

5 HOW DID THE BOLSHEVIKS KEEP POWER AFTER 1917?

How did the Bolsheviks stay in power?

LENIN HAD SEIZED power in Petrograd, but for how long could he hold on to it? A few days after the takeover, Kerensky sent troops to put the Provisional Government back in control, but they were easily stopped in the suburbs by a force of pro-Bolshevik workers, soldiers and sailors. In Moscow, the fighting was fiercer. Other cities also came out in favour of the Bolsheviks, but they controlled only a small area of Russia.

Meanwhile, Lenin set up his government, called the Sovnakom – the ‘Council of People’s Commissars’. Lenin was chairman, Trotsky was Commissar for War and Stalin was Commissar for Nationalities. There was only one woman in the Sovnakom – Alexandra Kollontai.

Lenin pushed ahead with his first measures. It was important that he carry out his promises: to end the war, to give land to the peasants and to get food to the cities. Otherwise, his support would disappear.

The first months

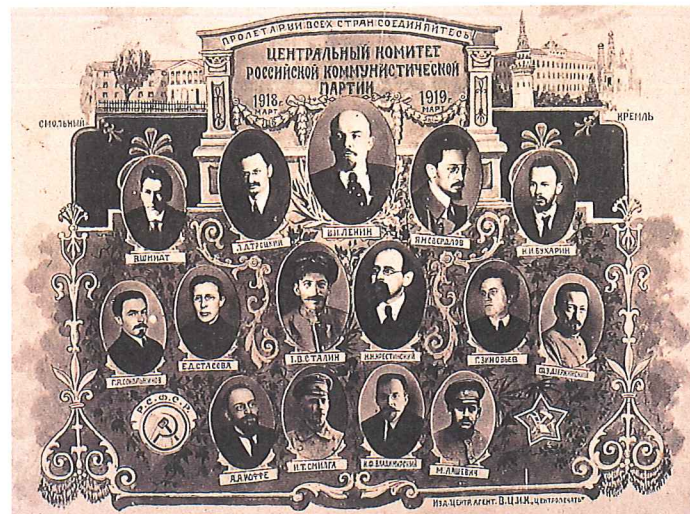
Decrees made by the Sovnakom in the first few months of power

November

- A maximum eight-hour day and 48-hour week declared for industrial workers
- Employment insurance introduced for workers for injuries, illness and unemployment
- All titles and class distinctions abolished – no dukes or lords, the title ‘comrade’ for everybody
- Women declared equal to men
- All non-Bolshevik newspapers banned

December

- Liberal party, the Cadets, banned
- All factories to be put under the control of workers’ committees
- All banks taken over by the government
- The army to be more democratic – officers to be elected, no ranks or saluting
- Church land to be confiscated by the state
- Divorce made easier and marriages do not have to be in churches



SOURCE 1 A collage of photographs showing members of Lenin's new government

Land

In November, a decree was passed taking all the land away from the Tsar and the old landlords. Land was to be given to the peasants, who would form committees to divide it up fairly.

Food

Lenin put an absolute priority on getting food to the cities. Where peasants would not sell their produce, he sent out the police and the Cheka to take it.

The Cheka

In December 1917, Lenin set up the Cheka. The head of this secret police force was the cold and incorruptible Felix Dzerzhinski. He set up headquarters in the ‘Lubyanka’ in Moscow, a name that was to become feared because of the torture and executions that were carried out there.

The Cheka arrested people who were considered dangerous. After an assassination attempt on Lenin, the Cheka launched the Red Terror. Anybody who spoke out against the government was arrested, and many were shot without trial. Sometimes it was enough to be someone who might oppose the Bolsheviks. The use of terror to control people was to become a feature of the new regime.

Constituent Assembly

Lenin had been forced, in November 1917, into holding the elections promised by the Provisional Government. The railway workers said that they would shut down the railways if Lenin did not go ahead with Russia’s first free elections. These were to choose a Constituent Assembly, which would work out how Russia would be governed in the future.

This was a real threat to Lenin, as the party with most votes would probably form a new government. The results of the elections can be seen in Source 2. Shortly after the Constituent Assembly met in January 1918, Lenin sent in soldiers to shut it down for good.

SOURCE 2 The results of the November 1917 election

Party	Seats in Constituent Assembly
Socialist Revolutionaries	370
Bolsheviks	175
Left Socialist Revolutionaries (supporters of Bolsheviks)	40
Cadets	17
Mensheviks	16
Others	89

A new name

In 1918, Lenin changed the name of the Bolshevik Party. They were now called COMMUNISTS.

TASK

1. Consider the following people. Decide which of Lenin’s actions described on pages 50–51 would have been popular with each person and which would not. You could do this in the form of a chart, with the names of the people along the top and the different actions down the side. (Your teacher will give you a sheet to fill in.)

- woman worker
- Tsarist army officer
- industrialist
- Socialist Revolutionary
- peasant

Peace

Lenin sent Trotsky to meet the Germans to negotiate a peace treaty. Trotsky walked out of the talks because the Germans demanded so much territory. He said there would be ‘no peace, no war’. However, Lenin sent him back, because he was sure that the Bolsheviks would stay in power only if the war could be ended quickly. The result was the harsh Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918.



SOURCE 3 A map showing land lost in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

- middle-class liberal
- soldier

2. a) Which of the actions mentioned would have increased support for Lenin?
b) Which do you think would have been most unpopular amongst different groups of people?
3. Had Lenin honoured his promises?
4. Which political party had been elected to form the new government of Russia?
5. How did Lenin deal with opposition and threats to his power?

How did the Bolsheviks stay in power?

Use this worksheet for the Task on page 51.

	Woman worker	Tsarist army officer	Industrialist	Socialist Revolutionary	Peasant	Middle-class liberal	Soldier
Land							
Food							
Treaty of Brest-Litovsk							
Constituent Assembly closed down							
The Cheka							
8-hour day/48-hour week							
Titles and ranks abolished							
Women equal							
Non-Bolshevik papers banned							
Liberal Party banned							
Banks taken over							
Army to be democratic							