

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