everything seemed up for grabs that summer. As Bolshevik propaganda penetrated deep into the ranks of the ordinary soldiers, the Russian high command came to consider its own army a huge, weary, shabby, and ill-fed mob of angry men.

Suddenly Russian politics swung to the right after the Bolsheviks failed to take charge of the country during violent antigovernment demonstrations on July 3 and 4. In reaction, a coalition government was formed that banned the party, sent Lenin into hiding under

threat of arrest, threw Trotsky in jail, and appointed right-wing general Lavr Kornilov commander-in-chief of the Russian army. Kornilov had been urging a number of reforms to restore the army to fighting trim. Kerensky was sympathetic, but the old general was surrounded by conspirators who wanted to make him military dictator. Reactionary skulduggery abounded, and Kerensky, aware of the danger of a coup, outlawed troop movements in the capital. When Kornilov attempted to lead an army into town to institute his reforms, the troops simply walked off the job behind his ramrod-straight back. Kerensky had Kornilov arrested, and the counterrevolution, if that's what it was, fizzled. In any case, yet another government had collapsed, and the Duma seemed bereft of both will and authority. On September 24 Kerensky formed one last coalition. Figuring he could beat the Bolsheviks at the ballot box, he hoped to hold out until the elections for a Constituent Assembly scheduled in December.

Exactly a month later, Lenin took control of Russia in a bloodless coup d'état. The Bolsheviks themselves doubted they would last long. On October 25 prominent party member Zinoviev, admittedly a notorious pessimist, gave the new regime two weeks because of the Bolsheviks' incompetence and the strength of their enemies. On October 28 Lenin declared a state of siege in Petrograd. Antirevolutionary (or, at least, anti-Bolshevik) "Whites" had taken the Kremlin, and civil war was under way. Come November, nothing much was settled: power and peace yet lay in the balance, the Bolshevik Party was deeply divided, civil servants engaged in systematic sabotage, bankers kept their doors locked to the new government, municipal services ground to a halt, and the White Army was on its way from the countryside.

Clearly, Lenin needed to be free of the European war in order to consolidate Bolshevik power. On December 15 the regime signed an armistice with the Central Powers. That same month, Lenin created the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle against Sabotage and Counterrevolution. Arrests began immediately, even as Trotsky headed off to the peace conference convening on December 22 at Brest-Litovsk. But it took several months for the terror to get into full swing and for the commission's acronym, CHEKA, to send chills down the spine of anyone with a bank account, not coincidentally about the same amount of time it took Trotsky to give away half of European Russia to the Germans.

## Terms

Immediately, the German imperialists and the Russian totalitarians-in-the-making began to bicker about the

definition of "national self-determination," an understandably touchy point since Lenin, Trotsky, and Karl Radek had in the first days of Bolshevik power organized the apparatus to spread revolution abroad. Although the expected uprisings had nowhere occurred when Trotsky sat down across the table from the Germans, Lenin continued to fear that the Bolshevik Revolution would not survive without them, and Trotsky believed in the necessity of international revolution until his dying day. Recognizing how far apart the two sides were, Trotsky promptly asked for an adjournment in hopes that the tide of revolution might yet sweep throughout central Europe. A mutiny did flare up in the Austrian fleet, and a general strike erupted in Berlin, but both outbreaks were quickly suppressed, and the Russians returned to the talks on January 7, 1918.

As Trotsky saw it, the Bolsheviks faced three choices, all bad. They could continue to defy the Germans, risking the almost certain conquest of Russian lands and the overthrow of their government; they could relent and cede to the Germans virtually all of Russia's western territories; or they could pursue what Trotsky called "neither war nor peace" while awaiting the revolution in Germany. The Germans suspected Trotsky of using the peace talks themselves to do just that, although he was more likely dragging out the proceeding to avoid any question that he was working in collusion with the German military. Such caution was wise, given the means by which he and Lenin had arrived back in Russian from their foreign exile. The Bolsheviks were always a suspicious lot, shrewd and ruthless, none more so than the head of the CHEKA, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, perhaps at the time the most ruthless of them all. It was folly to give such a man, searching for subversives and seeing sedition everywhere, the slightest cause for doubt.

Meanwhile, as Trotsky bode his time, the Germans and Austrians concluded the *Brotfrieden*, or "bread peace," with representatives of the Ukraine, a hotbed of White Army activity. When the Red Army fought its way into the region, the German high command, weary in any case of Trotsky's long-winded rhetoric, broke off the conference and resumed hostilities against Russia on February 18, 1918. The French ambassador immediately offered the Bolsheviks all the aid they could use if they would fight the Germans.

But Lenin—his country's economy in tatters, his party menaced by factionalism, his people engaged in civil war—ordered an immediate capitulation. The Germans now pressed even harsher terms on the Bolsheviks, but Lenin's government yielded to the new demands et alia. On March 3 the Bolsheviks signed. The Romanians, always under Russian domination, made peace on the 5th. The newly independent Fin-

land signed a separate treaty with Germany on the 7th.

By the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia delivered Poland, Lithuania, the Baltic Provinces, Finland, and the Ukraine to Germany, either to occupation or into the hands of puppet governments. The Bolsheviks signed away 34 percent of Russia's population, 32 percent of Russia's farmland, 54 percent of Russia's industrial plant, 89 percent of Russia's coal mines, and virtually all of Russia's cotton and oil. Article 1 of the treaty established the cessation of the "state of war," and Article 2, without naming names, quickly sought to neutralize the spread of revolution:

#### ARTICLE II

The contracting parties will refrain from any agitation or propaganda against the Government or the public and military institutions of the other party. In so far as this obligation devolves upon Russia, it holds good also for the territories occupied by the Powers of the Quadruple Alliance.

Article 3 summarily proclaimed the redrawn map of eastern Europe:

#### ARTICLE III

The territories lying to the west of the line agreed upon by the contracting parties which formerly belonged to Russia, will no longer be subject to Russian sovereignty; the line agreed upon is traced on the map submitted as an essential part of this treaty of peace (Annex I). The exact fixation of the line will be established by a Russo-German commission.

No obligations whatever toward Russia shall devolve upon the territories referred to, arising from the fact that they formerly belonged to Russia.

Russia refrains from all interference in the internal relations of these territories. Germany and Austria-Hungary propose to determine the future status of these territories in agreement with their population.

Appendix 1 to the treaty spelled out the new geography in detail:

#### APPENDIX I, PROVIDED FOR IN ARTICLE III OF THE TREATY OF PEACE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE CENTRAL POWERS, OF 3 MARCH, 1918

The line prescribed in Article III of the peace treaty with Russia, which in the west runs along Russian sovereignty, passes through the islands of Dago and Worms, between Mohn and the mainland, *between the islands Runo and Kuno*, and in segmental curve passing through the bay of Riga, reaches the mainland slightly to the northwest, [northeast] of the mouth of the Livonian Aa, then in continuation of the curve it passes around Riga and to the east of Uxkull (Oger Galle), crosses the Duna (Dvina). Then it follows the course of the Duna to the east of Dwinsk (Dunaberg) to the place where ended the former Courland frontier, almost to Druja, and from this place it extends in

a straight line *southwest crossing Strusty Lake* to the southern part of Lake Driswjaty, leaving the locality Driswjaty itself to the east of the line.

From here the line bends in a south-southwest direction close to *Mjelengjany on the German side*. The localities Widsy and Tweretsch remain east of the line. It crosses the railway line from Swenziany to Lyntupy upon midway. The line then passes along a stream by the localities Michalischki and Gerwjany, both of which are left to the west of the line, *along the rivers Oschmjanka and Loscha*. The line itself in manifold windings reaches the railway from Wilna to Smorgon, which it crosses somewhat west of Slobodka. Here the line bends, *running straight to Klewisa on the German side*, by Oschmjany and Dsewenischki on the east, and Geranony on the west, *along the rivers Opita and Gawja to the Niemen*.

The line now follows the downward course of the Niemen to a point above Mosty, and here it bends directly to the south into the river course of the Selwianka, which it follows to Roshany, which remains to the east of the line. From here it passes in a southwest direction (*along the Temra*) to the Ukrainian border where Prushany is reached. *From here it passes between Borowiri and Szolzhentiza, between Koski and Dobruschin, and west of the road from Prushany to Vidom, passes in straight line the bends of the river Liesna, leaving Vidoml on the Russian side. The line ends on the river Liesna north of Brest-Litovsk, Szmolienitza and Bobruschin remain to the east of the line, Riga, Jacobstadt, Dwinsk, Svenzjany, Vilna, Lida, Wolkowysk, and Konstantinow on the German side*

An absolutely exact determination of the line will be established through a Russo-German Commission.

Mutual evacuation of one another's territories was established in Article 4, and Article 5 mandated immediate Russian demobilization:

#### ARTICLE V

Russia will, without delay, carry out the full demobilization of her army inclusive of those units recently organized by the present Government.

Furthermore, Russia will either bring her warships into Russian ports and there detain them until the day of the conclusion of a general peace, or disarm them forthwith. Warships of the States which continue in the state of war with the Powers of the Quadruple Alliance, in so far as they are within Russian sovereignty, will be treated as Russian warships.

The barred zone in the Arctic Ocean continues as such until the conclusion of a general peace. In the Baltic Sea, and, as far as Russian power extends within the Black Sea, removal of the mines will be proceeded with at once. Merchant navigation within these maritime regions is free and will be resumed at once. Mixed commissions will be organized to formulate the more detailed regulations, especially to inform merchant ships with regard to restricted lanes. The navigation lanes are always to be kept free from floating mines.

Brest-Litovsk also obligated Russia to conclude peace with the Ukrainian People's Republic (with which Austria and Germany had concluded a treaty in February), and by Article 9, all signatories renounced "compensation for their war expenses." A complex series of appendixes and subappendixes defined virtually all aspects of relations between Germany and Russia, ranging from commerce to "quarantine regulations against epidemic diseases" (a pressing concern in 1918, when the great influenza pandemic was just beginning to sweep Europe). The two nations had little time in which to exercise their new relations, however, before the armistice that ended World War I specifically nullified the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

## Consequences

With Russia out of the war, the Central Powers were no longer fighting on two fronts, and Germany was free to concentrate all of its forces in the west. Both the economic gains in the east realized by the treaty and the new maneuverability it afforded cheered the Germans to believe they might achieve victory before the Americans arrived on the Continent in force. But in the event, the Germans did not take full advantage of Brest-Litovsk. They left roughly a million men, some 60 divisions, in the east in order to intimidate the Ukrainians into relinquishing foodstuffs, to pursue the German political agenda in the Baltic, and to make sure the Bolsheviks complied with the agreement.

Still, Brest-Litovsk almost certainly would have changed the outcome of the war, had the United States not become an "associated" power of the Allies and spent so freely of its money, material, and men. Even as it was, the treaty enabled Germany to unleash a massive offensive during 1918, which put American forces in the thick of some of the most savage fighting of the war.

If the Germans did not trust the Bolsheviks, neither did Russia's former allies. Not a few on the left in London, Paris, and Washington sympathized with the Bolshevik cause or believed Lenin would bring some efficiency to his troubled country, at least compared to the czar. There was talk among the French and the English of supporting various of the factions forming within the party. Then the German advance into Russia in February (after it had called off the conference with Trotsky in midsentence) caused the Allied diplomatic missions to panic and flee Petrograd for remote Vologda.

There they waited to see which direction Lenin and Trotsky would take, and Brest-Litovsk gave them their answer. News of Brest-Litovsk was received as an unparalleled disaster by the beleaguered Allies, who felt they now had to consider intervention in Russia. If they could hook up with the White nationalists, they

reasoned, they might be able to reopen the eastern front and thus save their own disgruntled troops the full wrath of the German army in the west. Then there was all the Allied matériel stacked up in Russian ports—nearly 20 tons of supplies in Archangel alone—just waiting for seizure by the Germans or the Bolsheviks. The Allied plans were to take those supplies and distribute them to any Russians they could find still willing to fight Germans.

In short, when Bolshevik Russia signed a separate peace with Germany at Brest-Litovsk, the Allies sent troops to invade Russia from the east in support of the Whites. In March, the month the treaty was signed, an Anglo-French expedition docked at Murmansk. In April the Japanese, seeking an imperial foothold on the Asian mainland, used the treaty as an excuse to seize and occupy Vladivostok. In June an American cruiser and 150 marines joined the English and French forces at Murmansk. In August another Anglo-French expeditionary force occupied Archangel, this one also to be joined by the Americans, five thousand of them under British command arriving in September.

Hitherto, Comrade Lenin had gone out of his way to check—and even punish—Dzerzhinsky-inspired excesses. That did not mean there was no CHEKA brutality, no summary executions, but as of Brest-Litovsk the Bolshevik tribunals had yet to deliver a death sentence. That changed with the Allied invasions. On June 18, 1918, the Bolsheviks handed down their first death sentence. A month later to the day, the local soviet in Ekaterinburg took the czar, his empress, and his heirs down into a dingy basement and shot them dead. That same month, August, the CHEKA arrested two hundred British and French residents of Moscow, stormed their consulates, and murdered the British naval attaché.

In Paris and in London, the Bolsheviks were now considered thugs or bandits or German agents, but in the Balkans their revolution had become an inspiration. Even moderates were won over to the cause of independence from the Great Powers. As men like the Czechs' Tomáš Masaryk, the Slovaks' Edvard Beneš, the Poles' Józef Piłsudski set up rump national governments, they joined for the time being the side offering them the best deal, but they had their eyes on the future. As soon as Hapsburg authority collapsed or the war ended, these de facto governments would be ready to assume control of successor states, which would greatly increase the headaches at the Paris Peace Conference. When the armistice came, Germany played the other side of the Bolshevik card in order to gain better peace terms, raising the specter of international revolution—"Bolshevism"—against which it might serve as a bulwark. The Germans won only minor concessions, but the Armistice, signed on November 11, 1918, did

renounce the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the TREATY OF BUCHAREST.

Nullifying Brest-Litovsk was not the same as negating the Bolshevik Revolution, however, nor did it solve the problem the Bolsheviks represented for the entente Great Powers at Versailles. For them, Wilson's views on national determination constituted a truly revolutionary idea with global, if unpredictable, implications. Lenin's ideas, embraced as an alternative to Wilsonianism by some of the lesser participants, were simply off the map. France's paranoia at the conference about a future German threat sprang in no small measure from the erasing of Romanov Russia as a player in the European balance of power. After Brest-Litovsk, Anglo-French policy had turned vehemently anti-Bolshevik, and now Georges Clemenceau negotiated for a cordon sanitaire in eastern Europe intended to check the potential of both German and Bolshevik expansion. Lenin, still in need of nothing so much as time to consolidate Bolshevik power, delayed his summons to European Socialists to form a Third International (the Comintern) in hopes of opening negotiations with the West in Paris and relieving Allied pressure on the Russian civil war. Thus, at the conference, dealing with the Russian question became at least as important as punishing Germany.

Just as the peace conference participants decided amongst themselves to make some initiative toward Russia, Lenin—disheartened by the snarled diplomacy that was clearly widening the gap between the two sides—finally issued his call on January 15, 1919, for an international meeting of communists. To the Allies the move made Lenin seem intent on remaining an international outlaw, calling for the utter destruction of

those very powers with which he claimed he wanted to normalize relations. The Bolshevik reputation for deviousness was only made worse by the Comintern itself, founded on March 2, 1919. Imposing rigorous communist discipline and subordinating local parties to the will of Moscow, it created a schism between European socialists, with the majority rejecting Bolshevik tactics and Lenin's dictatorship.

The peace conference's inability to frame a common policy toward Lenin's regime meant that the civil war continued and that Russia's future was a military, and not a diplomatic, matter. The civil conflict was a grand, protean struggle stretching over five major theaters. When the Reds defeated General Feliks Kolchak's White Army in the summer of 1919, the Allies gave up the battle in north Russia and evacuated Archangel and Murmansk—after several clashes with Bolshevik forces—on September 30 and October 12, 1919, respectively. In October 1920 Lenin came to terms with the Poles, fixing the Russian-Polish border west of Minsk (which was far east of the Curzon Line proposed at the Paris peace talks) and freeing the Red Army to turn south and eliminate the last pockets of White resistance.

On October 25, 1922, the Japanese, under pressure from the United States, withdrew from Vladivostok, bringing all foreign intervention in Russia to a close. For Russia, five years after signing its separate peace with Germany, World War I was finally over. In the final count, Russia had lost Poland, Finland, the Baltic states, and Bessarabia, but the Bolsheviks had survived to inherit the remaining, and still vast, Russian Empire.

On December 30, 1922, they created the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.