5 1917: The October Revolution

POINTS TO CONSIDER

The important point to stress about the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 is that it was quite distinct in character and objective from the revolution that had preceded it eight months earlier. The February Revolution had been essentially the collapse of tsardom from within. The October Revolution was a seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party from the Provisional Government, which had replaced the tsar but had proved no more capable of successfully leading Russia in wartime than he had. To understand how this second revolution came about it is necessary to chart the principal developments that occurred in Russia in the period from February to October 1917.

KEY DATES IN 1917

3 March	New Provisional Government publicly declared.
4 March	Formal declaration of Romanov abdication issued.
14 March	Petrograd Soviet issued its *Address to the people of the whole world.*
3 April	Lenin returned to Petrograd after completing his journey across Europe in a sealed train under German protection.
4 April	Lenin issued his *April Theses*, rejecting Bolshevik support for the Provisional Government.
26 June	Major Russian offensive launched against Austro-German armies on the south-western front.
3–6 July	Failure of 'July Days' Bolshevik uprising against the Provisional Government.
6 July	Lenin fled from Petrograd.
8 July	Kerensky became prime minister.
18 July	Kornilov became commander-in-chief.
August	German advance threatened Petrograd.
26 Aug –1 Sep	Resistance of the Petrograd workers forced Kornilov to abandon his march on the city.
25 Sep	Bolsheviks gained a majority in Petrograd Soviet and elected Trotsky as chairman.
7 Oct	Lenin slipped back into Petrograd.
10 Oct	Bolshevik Central Committee committed itself to armed insurrection.
12 Oct	Petrograd Soviet set up Military Revolutionary Committee.
23 Oct	Kerensky moved against the Bolsheviks by attempting to close down *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*.

	Lenin instructed the Bolsheviks to begin the rising against Kerensky's government.
24 Oct	First session of the Congress of Soviets.
24–25 Oct	Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd.
25–26 Oct	Kerensky fled from Petrograd. Bolsheviks seized the Winter Palace.
26 Oct	Bolsheviks established *Sovnarkom*, with Lenin as chairman.
27 Oct	Lenin informed the Congress of Soviets that the Bolshevik-led Petrograd Soviet had taken power in their name.

1 The Dual Authority

KEY ISSUE Was the Provisional Government fatally weakened from the first?

The Provisional Government, led by Prince Lvov, was the old duma in a new form. When Milyukov, the foreign minister, read out the list of ministers in the newly-formed government someone in the listening crowd called out, 'Who appointed you?' Milyukov replied, 'We were appointed by the Revolution itself.' In that exchange were expressed the two besetting weaknesses of the Provisional Government throughout the eight months of its existence. It was not an elected body. It had come into being as a rebellious committee of the old duma, refusing to disband at the tsar's order. As a consequence, it lacked legitimate authority. It had no constitutional claim upon the loyalty of the Russian people and no natural fund of goodwill on which it could rely. It would be judged entirely on how well it dealt with the nation's problems.

The Provisional Government's second major weakness was that its authority was limited by its unofficial partnership with the Petrograd Soviet. It was not that the Soviet was initially hostile. Indeed, at first, there was a considerable degree of liaison between them. Some individuals were members of both bodies. For example, Alexander Kerensky, the SR leader, was for a time chairman of the Soviet as well as a minister in the Provisional Government. The Soviet did not set out to be an alternative government. It regarded its role as supervisory, checking that the interests of the soldiers and workers were fully understood by the new government. However, in the uncertain times that followed the February Revolution, the Provisional Government often seemed unsure of its own authority. Such diffidence tended to give the Soviet greater prominence.

There was also the impressive fact that the soviet pattern had spread widely in the aftermath of the February Revolution. Soviets soon appeared in all the major cities and towns of Russia. The soviets were to play an increasingly important role in the development of the Revolution, but in the early stages they were not dominated by the

Bolsheviks and so were not necessarily opposed to the Provisional Government. It was significant, however, that even before the Bolshevik influence became predominant, the ability of the Petrograd Soviet to restrict the Provisional Government's authority had been clearly revealed. In one of its first moves as an organisation it had issued its 'Soviet Order Number 1':

> The orders of the military commission of the state duma are to be obeyed only in such instances when they do not contradict the orders and decrees of the soviet.

In effect, this Order, which was printed in *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* on 2 March, declared that the decrees of the Provisional Government in regard to military affairs were binding only if they were approved by the Petrograd Soviet. It is a commonplace of history that unless a government has control of its army it does not hold real power. What Order Number 1 made clear was that the Provisional Government did not have such power. It had, therefore, to compromise with the Soviet. Between February and April this worked as a reasonably effective consensus, which allowed a series of important changes to take place. A number of factors helped this 'dual authority' to operate. One was the euphoria experienced in Petrograd in the weeks following the collapse of tsardom. There was a genuine feeling across all the political groups that Russia had entered a period of real freedom. This made co-operation between potentially conflicting parties easier to achieve.

There was also a general acceptance that the new liberty should not be allowed to slip into anarchy and so destroy the gains of the Revolution. This created a willingness to maintain state authority at the centre of affairs. Furthermore, at the beginning both the Provisional Government and the Soviet contained a wider range of political representation than was the case later. Moderate socialists had a bigger influence than the SRs or SDs in the first meetings of the Soviet, while all parties, apart from the Bolsheviks and the monarchists, were represented in the Provisional Government during its early weeks. As the year wore on and the problems mounted, the Provisional Government moved increasingly to the right and the soviet increasingly to the left. But before that shift occurred there had been considerable co-operation.

The fruits of this were shown in such measures as an amnesty for political prisoners, the recognition of trade unions, the introduction of an eight-hour day for industrial workers, the replacement of the tsar's police forces with a 'people's militia', the granting of full civil and religious freedoms, and a commitment to the convening of a constituent assembly. However, the agreed changes did not touch on the critical issues of the war and the land. It would be these that would destroy the always tenuous partnership of the dual authority, and it would be Lenin who would begin the process of destruction.

2 Lenin's Return in April

KEY ISSUE What impact did Lenin's return have on the situation in Petrograd?

Once the exiled Bolsheviks learned of Nicholas's abdication they rushed back to Petrograd. Those, like Stalin, who had been in Siberia were the first to return in March. Another group with Lenin at their head arrived from Switzerland in April. Lenin's return was a remarkable event. In the hope that the tsar's fall would be the prelude to the collapse of the Russian armies, the German government arranged for Lenin to return to Russia in a sealed train across occupied Europe. His German pass stated:

> The carriage will be granted extra-territorial rights. No control or examination of passports or persons may be carried out either on entering or leaving Germany. Persons will be allowed to travel in the carriage absolutely regardless of their political opinions or their attitude towards the question of the desirability of war or peace. As far as possible the journey shall be made without stops and in a through train. The *émigrés* may not be ordered to leave the carriage, nor may they do so on their own initiative. The journey may not be interrupted except in the case of technical necessity.

Lenin's wife, Krupskaya, recorded the event:

> The moment the news of the February Revolution was received, Ilyich [Lenin] was all eagerness to get back to Russia. As there were no legal ways of travelling, illegal ways would have to be used. But what ways? From the moment the news of the Revolution was received, Ilyich had no sleep. His nights were spent building the most improbable plans. Naturally the Germans gave us permission to travel through Germany in the belief that Revolution was a disaster to a country, and that by allowing emigrant internationalists to return to their country they were helping to spread the Revolution in Russia. The Bolsheviks, for their part, considered it their duty to bring about a victorious proletarian revolution. They did not care what the German bourgeois government thought about it.

Since the outbreak of war in 1914 Lenin's opponents had continually accused him of being a German agent. Their charge had weight. Between 1914 and 1917 the German Foreign Office had given regular financial support to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, in the hope that if they achieved their revolutionary aims they would pull Russia out of the war (see page 106). As Krupskaya observed, Lenin did not really care what the attitude of the Germans was. It just so happened that, for quite different reasons, what they wanted – the withdrawal of the Russian armies from the war – was precisely what he wanted. However,

it made no difference to anti-Bolsheviks that the German reasons were military and Lenin's were political. They considered the German government and the Bolshevik Party to be co-operating in a common cause, the defeat of Russia.

There is no doubting the great significance of Lenin's return to Petrograd in April 1917. Before then, the Bolsheviks had accepted the events of February, leading to the formation of the dual authority, as part of a genuine revolution. They had been willing to work with the other revolutionary and reformist parties. Lenin changed all that. In his speech on his arrival at Petrograd's Finland Station on 3 April, he declared that the February Revolution, far from giving Russia political freedom, had created a 'parliamentary-bourgeois republic'. He condemned the Provisional Government and called for its overthrow in a second revolution. The following day he issued his 'April Theses', in which he spelt out future Bolshevik policy.

Lenin insisted that the Bolsheviks abandon all compromise with other parties and work for the true revolution entirely by their own efforts. The role of the Bolsheviks was not to extend freedom to all classes, but to transfer power to the workers. This was a reaffirmation of his basic belief that only the Bolshevik Party represented the forces of proletarian revolution. Lenin had ulterior motives in demanding power for the soviets. Although he rejected much of what they had done, he saw the soviets as a power-base. In practice they had become an essential part of the structure of post-tsarist government. Lenin calculated that the soviets – the Petrograd Soviet in particular – offered his small Bolshevik Party the means by which it could obtain power in the name of the proletariat. The Bolshevik takeover of the soviets would be the prelude to Bolshevik takeover of the state.

Main points in Lenin's April theses

- February had not been a genuine class revolution but a palace *coup*, which had simply given authority to the bourgeoisie.
- The Soviet was the sole body with the right to govern.
- The Provisional Government was simply the old, class-ridden, duma in a new garb.
- It was the task of the Bolsheviks not to co-operate with the Provisional Government but to overthrow it.

The essence of Lenin's argument was summed up in a set of provocative Bolshevik slogans: 'Peace, Bread and Land' and 'All Power to the Soviets'. These proved to be more than slogans. They identified the basic problems confronting Russia: the war with Germany, the chronic food shortage, and the disruption in the countryside. It was the Provisional Government's failure to cope with these difficulties that was to bring about its collapse.

3 The Provisional Government

KEY ISSUES Was the Provisional Government's problem not that it lacked power but that it did not use the power that it had? How were the Bolsheviks able to survive their failure in the July Days?

From the outset, the position of the Provisional Government was precarious. The dominant problem was the war. For the Provisional Government after February 1917 there was no choice but to fight on. Unless it did so it would no longer receive the supplies and war-credits from the western allies on which it had come to rely. Tsardom had left Russia virtually bankrupt. No government could have carried on without large injections of capital from abroad. Foreign bankers were among the first to visit Russia after Nicholas's abdication to ensure that the new regime was committed to pursuing the war. The strain that this obligation imposed on the Provisional Government finally proved unsustainable. Its preoccupation with the war prevented it from dealing with Russia's social and economic problems. It was a paradoxical situation: in order to survive the Provisional Government had to keep Russia in the war, but in doing so it destroyed its own chances of survival.

The question of the war brought about the first serious rift between the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government. On 14 March the Soviet had issued an 'Address to the people of the whole world, declaring for peace without annexations or indemnities'. Nonsense was made of the government's acceptance of the 'Address' by the repeated assurances of Milyukov, the foreign minister, that Russia would continue to play its full military role as one of the allies. Late in April, a series of violent demonstrations occurred in Petrograd directed against Milyukov. These resulted in his resignation and that of Guchkov, the war minister, early in May. In the reshuffled cabinet, Kerensky become the war minister and places were found for leading Mensheviks and SRs. It was hoped that this apparent leftward shift of the Provisional Government would ease its relationship with the Soviet.

In fact, the opposite happened. The socialists in the government tended to become isolated from the Soviet. This was because in joining the government they had necessarily to enter into coalition with the Kadets, which opened them to the charge that they were compromising with the bourgeoisie. Lenin wrote of 'those despicable socialists who have sold out to the Government'.

Some individuals within the Provisional Government had misgivings about continuing the war, but at no time did the government as a body contemplate withdrawing from the war. This would have mattered less had the Russian armies been successful, but the military

situation continued to deteriorate, eroding such support as the government had initially enjoyed. Lvov stayed as nominal head of the government but it was Kerensky who increasingly became the major influence. As war minister, he urged that Russia should embrace the conflict with Germany as a struggle to save the Revolution, requiring the total dedication of the nation. He made a number of personal visits to the front to deliver passionate speeches to the troops. He later described his efforts: 'For the sake of the nation's life it was necessary to restore the army's will to die. "Forward to the battle for freedom. I summon you not to a feast but death." These were the words I used before the troops in the front-line positions.'

This attempt to turn the war into a revolutionary crusade took no account of the real situation. The fact was that Russia had gone beyond the point where it could fight a successful war. Yet Kerensky persisted. In June, a major offensive was launched on the south-western front. It failed badly. With their already low morale further weakened by Bolshevik subversion, the Russian forces were no match for the Germans, who easily repulsed them and inflicted heavy losses. Whole regiments mutinied or deserted. General Kornilov, the commander on the south-western front, called on the Provisional Government to halt the offensive and direct its energies to crushing the political subversives at home. This appeal for a tougher policy was taken up by the government. Lvov stood down as prime minister, to be replaced by Kerensky. Kornilov became commander-in-chief.

The government's troubles were deepened by events on the island of Kronstadt, the naval base situated fifteen miles west of Petrograd in the Bay of Finland. Sailors and workers there defied the central authorities by setting up their own separate government. Such developments tempted a number of revolutionaries in Petrograd into thinking that the time and opportunity had come for them to bring down the Provisional Government. The attempt to do so became known as 'The July Days'.

a) The July Days

By the summer of 1917 it did, indeed, seem that the government's authority was irreparably breaking down. The spread of soviets, worker-control of the factories, widespread seizure of land by the peasants, and the creation of independent national minority governments – most notably in the Ukraine – suggested that the Provisional Government was no longer in control of events. It was the Ukrainian question that helped to provoke the July Days crisis. When the Kadet ministers in the coalition learned in late June that a Provisional Government deputation in Kiev had offered independence to the Ukraine, they resigned, protesting that only a constituent assembly could properly decide such matters. This ministerial crisis coincided with large-scale street demonstrations in Petrograd. Public protests

were not uncommon; they had been almost a daily occurrence since February. But in the atmosphere created by the news of the failure of the south-western offensive and the government's mounting problems the demonstrations of early July turned into a direct challenge to the Provisional Government.

It is not entirely clear who initiated the rising of 3–6 July. A month before, at the first All-Russian Congress of Soviets, Lenin had declared that the Bolshevik Party was ready to take power, but the delegates had regarded this as rhetoric rather than a clear intention. It is also the case that there were SRs and other non-Bolshevik revolutionaries in the Soviet who for some time had been demanding that the Petrograd Soviet supersede the Provisional Government. Trotsky later referred to the July Days as a 'semi-insurrection' and argued that it had been begun by the Mensheviks and SRs. In saying this, he was trying to absolve the Bolsheviks from the blame of having started a rising that failed. The explanation offered afterwards by the Bolsheviks was that they had come heroically to the aid of the workers of Petrograd and their comrades-in-arms, the sailors of Kronstadt, who had risen spontaneously against the government. The opposite point of view was put at the time by Nikolei Chkheidze, the Menshevik chairman of the Soviet. He argued that the Bolsheviks, having been behind the rising from the beginning, later tried to disclaim responsibility.

The rising itself was a confused, disorderly affair. In the course of the three days the demonstrators fell out amongst themselves; those members of the Soviet who seemed reluctant to make a real bid for power were physical attacked. This disunity made it relatively easy for the Provisional Government to crush the rising. Troops loyal to the government were rushed from the front. They duly scattered the demonstrators and restored order.

While the origins of the July Days may have been uncertain, the results were not. The unsuccessful rising revealed a number of important facts: that the opposition forces were disunited, that the Bolsheviks were still far from being the dominant revolutionary party, and that the Provisional Government still had the strength to be able to put down an armed insurrection. This last revelation did much to raise the spirits of the Government and brought particular credit to Kerensky as war minister. Two days after the rising had been crushed he became prime minister. He immediately increased the pressure on the Bolsheviks. *Pravda* was closed down and many of the Bolshevik leaders, including Trotsky and Kamenev, were arrested. Lenin fled to Finland. Kerensky also launched a propaganda campaign in which Lenin and his party were branded as traitors and agents in the pay of the German high command. A fortnight after the July Days, the Bolshevik Party appeared to have been broken as a political force in Russia. What enabled the Bolsheviks to survive, as the next two

Photo of Lenin, clean-shaven and be-wigged, in hiding in Petrograd 1917. Throughout the period April–October 1917, Lenin went in constant fear of being arrested and executed by the Provisional Government. He adopted various disguises, kept continually on the move and frequently fled to Finland. Yet oddly, as Kerensky later regretfully admitted, the authorities made little concerted effort to capture their chief opponent. This raises the interesting question whether Lenin exaggerated, or the Government underestimated, his powers of disruption (see page 97).

sections show, was the critical misjudgements by the Provisional Government over the land question and the Kornilov affair.

b) The Land Question

Land-shortage had been a chief cause of peasant unrest since the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. The February Revolution had led the peasants to believe that they would be the beneficiaries of a major land redistribution. They had expected that the estates of the landlords would be appropriated and given to them. When this did not happen, the peasants in many parts of Russia took the law into their own hands and seized the property of local landlords. Disturbances in the countryside occurred daily throughout 1917. It would not be an exaggeration to describe this as a national peasants' revolt.

Neither the Provisional Government nor the Bolsheviks had a real answer to the land problem. The Provisional Government had set up a Land Commission with the object of redistributing land, but this body made little headway in handling a massive administrative task. It was doubtful, moreover, whether the Government's heart was ever really in land reform. The majority of its members came from the propertied classes. They were unlikely to be enthusiasts for a policy that would threaten their own position. They had supported the February Revolution as a political change, not as a social upheaval. They were quite willing for the estates of the fallen monarchy go to the peasants, but they had no intention of losing their own possessions in a general land redistribution. This had been the thrust of Lenin's assertion in the 'April Theses' that tsardom had been replaced not by a revolutionary but by a bourgeois regime.

Yet there was a sense in which the land issue was equally difficult for the Bolsheviks. As a Marxist party, they had dismissed the peasantry as, in Trotsky's words, 'the pack animal' of history, lacking true revolutionary initiative. By definition the proletarian revolution was an affair of the industrial working class. Lenin, on his return in April, had declared: 'It is not possible for a proletarian party to rest its hopes at this time on a community of interest with the peasantry'. However, faced with the fact of peasant land-seizures throughout Russia, Lenin was quite prepared to make a tactical adjustment. Appreciating that it was impossible to ignore the disruptive behaviour of four-fifths of the population, he asserted that the special circumstances of post-tsarist Russia had produced a situation in which the peasants were acting as a truly revolutionary force. This modification of Marxist theory thus allowed Lenin to add the Russian peasants to the proletarian cause.

'Land to the Peasants', a slogan lifted from the programme of the SRs, became the new Bolshevik catchphrase. What this meant in mid-1917 was that the Bolsheviks recognised the peasant land-seizures as a *fait accompli*. Lenin declared that what the peasantry had done was wholly in keeping with 'revolutionary legality'. This produced a con-

siderable swing to the Bolsheviks in the countryside. It had the further effect of splitting the SRs, a significant number of whom began to align themselves with the Bolsheviks. Known as Left SRs, they sided with the Bolshevik Party on all major issues.

c) The Kornilov Affair

In August, the Provisional Government became involved in the Kornilov Affair, a crisis that undermined the gains it had made from its handling of the July Days and allowed the Bolsheviks to recover from their humiliation. Parts of the story have been obscured by the conflicting descriptions later given by some of the participants, but there was little doubt as to the intentions of the chief figure in the episode. General Kornilov, the new commander-in-chief, was the type of right-wing army officer who had never accepted the February Revolution. He believed that before Russia could fulfil its patriotic duty of defeating Germany, it must first destroy the socialist enemies within. 'It's time to hang the German supporters and spies, with Lenin at their head, and to disperse the Soviet.'

By late August, the advance of German forces deeper into Russia began to threaten Petrograd itself. Large numbers of refugees and deserters flocked into the city, heightening the tension there and creating serious disorder. Kornilov declared that Russia was about to topple into anarchy and that the government stood in grave danger of a socialist-inspired insurrection. He informed Kerensky that he intended to bring his loyal troops to Petrograd to save the Provisional Government from being overthrown.

Accounts tend to diverge at this point in their description of Kerensky's response. Those who believe that he was involved in a plot with Kornilov to destroy the Soviet and set up a dictatorship argue that Kerensky had at first fully supported this move, and that it was only subsequently, when he realised that Kornilov was also intent on removing the Provisional Government and establishing military rule, that he turned against him. Other commentators, sympathetic to Kerensky, maintain that he had not colluded with Kornilov and that his actions had been wholly consistent. They also point to the fact that a special Commission of Enquiry into the affair in 1917 cleared Kerensky of any complicity. But however the question of collusion is decided, it was certainly the case that Kerensky publicly condemned Kornilov's advance. He ordered him to surrender his post and placed Petrograd under martial law. Kornilov reacted by sending an open telegram, declaring:

> People of Russia! Our great motherland is dying. I, General Kornilov declare that under pressure of the Bolshevik majority in the soviets, the Provisional Government is acting in complete accord with the plans of the German General Staff. It is destroying the army and is undermining the very foundations of the country.

In response Kerensky called on all loyal citizens to take up arms to defend the city. The Bolsheviks were released from prison or came out of hiding to collect the weapons issued by the Provisional Government to all who were willing to fight. By this strange twist in the story of 1917, the Bolsheviks found themselves being given arms by the very government they were pledged to overthrow. As it happened, the weapons were not needed against Kornilov. The railway workers refused to operate the trains to bring his army to Petrograd. When he received the news of this and of a mass workers' militia formed to oppose him, Kornilov abandoned the advance and allowed himself to be arrested.

It was the Bolsheviks who gained most from the failure of Kornilov's attempted *coup*. They had been able to present themselves as defenders of Petrograd and the Revolution, thus wiping out the memories of the debacle of the July Days. Despite the obvious readiness of the people of Petrograd to resist a military takeover, the Kornilov episode did not strengthen the position of the Provisional Government. Kerensky later admitted that the affair had been 'the prelude to the October Revolution'. It had further exposed the political weakness of the Government and had shown how vulnerable it was to military threat.

4 The October Revolution

KEY ISSUES How vital was Lenin to the success of the Bolshevik rising?
Were the Bolsheviks pushing against an open door in October 1917?

The measure of the Bolsheviks' recovery was soon apparent. By the middle of September they had gained a majority in both the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets. However, this should not be seen as indicating a large swing of opinion in their favour, but rather as a reflection of the changing character of the soviets. In the first few months after the February Revolution the meetings of the soviets had been fully attended. Over 3,000 deputies had packed into the gatherings of the Petrograd Soviet at the Tauride Palace. But as the months passed, enthusiasm waned. By the autumn of 1917 attendance was often down to a few hundred. This was a major advantage to the Bolsheviks. Their political dedication meant that they continued to turn up in force while the members of the other parties attended irregularly. The result was that the Bolshevik Party exerted an influence out of proportion to its numbers. This was especially the case in regard to the composition of the various sub-committees.

Broadly what happened in Petrograd following the Kornilov Affair

was that the Petrograd Soviet moved to the left while the Provisional Government shifted to the right. This made some form of clash between the two bodies increasingly likely. Lenin put it as a matter of stark choice: 'Either a soviet government or Kornilovism. There is no middle course.' From his exile in Finland, Lenin constantly urged his party to prepare for the immediate overthrow of Kerensky's government. He claimed that his earlier estimate of what would happen had proved wholly correct: that the Provisional Government, incapable of solving the war and land questions, would become increasingly reactionary while the soviet would become the only hope of true revolutionaries. He further argued that the Bolsheviks could not wait; they must seize the moment while the government was at its most vulnerable. In a sentence that was to become part of Bolshevik folklore, Lenin wrote on 12 September: 'History will not forgive us if we do not assume power'.

Lenin's urgency arose from his anxiety in regard to two events that were due to take place in the autumn, and which he calculated would seriously limit the Bolsheviks' future freedom of action. One was the meeting of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets in late October; the other was the November election for the Constituent Assembly. He was convinced that the Bolsheviks would have to take power before these events occurred. If the Bolsheviks, under the banner 'All Power to the Soviets', could topple the Provisional Government before the congress met they could then present their new authority as a *fait accompli* which the Congress would have no reason to reject. The elections to the Constituent Assembly presented a different problem. The Assembly was the body on which all progressives and reformers had set their hopes. Once it came into being its moral authority would be difficult to challenge. Lenin told his party that since it was impossible to foretell how successfully they would perform in the elections, they would have to be in power before the results were announced. This would provide the Bolsheviks with the authority to undermine the results should they prove unfavourable.

At the same time as Lenin pressed this policy upon his party, Kerensky tried to make his government less exposed by announcing plans for a 'Pre-Parliament', a body intended to fill the interim before the Constituent Assembly came into being. Lenin condemned the Pre-Parliament as a manoeuvre to strengthen the bourgeoisie's grip on the government. Acting on his orders, the Bolshevik members of the Soviet who were entitled to attend the Pre-Parliament first derided it and then walked out.

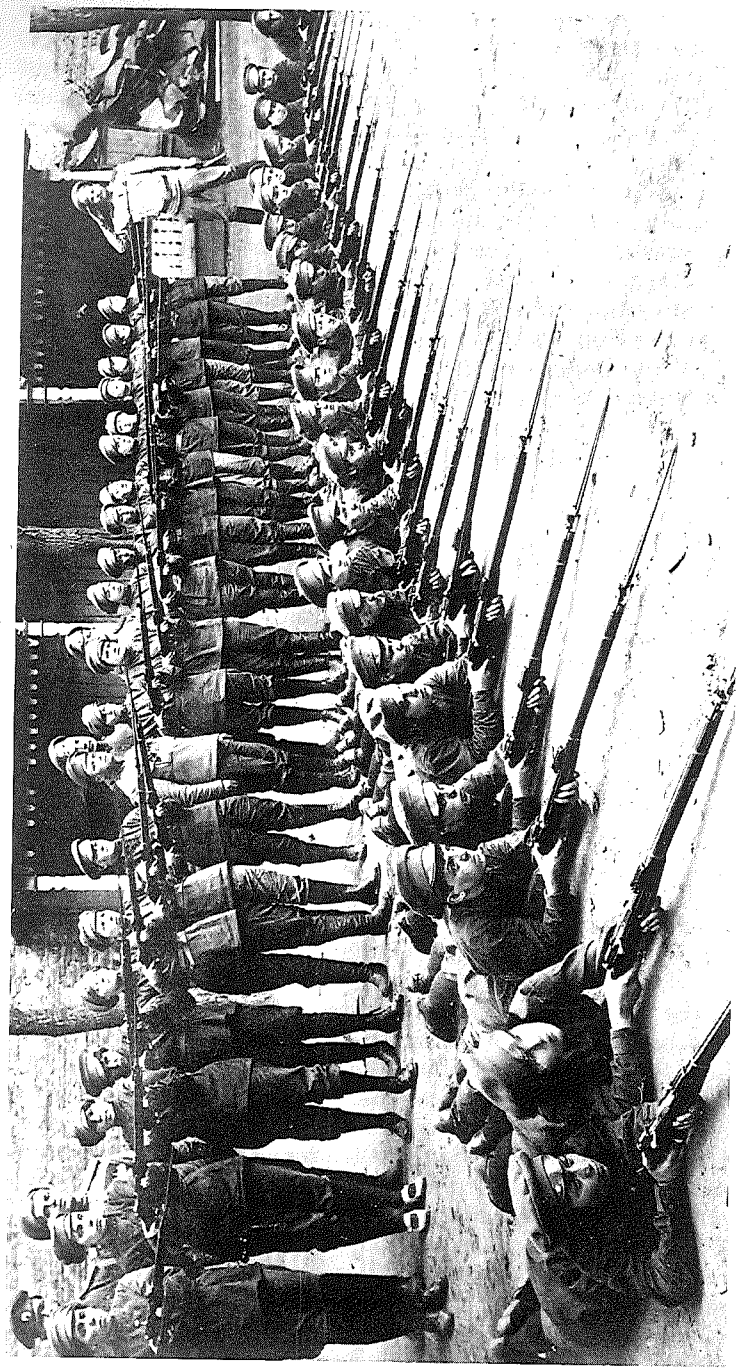
Despite the power with which Lenin put his arguments to his colleagues, there were Bolsheviks on the Central Committee of the party who doubted the wisdom of striking against the Provisional Government at this point. In an effort to enforce conformity, Lenin slipped back into Petrograd on 7 October. His personal presence stiffened Bolshevik resolve, but did not produce total unity. During the

next two weeks he spent exhausting hours at a series of Central Committee meetings trying to convince the waverers. On 10 October, the Central Committee pledged itself to an armed insurrection, but failed to agree on a specific date. In the end, by another quirk of fate, it was Kerensky and the government, not the Bolsheviks, who initiated the actual rising.

Rumours of an imminent Bolshevik *coup* had been circulating for some weeks, but it was not until an article, written by two members of the Bolshevik Central Committee, appeared in a revolutionary journal that the authorities felt they had sure proof. The writers, Zinoviev and Kamenev, argued that it would be a mistake to attempt to overthrow the government in current circumstances. Kerensky interpreted the article as indicating that a date had been set. Rather than wait to be caught off guard, he ordered a pre-emptive attack on the Bolsheviks. On 23 October, the Bolshevik newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, were closed down by government troops and an attempted round-up of the leading Bolsheviks began. The Bolsheviks no longer had a choice; Lenin ordered the planned insurrection to begin.

That there was a plan at all was the work not of Lenin but of Trotsky. While it was Lenin who was undoubtedly the great influence behind the October Rising, it was Trotsky who actually organised it. The key to Trotsky's success in this was his chairmanship of the Petrograd Soviet, to which he had been elected in September. As the dominant member of the three-man Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) of the Soviet, it was Trotsky who had drafted the plans for the overthrow of the Provisional Government. When Lenin gave the order for the uprising to begin, it was Trotsky who directed the Red Guards in their seizure of the key installations and vantage points in Petrograd.

In the three days (25–27 October) that it took for the city to fall under Bolshevik control there was remarkably little fighting. There appears to have been no more than five fatalities during the whole episode. The simple fact was that the Provisional Government had hardly any military resources on which to call. Desertions had reduced the Petrograd garrison to a few loyal officer-cadets, a small group of Cossacks, and a battalion of women soldiers, known as the 'Amazons'. Faced by the Red Guards, the Cossacks deserted, while the cadets and the Amazons were persuaded that attempts to resist would be futile. When the Red Guards approached the Winter Palace, which housed the Provisional Government, they met minimal resistance. The sounding of its guns by the cruiser *Aurora*, moored in the River Neva, whose crew had declared their support for the Soviet, convinced the remaining members of the government that their position was hopeless. As many as were able escaped unnoticed out of the building. Kerensky himself, having earlier left the city in a vain effort to raise loyal troops, fled to the American embassy and subsequently to the USA.



A contingent of Amazons being trained in 1917. Kerensky had specially recruited these female soldiers as an example of the fighting spirit of the Russian people.

On the night of 27 October, Lenin informed the somewhat bewildered delegates to the Congress of Soviets, who had begun their first session that evening, that the Bolshevik-led Petrograd Soviet had seized power in their name. He then proceeded to read out the list of commissars (ministers) of the new revolutionary government (*Sovnarkom*). His own name was at the head as chairman. The right-wing SRs and the Mensheviks walked out, protesting that it had been a Bolshevik *coup*, not a soviet assumption of power. Trotsky jeered after them that they and their kind had 'consigned themselves to the dustbin of history'. Lenin then announced to the Bolsheviks and the SRs who remained that they would now proceed 'to construct the towering edifice of socialist society'.

The failure of the Provisional Government to rally effective military support in its hour of need was symptomatic of its much deeper political failure over the previous eight months. It was not that the Provisional Government was bitterly rejected by the Russian people. It was more a matter of its inability to arouse genuine enthusiasm. Kerensky's government had come nowhere near to solving Russia's problems or satisfying its needs. Its support had evaporated. Economically incompetent and militarily disastrous, the Provisional Government was not considered worth struggling to save. In October 1917, the Bolsheviks were pushing against an already open door.

5 Reasons for Bolshevik Success

KEY ISSUE Why was it the Bolsheviks, and not any of the other parties, who took power in October 1917?

Trotsky later ascribed the success of the Bolshevik rising to three factors: 'the refusal of the Petrograd garrison to side with the government, the creation of the MRC, and the infiltration by Bolshevik commissars of the key divisions of the army'. These, he wrote, 'completely isolated not only the general staff of the Petrograd zone, but also the government'.

An obvious question is why none of the other parties was able to mount a serious challenge to the Bolsheviks for the leadership of the Revolution between February and October. One answer is that they had all accepted February as a genuine revolution. Consequently it made sense for them to co-operate with the Provisional Government, which claimed to represent the progressive forces in Russia. The result was that the supposedly revolutionary parties were prepared to enter into coalition with the Kadets, the dominant party in the government, and await the convening of the Constituent Assembly. This

gave the Bolsheviks a powerful propaganda weapon, which Lenin exploited. He charged the socialists with having sold out to the bourgeoisie.

Another explanation is that the other parties were weakened by their support for the war. None of them opposed the continuation of the struggle against Germany with the consistency that Lenin's Bolsheviks did after April 1917. The non-Bolshevik parties regarded it as Russia's duty to defeat the enemy. The SRs, the Mensheviks and, indeed, some Bolsheviks believed wholeheartedly in a revolutionary war against bourgeois Germany. On the left of the Menshevik Party there was a vociferous wing of international revolutionaries who saw the war as the ideal opportunity for beginning the worldwide class struggle.

As committed Marxists, the Mensheviks had good reason for co-operating with the Provisional Government rather than opposing it. They saw the February Revolution as marking a critical stage in the class war, when the bourgeoisie had overthrown the old feudal forces represented by the tsar. This stage, as Marx had argued, was the necessary prelude to the revolution of the proletariat. However, the Mensheviks judged that since Russia did not yet possess a proletariat large enough to be a truly revolutionary force, it was their immediate task to align themselves with the other parties in a broad front to work for the consolidation of the bourgeois revolution before turning to the ultimate objective of the proletarian rising. One of the interesting paradoxes of the Russian Revolution is that, in strictly theoretical terms, the Mensheviks were always more consistent in their Marxism than were Lenin and his Bolsheviks.

In this context it is important to remember the lack of a tradition of legitimate party politics in tsarist Russia. With the fall of tsardom, the various parties found themselves for a brief, heady period free to advance their views. But there were no accepted rules of political conduct which they could follow. The arts of negotiation and compromise, which had developed in more advanced political systems elsewhere, were unknown in Russia. In their absence, politics was reduced to a simple question of who could gain power and then assert it over others. Lenin expressed it in the simple formulation: 'who, whom?' Democracy did not enter into it. Power would go to the most flexible and the most ruthless party. The Bolsheviks under Lenin perfectly fitted this requirement. They were prepared to adjust to circumstance if the occasion demanded. Their land policy was evidence of this. But they never lost sight of their basic goal – the seizure of power.

This did not make their position unassailable; the near-fiasco of the July Days had shown how narrow the gap between success and failure could be. Nor can it be said that their takeover in October was inevitable – that depended as much on the weakness and mistakes of their opponents as upon their own resolution. Yet what is clear is that

none of the contending parties was as well equipped as the Bolsheviks to exploit the crises facing Russia in 1917.

Tseretelli, a Menshevik and a leading member of the Petrograd Soviet before its domination by the Bolsheviks, admitted: 'Everything we did at that time was a vain effort to hold back a destructive elemental flood with a handful of insignificant chips'. Struve, a liberal *émigré*, observed: 'Only Bolshevism was logical about revolution and true to its essence, and therefore in the revolution it conquered'. Milyukov, the Kadet leader, shared Struve's view of the Bolsheviks: 'They knew where they were going, and they went in the direction which they had chosen once and for all toward a goal which came nearer with every new, unsuccessful, experiment of compromise'.

Lenin's Bolsheviks were a new breed of politician: utterly self-confident, scornful of all other parties and ideas, and totally loyal to their leader. As Trotsky expressed it: 'The party in the last analysis is always right, because the party is the only historical instrument given to the proletariat to resolve its fundamental tasks'. Their ruthlessness did not guarantee their success, but it did mean that no other party could hope to gain or hold power unless it was able to overcome the challenge of these dedicated revolutionaries. In the event, none of the other parties was ever in a position to do this.

In assessing the reasons why the Provisional Government did not survive, it should be emphasised that it had never been meant to last. As its very title suggested, it was intended to be an interim government. Along with its partner in the dual authority, the Petrograd Soviet, its role was to provide a caretaker administration until an all-Russian Constituent Assembly was formed after the autumn election. The Assembly was the ultimate dream of all liberals and democrats; it would be the first fully-elected, nationwide, democratic parliament in Russia. All parties, including the Bolsheviks, were committed to it. As a consequence, the Provisional Government was always open to the charge that as an unelected, self-appointed body it had no right to exercise the authority that properly belonged to the Constituent Assembly alone. Such limited strength as the Provisional Government had came from its claim to be the representative of the February Revolution. Lenin had made it his task to undermine that claim.

One of the ironies of the situation was that both the Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks overestimated each other's strength, each delaying their moves against the other for fear of overplaying their hand. Historians have often wondered why the Provisional Government did not make a more sustained effort to destroy the Bolsheviks politically. It is true that some arrests were made, but the government's efforts at suppression were half-hearted and desultory. Sukhanov, a Menshevik eye-witness of the events of 1917, calculated that so limited was the Bolshevik military strength at the time of the October Rising that 'a good detachment of 500 men would have

been enough to liquidate Smolny [the Bolshevik headquarters] and everybody in it'. Trotsky agreed, but asked derisively where the Provisional Government was to get five hundred good men to support it.

For their part, the Bolsheviks miscalculated the strength and effectiveness of the Provisional Government. Lenin expected to be summarily shot if ever the government's agents found him. This was why he was either incognito or absent altogether from Petrograd for long periods during the critical months in1917. It says much for his forcefulness as party leader that despite this he continued to exercise a dominant influence over the actions of the Bolshevik Party. Trotsky later made an interesting assessment of the part played by Lenin in the October Revolution:

> Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, the October Revolution would still have taken place – *on the condition that Lenin was present and in command.* If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik party would have prevented it from occurring.[1]

However, most historians are now careful not to overstate Lenin's power to dictate events in 1917. In the standard Bolshevik version of what happened, Lenin was portrayed as having fulfilled his plans for revolution along the lines he had laid down in such writings as his 1902 pamphlet, *What Is To Be Done?* This had visualised the development of a tightly-knit, disciplined Bolshevik Party which would seize power in the name of the masses at the opportune moment (see page 40). Yet the structure and authority of his party in 1917 were markedly different from Lenin's 1902 model. The evidence of the many disputes within the Bolshevik ranks over policy between February and October suggests that they were by no means as disciplined or centrally-controlled as the party later claimed it had been.

Part of the explanation for this is that the composition of the party had changed in ways which Lenin and the Central Committee had not planned. After the February Revolution there had been a major increase in membership which the Central Committee had not wanted but which, in the mixture of post-Revolution enthusiasm and political confusion, they seemed unable to prevent. The following figures, calculated by Western analysts, are tentative, but they do indicate the remarkable transformation which the Bolshevik Party underwent in 1917:

Membership of the Bolshevik party in 1917

February	24,000
April	100,000
October	340,000 (60,000 in Petrograd)

Modern commentators view this influx of party members as an aspect of the general radicalisation of Russian politics that occurred as the Provisional Government got into increasing difficulties. What had helped to prepare the ground for the successful Bolshevik *coup* in October was the growth in the Petrograd factories of workers' committees which, while not necessarily pro-Bolshevik, were certainly not pro-government. One result of the anti-government agitation of these committees was that, when the open challenge to the Provisional Government came in October, Kerensky's desperate appeal for support from the people of Petrograd went unheeded.

Reference

1 Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Gollancz, 1985) p.899

Working on Chapter 5

This chapter attempts to explain the October Revolution by reference to the key developments between February and October 1917. Those months were a period of rapid and often dramatic change. Since effective analysis depends on sound chronology, it is important when studying 1917 to acquire an understanding of the order in which events occurred. The key dates at the start of the chapter should provide a useful base on which you can build your own framework.

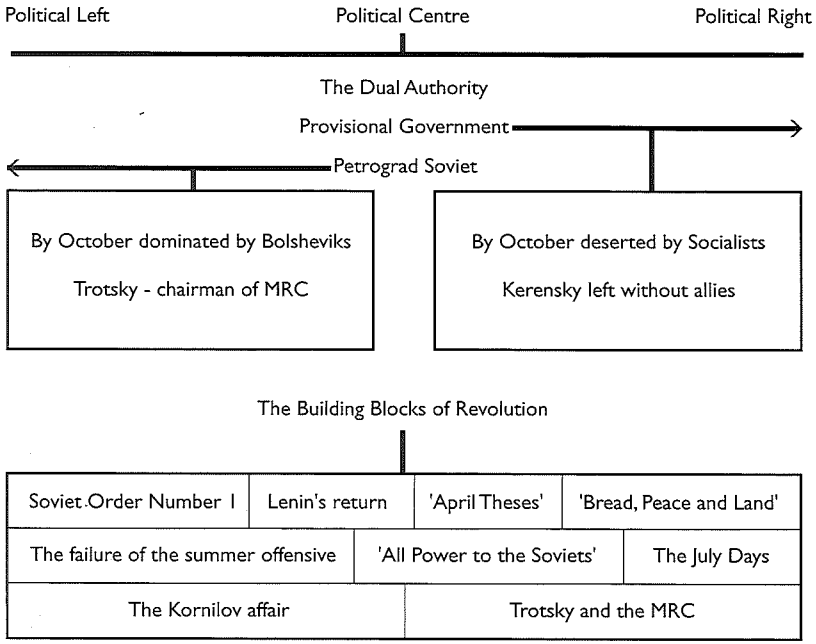
Answering structured and essay questions on Chapter 5

Examples of structured questions on the events of 1917:

1. Describe how Lenin's return to Petrograd in April 1917 altered the political situation there
2. Outline the main points in Lenin's April Theses
3. In what respects after April 1917 did the Bolsheviks differ from the other main political parties in Russia in their attitude towards the war with Germany?
4. Describe the difficulties encountered by Provisional Government between February and October 1917.
5. Describe the main steps by which the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917.

The importance of the October Revolution of 1917 makes it a rich vein from which essay questions are mined. There is one question that could be said to cover everything of importance: Why did the Provisional Government fail and the Bolshevik Party succeed in 1917? However, precisely because it does cover practically everything it is highly unlikely that it would ever be set as a single question. What needs to be done, therefore, is to frame a range of questions that each

Summary Diagram
The Political Shift in 1917



contribute to building an effective response to the larger question. Three main lines of approach may be suggested. These, while not touching on every possible question, do cover the essentials.

1. *The Provisional Government and its problems* – its uncertain status – its relations with the Petrograd soviet in the Dual Authority – the war question – the land and food problem – the July Days – the Kornilov affair.

2. *Lenin and the Bolsheviks* – the 'April Theses' – 'Peace, Bread and land' – 'All Power to the Soviets' – the July Days – the October Rising.

3. *The October Revolution* – Bolshevik preparations – Provisional Government weakness – the rising itself – reasons for government collapse and Bolshevik success.

There is obviously considerable overlap and common ground between these themes and their sub-sections. The Dual Authority is a very useful central strand, connecting the status and power of the government and the Petrograd soviet, the 'April Theses', the Bolshevik policy of 'All Power to the Soviets', and the final collapse of Kerensky's government.

Questions on these central themes might include:

1. **a)** How valid is the view that 'The Provisional Government was doomed to failure from the first'?
   b) Examine the view that the Bolshevik slogans, 'Bread, Peace and Land' and 'All power to the soviets' were accurate definitions of the basic problems confronting the Provisional Government.
2. **c)** Estimate the significance of Lenin's return to Russia in April.
   d) How was it that only three months after their failure in the July Days the Bolsheviks were in a position to take power?
3. **e)** Why was there so little resistance to the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917?
   f) How far do you agree that in October 1917 the Bolsheviks were pushing against an open door?

A possible approach to question **2d** would be:

(1) Begin with a list of the principal developments between July and October. These should include such points as the July Days, the Kornilov affair, the increasing desertions from the front, the growing disillusionment with and within the Provisional Government regarding its failure to solve Russia's outstanding problems, and the increasing Bolshevik influence in the Petrograd soviet. *(2)* From this list you can then fashion the features of the main points of the answer. An appropriate opening would be to explain that the Bolsheviks recovered from the July Days debacle largely because the Provisional Government seemed disinclined to press home their political advantage over them. Moreover, whatever advantage the government had held was lost when the Bolsheviks were able to pose as defenders of Petrograd and the Revolution against Kornilov. *(3)* The main body of the answer should emphasise how the authority of the Provisional Government, which had always been conditional on its being able to meet the challenges facing Russia, was steadily eroded by the Petrograd soviet, in which the Bolsheviks became increasingly influential. *(4)* It would be worth stressing that the question of Bolshevik recovery cannot be considered in isolation. Indeed, it is arguable that Provisional Government decline was more significant than rising Bolshevik strength. *(5)* In this context, attention should be drawn to the misjudgement by Kerensky's government of the strength of Lenin's party. In fact, each side over-estimated the power of the other and tended to play a waiting game, fearful of exposing its own weakness. Although Trotsky's plans for a *coup* against the government had been drawn up for some time, in the event the rising was occasioned by Kerensky's attempt at a pre-emptive strike against the Bolsheviks. *(6)* Trotsky's key role as chairman of the soviet's MRC was vitally important since, in fulfilment of Lenin's long-standing aim, it enabled the Bolsheviks to dress their objectives in a soviet cloak. *(7)* In the concluding part of the answer stress should be laid on the inability of the Provisional Government either to conduct a successful

war or withdraw from it. This, together with its poor record with regard to the issues of 'bread and land', encouraged a drift to the left in Russian politics. When the challenge came in October, the Provisional Government found itself without allies. The Bolsheviks did not so much seize power as pick it up after it had been dropped. A useful quotation with which to end the essay might be: 'the Bolsheviks did not inherit a ship of state, they took over a derelict hulk'.

6 The Bolshevik Consolidation of Power 1917–21

POINTS TO CONSIDER

A key point to remember is that the successful Bolshevik rising of October 1917 marked the beginning rather than the end of the Russian Revolution. After they had taken over power the Bolsheviks under Lenin faced huge problems in trying to consolidate their hold over what had been the tsarist empire. What this chapter will consider is how the new regime under Lenin dealt with the four particularly urgent questions that confronted it from the end of 1917. The first was very simple and stark – could the Bolsheviks survive? The second question grew out the first. If they did survive how were they then to extend their control over the nation at large? The third question was whether they could negotiate a quick end to the war and lift the German occupation of western Russia. The fourth question was whether, having solved the first three, they could bring economic stability to a Russia devastated by four years of war and internal upheaval.

KEY DATES

1917	
November	Bolsheviks issued the Decrees on Land, on Peace, and on Workers' Control.
	Elections for Constituent Assembly.
December	Armistice signed at Brest-Litovsk.
	Cheka created.
1918–20	Russian Civil War and foreign interventions.
	War Communism.
1918	
January	Bolsheviks forcibly dissolved the Constituent Assembly.
	Red Army established.
March	Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.
June	Decree on Nationalisation.
July	Formation of Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic.
	Forced grain requisitions began.
	Murder of tsar and his family
September	Red Terror officially introduced.
1919	
March	Comintern established.
	Bolshevik Party renamed the Communist Party.
1920	
April	Invading Red Army driven from Poland.
1921	
March	Kronstadt Rising.