

**GREAT WAR (1914-
1918): THE EASTERN
FRONT: TREATY OF
BREST-LITOVSK 1918**



GREAT WAR (1914-1918): THE EASTERN FRONT: TREATY OF BREST-LITOVSK 1918

Description

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, including a full text reading of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918), students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the provisions of the treaty, how the Germans forced the Russians into signing the treaty, and why Lenin and most of the Soviet leadership believed that peace at any cost was necessary.

Subjects

European History
World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- [Lenin's Mausoleum, Moscow](#)

Essential Questions

- What was the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk?
- What were its major provisions?
- Why were the Germans able to convince Russian representatives to accept such a harsh treaty?
- Why did Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders believe that peace at any cost was necessary?

Academic Summary

The Workers' and Peasants' Government, created by the revolution of October 24-25, and drawing its strength from the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies, proposes to all warring peoples and their governments to begin at once negotiations leading to a just democratic peace. A just and democratic peace for which the great majority of wearied, tormented and war-exhausted toilers and laboring classes of all belligerent countries are thirsting, a peace which the Russian workers and peasants have so loudly and insistently demanded since the overthrow of the Tsar's monarchy, such a peace the government considers to be an immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without the seizure of foreign territory and the forcible annexation of foreign nationalities) and without indemnities. The Russian Government proposes to all warring peoples that this kind of peace be concluded at once; it also expresses its readiness to take immediately, without the least delay, all decisive steps pending the final confirmation of all the terms of such a peace by the plenipotentiary assemblies of all countries and all nations. By annexation or seizure of foreign territory the government, in accordance with the legal concepts of democracy in general and of the working class in particular, understands any incorporation of a small and weak nationality by a large and powerful state without a clear, definite and voluntary expression of agreement and desire by the weak nationality, regardless of the time when such forcible incorporation took place, regardless also of how developed or how backward is the nation forcibly attached or forcibly detained within the frontiers of the [larger] state, and, finally, regardless of whether or not this large nation is located in Europe or in distant lands beyond the seas. If any nation whatsoever is detained by force within the boundaries of a certain state, and if [that nation], contrary to its expressed desire whether such desire is made manifest in the press, national assemblies, party relations, or in protests and uprisings against national oppression, is not given the right to determine the form of its state life by free voting and completely free from the presence of the troops of the annexing or stronger state and without the least desire, then the dominance of that nation by the stronger state is annexation, i.e., seizure by force and violence.

The government considers that to continue this war simply to decide how to divide the weak nationalities among the powerful and rich nations which had seized them would be the greatest crime against humanity, and it solemnly announces its readiness to sign at once the terms of peace which will end this war on the indicated conditions, equally just for all nationalities without exception. At the same time the government declares that it does not regard the conditions of peace mentioned above as an ultimatum; that is, it is ready to consider any other conditions, insisting, however, that such be proposed by any of the belligerents as soon as possible, and that they be expressed in the clearest terms, without ambiguity or secrecy. The government abolishes secret diplomacy, expressing, for its part, the firm determination to carry on all negotiations absolutely openly and in view of all the people. It will proceed at once to publish all secret treaties ratified or concluded by the government of landlords and capitalists ... All the provisions of these secret treaties, in so far as they have for their object the securing of benefits and privileges to the Russian landlords and capitalists -

which was true in a majority of cases - and retaining or increasing the annexation by the Great Russians, the government declares absolutely and immediately annulled.

... Our appeal must be directed to the governments as well as to the peoples. We cannot ignore the governments, because this would delay the conclusion of peace, a thing which a people's government does not dare to do but at the same time we have no right not to appeal to the peoples. Everywhere governments and peoples are at arm's length; we must, therefore, help the peoples to take a hand in [settling] the question of peace and war. We shall of course stand by our program of peace without annexations and without indemnities. We shall not relinquish [that program], but we must deprive our enemies of the possibility of saying that their conditions are different and that they do not wish, therefore, to enter into negotiations with us. No, we must dislodge them from that advantageous position by not presenting them our conditions in the form of an ultimatum.

For this reason we have included a statement to the effect that we are ready to consider any condition of peace, in fact, every proposal. Consideration, of course, does not necessarily mean acceptance. We shall submit [the proposals] for consideration to the Constituent Assembly, which will then decide, officially, what can and what cannot be granted. We have to fight against the hypocrisy of the governments, which, while talking about peace and justice, actually carry on wars of conquest and plunder. Not one single government will tell you what it really means. But we are opposed to secret diplomacy and can afford to act openly before all people. We do not now close nor have we ever closed our eyes to the difficulties. Wars cannot be ended by a refusal [to fight]; they cannot be ended by one side alone. We are proposing an armistice for three months - though we are not rejecting a shorter period - so that this will give the suffering army at least a breathing spell and will make possible the calling of popular meetings in all civilized countries to discuss the conditions [of peace].
Vladimir Lenin, speech to the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, October 1917

This war has long since ceased to be a defensive war for either side, if indeed it ever was that. If England seizes hold of the African colonies, Baghdad and Jerusalem, it is not a defensive war. And if Germany occupies Belgium, Serbia, Rumania, Poland and Lithuania and takes the Islands in the Moorsund [The Sound], it is not a defensive war but a struggle for the division of the world. This is now clearer than ever and we want no more part in this purely imperialistic war, where the wishes of the land-owning classes are quite openly paid for with the blood of the people. Our relationship with the imperialistic governments of both sides is the same, and we are no longer willing to shed our soldiers' blood for the interests of one side over the other. We are leading our army and our people out of the war, in anticipation of an imminent time when the oppressed peoples of all countries will take their fate into their own hands, in the way that Russian workers have done. Our soldiers, once farm workers, must return to the land, which the revolution has taken out of the hands of the landowners and placed into peasant hands, so that he can till the land peacefully this spring. Our industrial soldier must return to his workshop to produce weapons of production, rather than weapons of

destruction, and together with the farmer build a new socialist economy. We hereby notify all peoples and their governments of our intention to withdraw from the war. We issue the order to fully demobilize all armies in action against the armies of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey. It is our belief that other nations will soon follow our example. At the same time, we declare that the conditions proposed to us by the governments of Germany and Austria-Hungary are fundamentally inconsistent with the interests of all peoples. The workers of all nations will reject these conditions, including those of Austria-Hungary and Germany themselves.

Leon Trotsky, speech during the negotiations for the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, February 1918

Late October 1917...

After three long years of war, Russia was exhausted. Almost two million Russian soldiers were dead. Another two million were missing or prisoners of war. Five million had been wounded and countless others were beginning to experience what later generations would call "shell shock" or PTSD. During the war, over 12 million peasants and workers had been pressed into service. The economy was in chaos and people were starving. Tsar Nicholas II, last of the Romanov family, had been forced from power by a revolution in February, but the provisional government in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) was struggling to maintain control of a weary and angry populace. The war continued. More soldiers died for what to many seemed like a useless cause. Russians wanted peace at any cost.

Vladimir Lenin, a radical Marxist revolutionary and leader of a group known as the "Bolsheviks" answered their call. Promising "Peace, Land and Bread", Lenin organized a second revolution in late October and seized control from the provisional government. Immediately after they took power, the Bolsheviks contacted the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria) to discuss peace. After two months of negotiations, and with the German army threatening to march into Russia's heartland, the two sides signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. The treaty would be harsh. Under its terms, Russia lost about almost 40% of its European lands to Germany, including the Baltics, Russian Poland (part of the tsar's empire since 1795) and other large sections of Eastern Europe. Under a separate agreement signed in August 1918, Soviet leaders agreed to pay Germany reparations that would total six billion marks in gold, cash and commodities, a huge sum at the time (roughly equivalent to \$200 billion in US dollars today). It didn't matter. Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders felt like they faced no choice.

Russia's decision to get out of the war angered and dismayed their allies fighting on the Western Front. The German High Command's plan to win the war early in 1918 almost worked. German leaders recognized they didn't have enough troops left by 1917 to fight and win a two-front war. Lenin had been exiled from Russia after the Revolution of 1905 and was living in Zurich, Switzerland. Long believing the war to be an imperialist plot designed to keep the proletariat under control by having them fight each other under false nationalist pretenses, Lenin blamed both sides for the carnage, all the while continuing to write essays and newspaper articles calling for a Marxist revolution of the workers and an end to the war.

In late March the German High Command offered Lenin and other exiled revolutionaries passage through Germany to the Russian border. In exchange, the Germans expected Lenin to organize a second revolution. Once in power, the Bolsheviks were to end the war in the east, immediately freeing up German troops for

the final push and breakthrough in the west. Timing was critical. In April 1917, after sitting on the sidelines for almost three years, the United States had declared war on Germany. Small numbers (about 15,000) of American troops began arriving in France by that summer, and the Germans knew that many more would be on the western front by the following spring. Their only chance at winning the war was to achieve a breakthrough before the Americans could make a difference, and that meant getting Russia out of the war, putting Lenin and his radical Marxists in power. Their plan worked on the front end, but by the time German troops from the east arrived in France, Americans were pouring into the trenches at a rate of over 10,000 per day. It was too late.

The treaty of Brest-Litovsk was nullified by Germany's surrender a few months later. As part of the Versailles treaty, Germany was forced to renounce Brest-Litovsk and to pay the same kind of reparations to the western allies that had forced from Soviet Russia only months earlier. Eastern European lands in Poland and the Balkans that had been taken from Russia were declared independent, a decision that would lead to a period of mistrust and anger in Moscow (the new Russian capital after Brest-Litovsk).

Russia after Brest-Litovsk had its own problems. Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders recognized early in their rule that they needed to end the war with Germany in order to consolidate their own power in Russia itself. Russian anti-Bolshevik nationalists and conservatives (supported by many of empire's former allies, including Britain and the United States) waged a civil war against Lenin's leadership that rocked the country until the "reds" finally gained the upper hand in 1922. Russian territorial losses wouldn't be regained until late in the Second World War when the Soviet Army swept across Eastern Europe on its way to Germany.

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, including a full text reading of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918), students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the provisions of the treaty, how the Germans forced the Russians into signing the treaty, and why Lenin and most of the Soviet leadership believed that peace at any cost was necessary.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the provisions of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the Germans forced Russia into the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders believed that peace at any cost was necessary for Russia by 1917.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Should victors in a war be able to punish the losing nations? If so, should there be limitations on how much to punish, or should the winners simply be able to dictate whatever terms they choose to impose on the losers? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (20 min)
- Video – World War I: Eastern Front (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on the war on the eastern front of World War I and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, how the Germans were able to force the Russians to capitulate and who Lenin and many other Soviet leaders believed peace at any cost was necessary. (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay: Explain in detail the provisions of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, how the Germans forced the Russians into signing such a harsh treaty, and why Lenin and most of the Soviet leadership believed that peace at any cost was necessary.

Extension

On tour: Lenin's Mausoleum, Red Square, Moscow

While on tour, students in Moscow will visit Red Square and Lenin's Tomb. The Soviet leader suffered a series of strokes in 1922 that left him incapacitated. By March 1923, he was bed-ridden and unable to speak. He slowly withered away and died on 21 Jan 1924. His body was embalmed and preserved by Soviet scientists and he was put on display in Red Square (something that continues to this day). With the exception of when Lenin was moved to Siberia during World War II, the body has lay in state in Red Square for the last 70 years. When the Soviet Union fell in the early 1990s, there were discussions as to whether or not to bury Lenin in St. Petersburg (that was his wish), but Russian leaders ultimately decided to leave him in Moscow. According to an online poll of Russian citizens in 2011, 70% of those voting said that the former Soviet leader should be buried, and yet he remains in the Mausoleum. The Cold War may be long over, yet Lenin's Tomb continues to attract visitors from across the globe. Also on Red Square is the Lenin Museum (a branch of the State Historical Museum), where students can see for themselves many artifacts and personal items belonging to Lenin and other Soviet-era Bolsheviks.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/bl34.asp
Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (primary source) – full text from the Avalon Project at Yale. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.
- www.historyguide.org/europe/brest.html
Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (primary source) – short version that contains the major points.
- www.historyguide.org/europe/decreed.html
The Decree on Peace, November 1917 (primary source) – Lenin’s speech after the Bolsheviks came to power.
- www.pbs.org/greatwar/resources/casdeath_pop.html
WWI Casualty and Death Tables – PBS
- www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1917brest&Year=1917
The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (website) – from Soviet History. Concise explanation of the treaty. This site also contains images and a silent film (in Russian) on the treaty.
- moroshistory.wikispaces.com/TREATY+OF+BREST-LITOVSK
Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (website)
- www.historylearningsite.co.uk/treaty_of_brest-litovsk.htm
Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (website)
- russiasgreatwar.org/media/international/brest.shtml
The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (academic essay) – from John W. Steinberg, Professor of History at Georgia Southern University
- alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/treaty-of-brest-litovsk/
The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (website) – great basic information on the treaty, German motivations and why Lenin accepted it. Highly recommended for all students.
- www.yorku.ca/splekhan/docs/4280-5280/lecture_notes/Brest-Litovsk%20-%20Walsh.ppt
The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (powerpoint) – from Sergei Plekhanov, Associate Professor of Political Science, York University (Canada)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- classroomclips.org/video/4400
A Moment in Time: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (video). Excellent 4-minute video on the treaty. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijN9B-OpiYQ
Teacher Resource: World War I – The Eastern Front (video). This 40-minute video, put together by a high school teacher (from different sources) might be a bit too long for most in-class showings, but it is well done and very useful. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Brest-Litovsk
Treaty of Brest-Litovsk – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Front_\(World_War_I\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Front_(World_War_I))
Eastern Front (World War I) – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin
Vladimir Lenin – Wikipedia article

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia
Great War – Serbian Front: Austrian Ultimatum of 1914
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914
Great War – Lights Going Out in 1914
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-wilfred-owen
England and the Great War – Wilfred Owen: Dulce et Decorum Est
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918
England and the Great War – Armistice Day 1918
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-treaty-of-versailles
Great War – Treaty of Versailles 1919
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme
Great War – Battle of the Somme 1916
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles
Great War – France: Clemenceau
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916
Great War – Battle of Verdun
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914
Great War – First Battle of the Marne 1914
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan
Great War – Germany: The Schlieffen Plan
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918
Great War – Eastern Front: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918

Key Terms

- Bolsheviks
- Brest-Litovsk
- Eastern Front
- Great War
- Lenin
- Reparations
- Soviet
- Trotsky

