

SOURCE O

It is obvious that His Majesty and you do not realise what is going on here. One of the most terrible revolutions has broken out, which it will not be so easy to quell. The troops are completely demoralised; they not only disobey but murder their officers. Hatred of Her Majesty [the Tsarina] has reached extreme limits. I must inform you that what you propose is no longer adequate. Troops everywhere are joining the people and the Duma, and there is a definite, terrible demand for abdication.

A telephone conversation between one of the Duma's leaders and one of the Tsar's advisers in March 1917. The Tsar had just agreed to permit a new Duma government to be formed.

On 15 March, Nicholas finally decided to abdicate. His generals advised him that the situation was hopeless and that any attempt to put down the revolution using troops from outside the capital would only make matters worse. As his son Alexis was so young, he chose to give the throne to his brother Michael. But the time for monarchy was past. The people had decided that Nicholas would be the last Tsar. When moderates in the Duma spoke in favour of a constitutional monarchy, they were openly jeered.

So, on 14 March, the Duma announced the formation of a Provisional Government, which would rule until elections could be held for a new Assembly. The first Prime Minister was Prince Lvov and the government had members from several parties, including a Social Revolutionary, Kerensky, as Minister of Justice. It immediately announced a series of reforms, which transformed Russia overnight into one of the freest countries in the world. There was freedom of the press, the vote for all adults over 21, abolition of the death penalty and full civil rights for all regardless of religion.

The revolution seemed to have triumphed, but worries remained. How would the new government cope with the real problems of Russian society – the war, the land question, food supplies? And how would it deal with the power of the Petrograd Soviet, which had better claims to represent those who had really made the revolution – the workers and soldiers of Petrograd?

SOURCE P

The roof had already fallen in, the fire crackled between the walls, and red and yellow wisps like wool were creeping out of the windows, throwing a sheaf of paper ashes up into the black sky of the night. No one made any attempt to extinguish the fire. A tall stooping man in a shaggy sheepskin hat was walking about like a watchman. He stopped and asked in a dull voice, 'Well, it means that all justice is to be abolished, doesn't it? Punishments all done away with, is that it?' No one answered him.

The writer Maxim Gorky witnessed the events of the March revolution. Here he describes the burning of the Palace of Justice by the rioters.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why did revolution break out in March 1917?
- 2 Why was the Tsar so easily overthrown?
- 3 Read Source O.
What does this source tell you about
a the Tsar
b the Duma
during the March revolution?
- 4 Read Source P.
What does this source tell you about the nature of the March revolution?

How did the Bolsheviks gain power, and how did they consolidate their rule?

In the four years after the overthrow of the Tsar in March 1917, Russia suffered further revolution, civil war and widespread devastation. The result was the emergence of the world's first communist state. Under the leadership of Lenin, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in the revolution of November 1917. They then defeated their enemies in a bloody civil war that lasted until 1920. How did a small revolutionary socialist party manage to seize and hold on to power, when the great majority of the Russian people did not support it?

How effectively did the Provisional Government rule Russia in 1917?

The Provisional Government was intended to hold power only temporarily, until elections took place. Then a new assembly would decide Russia's future. But many important decisions could not wait for the elections.

- Russia was still at war. The strains this imposed had been a major reason for the Tsar's downfall. Would Russia make peace or fight on?
- In the countryside, the peasants were seizing landowners' estates and murdering those who resisted. Would the government approve land reforms to try and bring this anarchy to an end?
- The people in the cities did not have enough to eat. Would food supplies be restored?

The Provisional Government failed to deal with almost all the challenges it faced. It was a divided government, made up of members from several different parties. The middle-class Cadets wanted to restore order and create a parliamentary democracy. The socialists wanted to push the revolution further and transfer more land to the peasants. During its short life the government split several times as ministers quarrelled among themselves. In July, Kerensky replaced Lvov as Prime Minister. There were many other ministerial resignations and changes, which showed the government's divisions and weakened its authority.

The one major decision that the government did take was disastrous. It decided to continue the war. When Russia's armies were ordered to take the offensive in June, the soldiers' response was wholesale desertion and mutiny. Henceforth it was clear that Russia had lost the war against Germany. In many areas, the army ceased to offer any resistance to the German advance.

The Russian calendar

Until February 1918, Russia used the old calendar, which was thirteen days behind the rest of Europe. Then the new Bolshevik government decided to bring Russia into line. This means that alternative dates exist for events before the changeover. This book uses the new dates, but you might come across the alternatives elsewhere. This makes a particular difference with the second revolution of 1917, which is known either as the October or the November revolution.

SOURCE A

The Provisional Government has no real power of any kind and its orders are carried out only to the extent that the soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies permits it. The soviet controls the most essential levers of power, insofar as the troops, the railways, and the postal and telegraph services are in its hands. One can assert bluntly that the Provisional Government exists only as long as it is permitted to do so by the soviet.

From a letter written by a minister in the Provisional Government, March 1917.

QUESTION

Read Source A. Does this source prove that the Provisional Government never had a chance of success? Explain your answer.

Attempts were made to improve food supplies to the cities. Rationing was introduced, and the government established a monopoly over grain trading. But transport problems continued, and the peasants were reluctant to sell their grain for increasingly worthless money. As the winter of 1917 approached, Russia's cities faced food shortages again. Meanwhile, the government lacked the political will to deal with the land issue. Its policy was simply to leave the problem for the new Assembly.

The soviets

The re-establishment of the Petrograd Soviet was followed by the setting up of workers' and soldiers' soviets across Russia. The Petrograd Soviet co-ordinated the activities of the national soviet movement, and it soon became obvious that its authority over the working classes, coupled with the military force it possessed through its Order Number One, made it an alternative national government. Although at first it was prepared to work with the Provisional Government, it became increasingly hostile as it fell under the influence of revolutionary groups, particularly the Bolsheviks.

Proceedings of the Petrograd Soviet, to which there were often over a thousand delegates, were noisy, chaotic and unproductive. Its power was exercised through a small executive committee, which the Bolsheviks targeted for takeover. As the power of the Provisional Government ebbed away during 1917, so control of the soviet became more important. Whoever controlled the soviet could also control Russia.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What was the Provisional Government?
- 2 Why was it weak?
- 3 In what ways was the Petrograd Soviet more influential than the Provisional Government?

SOURCE B



A Russian soldier trying to stop colleagues from deserting in 1917.

The growing power of revolutionary groups

The Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (SRs) welcomed the March revolution because it offered the chance to improve the conditions of the workers and peasants. They were prepared to work with the Provisional Government, and some of them even served as ministers. The Bolsheviks, however, were more hostile, particularly after the return of Lenin (see page 192) from exile in April.

According to Lenin's *April Theses*, the Bolsheviks' must overthrow the government as soon as possible and seize power for themselves. They could then set up a socialist dictatorship. To bring this about, it was essential to gain control of the Petrograd Soviet. Some Bolsheviks disliked the idea of destroying the results of a revolution that had only just occurred, but they fell into line with Lenin's policy. The Bolsheviks' propaganda machine swung into action in support of the slogans 'All Power to the Soviets!' and 'Peace! Bread! Land!'

At first, the Bolsheviks were only a minority in the soviet. When an All-Russian Congress of Soviets was held in June, the Bolsheviks had fewer than half the delegates of either the Mensheviks or the Social Revolutionaries. However, the Bolsheviks were not tainted by co-operation with the Provisional Government, and as the weakness of the government became clearer, the Bolsheviks grew bolder.

The July Days

In July, demonstrations organised by the Bolsheviks turned into an uprising against the government. This took the Bolshevik leaders by surprise. Lenin was on holiday when the disturbances started, and could not make up his mind whether to try and seize power or not. Petrograd was entirely in the hands of rioting mobs, but without leadership they could achieve nothing. Lenin's hesitation gave the government time to move loyal troops into the city, and the 'July Days' came to a rapid end.

SOURCE C



Troops open fire on the crowds during the July Days.

The Kornilov affair

These developments were a setback to the Bolsheviks. Hundreds of them were arrested, and Lenin, whom the government had shrewdly accused of being a German spy, was forced into hiding in Finland. Yet they did no long-term damage to the Bolsheviks because the Provisional Government's fortunes continued to decline. In an attempt to restore discipline in the army, in July Kerensky appointed General Kornilov as commander-in-chief.

He promised Kornilov support in restoring the authority of officers over the ordinary soldiers. However, Kerensky soon began to have second thoughts, as this was bound to bring him into conflict with the soviets. On the other hand, Kornilov had powerful support among the middle and upper classes, who expected him to restore some control in Russia. On 8 September, Kornilov, assuming he had Kerensky's support, ordered his troops to occupy Petrograd, as a first step to breaking the power of the soviets. Kerensky had to choose whether to back this move or not. He lost his nerve and dismissed Kornilov from his command.

Kornilov decided to revolt against Kerensky's government, but he had no chance of success. His troops had no enthusiasm for overthrowing the soviets, and were easily persuaded by the Bolsheviks to abandon the attempt. The revolt collapsed with no fighting, but it revealed how totally the Provisional Government depended on the soviets for its survival. During the revolt, many Bolshevik leaders were released from gaol as part of the soviets' preparation to resist an attack by Kornilov's men. It was clear that the Bolsheviks had most influence over the soldiers and workers who would have done the fighting. These 'Red Guards' were practically the Bolsheviks' private army.

By late September, the soviets in most major cities, including Petrograd and Moscow, were in Bolshevik hands. Now it was just a matter of selecting the most favourable moment for a takeover of government. Under Trotsky, one of Lenin's closest colleagues, the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet was actively planning to seize power.

A Provisional Government poster. It shows a Russian soldier backed by workers and soldiers in a heroic continuation of the war.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why did the revolutionary groups become stronger after the March revolution?
- 2 What effect did
 - a the July Days
 - b the Kornilov affairhave on the fortunes of the Bolsheviks?
- 3 Look at Source D. Why do you think the Provisional Government published this poster?

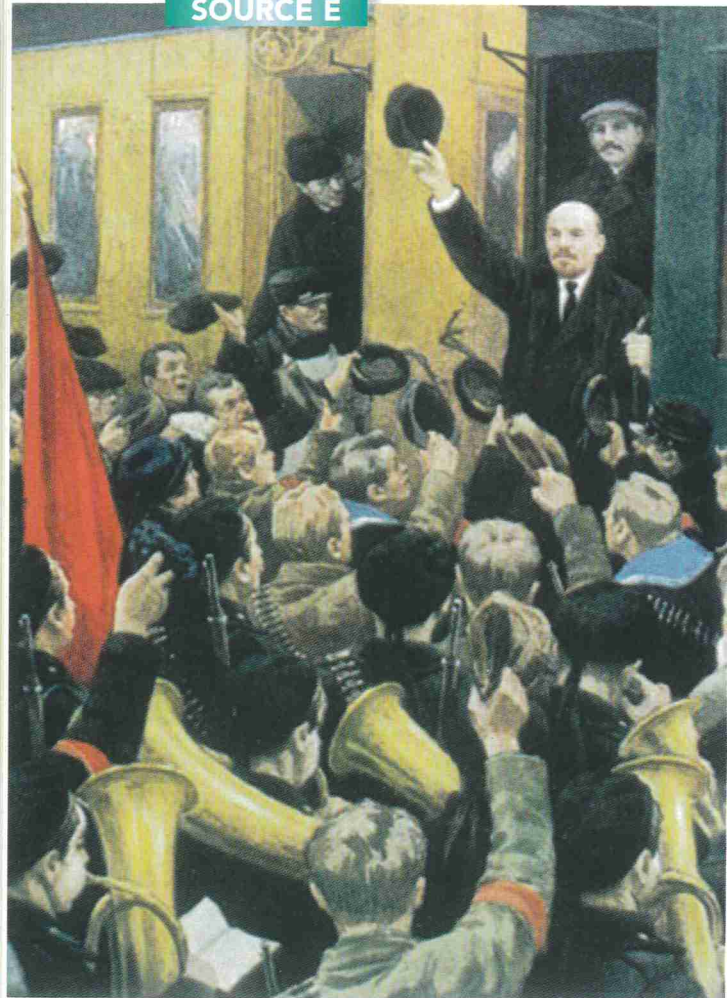


Why were the Bolsheviks able to seize power in November 1917?

By mid-October 1917, Lenin's main concern was to ensure that, when Kerensky's government collapsed, the Bolsheviks would take over. Moderate groups like the Mensheviks still had influence in the Petrograd Soviet. However, Lenin believed that if the Bolsheviks could seize power by force, the other groups would not have the courage to fight them. Lenin returned from hiding in Finland, and took control of the Bolsheviks' preparations. The decision was taken to stage an armed uprising, but no date was fixed.

Meanwhile, Kerensky seemed as out of touch with reality as the Tsar in his last days. He ordered the Petrograd garrison to the front, to take part in the fighting against the Germans. The soldiers had no

SOURCE E



Lenin

Lenin was born Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov in 1870, but later changed his name to avoid arrest by the Tsarist police. Lenin's background was not working class, but he was attracted to radical politics from a young age, and was expelled from university for taking part in student protests. His brother was executed for his part in a plot to assassinate Tsar Alexander III.

Lenin spent some time in internal exile in Siberia, then left Russia for western Europe, where he developed the revolutionary ideas that were later known as Marxism-Leninism. Marx had taught that once industrial capitalism had developed, workers would be exploited by their bosses and would rise up in a class struggle against them. But Lenin believed that a party of determined revolutionaries could seize power and introduce communism. After the split of the Social Democrats in 1903, Lenin was one of the most important leaders of the Bolsheviks. He returned to Russia too late to take part in the revolution of 1905 and was forced back into exile in Switzerland, where he remained until 1917. Then, after the March revolution of 1917, the Germans helped him to return home. They hoped he would weaken Russia's war effort. Lenin was smuggled across Germany on a train, reaching Petrograd in April.

Lenin's great contributions to the Bolsheviks before 1917 were his intellectual leadership and his determination. He was a tireless propagandist, churning out dozens of books and articles, and founding *Pravda*, the Bolshevik Party newspaper. He was difficult and prickly towards those who disagreed with him. But nobody doubted his ability. His insistence on discipline and his refusal to compromise made the Bolsheviks the most formidable force in Russian revolutionary politics.

A painting showing Lenin addressing a crowd at Finland station in 1917.

SOURCE F



The defenders of the Provisional Government: the Women's Battalion outside the Winter Palace.

desire to sacrifice themselves, so they mutinied and declared themselves loyal to the Bolsheviks. On 3 November, Trotsky's Military Revolutionary Committee announced that it had taken command of the garrison. Lenin was still worried that the working classes of Petrograd would not support a Bolshevik takeover.

During 6–7 November 1917, Red Guards occupied government buildings throughout the city. Most citizens of Petrograd did not even notice that a revolution was taking place. Kerensky fled the city and the rest of the Provisional Government barricaded themselves in the Winter Palace. The palace was guarded by a few thousand soldiers, including young cadets and around 200 women soldiers, but they gradually slipped away. Late in the evening of the 6th, guns opened fire on the palace. Finally, around 2 a.m. on 7 November, Bolsheviks entered the palace and arrested the ministers inside. This event was later transformed by Bolshevik propaganda into an epic assault against determined defenders.

Their determination and the weakness of the Provisional Government had enabled the Bolsheviks to seize power. On hearing of the Bolsheviks' takeover, the Mensheviks and SRs in the Petrograd Soviet reacted just as Lenin had hoped. They walked out in disgust, leaving the Bolsheviks in total control. The way was clear for

Lenin to form a Bolshevik government. However, although the Bolsheviks controlled the capital, their authority was minimal in the rest of the country. In Moscow, loyalist troops fiercely resisted the takeover, and the city was not in Bolshevik hands for another ten days. Before long the Bolsheviks' enemies would begin to fight back, and then the true level of their support would become clear.

SOURCE G

We were under assault. Defence was useless. Victims would be sacrificed in vain. The door flew open. A soldier rushed in, his face excited, but determined. 'What does the Provisional Government command? Defend to the last man? We are ready if the Provisional Government so orders. All the entrances have been taken. Only these quarters are still guarded. What does the Provisional Government command?'

'Surrender!' we shouted. 'Hurry! Go and tell them! We want no blood! We surrender!'

The soldier left. The whole scene, I believe, took no more than a minute.

A member of the Provisional Government describes the surrender of the Winter Palace to the Bolsheviks.