

1917: The October Revolution

POINTS TO CONSIDER

The key aspect of the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 is that it was quite distinct in character from the revolution that had preceded it eight months earlier. Whereas 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. This chapter examines the events leading up to the October Revolution through the following themes:

- The Dual Authority
- The return of the Bolsheviks and the role of Lenin
- The limitations of the Provisional Government
- The events of the October Revolution
- The reasons for the Bolshevik success

Key dates

1917	March 12	Stalin and Kamenev arrived in Petrograd
	March 14	Petrograd Soviet issued its <i>Address to the people of the whole world</i>
	April 3	Lenin returned to Petrograd
	April 4	Lenin issued his <i>April Theses</i>
	July 3–6	Failure of the 'July Days' Bolshevik uprising
	July 8	Kerensky became Prime Minister
	July 18	Kornilov became Commander-in-Chief
	September 1	Kornilov's march on Petrograd abandoned
	September 25	Bolsheviks gained a majority in Petrograd Soviet
	October 9	Military Revolutionary Committee set up
	October 23	Kerensky moved against the Bolsheviks by attempting to close down <i>Pravda</i> and <i>Izvestiya</i>
		Lenin instructed the Bolsheviks to begin the rising against Kerensky's government
	October 25	First session of the Congress of Soviets
	October 25–6	Kerensky fled from Petrograd
		Bolsheviks seized the Winter Palace
	October 26	Bolsheviks established <i>Sovnarkom</i>
		Lenin claimed power in the name of Congress of Soviets

1 | The Dual Authority

The Provisional Government, led by Prince Lvov, was the old duma in a new form. When Paul 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 lot, then?'. Milyukov replied, 'We were appointed by the Revolution itself'.

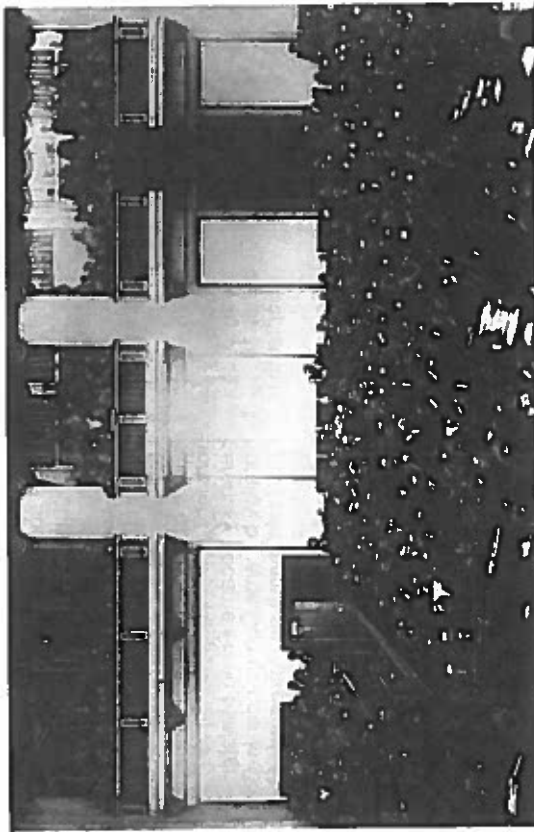
In that exchange were expressed the two crippling weaknesses of the Provisional Government throughout the eight months of its existence. It was not an elected body. It had come into being as a rebellious committee of the old duma, refusing to disband at the tsar's order. As a consequence, it lacked legitimate 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 role of the Petrograd Soviet

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 considerable co-operation 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

Key question
Was the Provisional Government fatally weakened from the first?



An overflowing meeting of the Petrograd Soviet in March 1917. Huge numbers of soldiers and workers, sometimes as many 2000, attended the early meetings. By the autumn this had dropped to a few hundred but the Bolsheviks kept up their numbers, which gave them a disproportionate influence in the Soviet. Why was the presence of the Bolsheviks in the meetings of the Petrograd Soviet so politically important between March and October 1917?

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. This uncertainty tended to give the Soviet greater prominence.

There was also the impressive fact that in the aftermath of the February Revolution soviets were rapidly set up in all the major cities and towns of Russia. Yet, although the soviets were to play an increasingly important role in the development of the Revolution, in the early stages the Bolsheviks did not dominate them. They were not, therefore, 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', which read:

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.

Importance of the Order

What the Order meant was that the decrees of the Provisional Government in regard to military affairs were binding only if they were approved by the Petrograd Soviet. History shows that unless a government has control of its army it does not hold real power. Order Number 1 made it clear that the Provisional Government did not have such power. It had, therefore, to compromise with the Soviet. Between February and April this arrangement worked reasonably well; there were no serious disputes between the two bodies in the 'dual authority'.

Political co-operation

An important factor that helped lessen party differences was the widespread elation in Petrograd in the weeks following the February Revolution. There was an excitement in the air; people on the streets greeted each other enthusiastically as if a new era had dawned. This encouraged a genuine feeling across all the political groups that Russia had entered a period of real freedom. For a time co-operation between opposing parties became much easier to achieve.

There was also a general acceptance that the new liberty that had come with the collapse of tsardom should not be allowed to slip into anarchy. 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 Social Revolutionaries or Social Democrats 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 harmony.

Key question
Why was there so little political conflict in the period immediately after the February Revolution?

Key terms
Anarchy
An absence of government or authority, leading to disorder.
Monarchists
Reactionaries who wanted a restoration of tsardom.

Early achievements of the Provisional Government

The fruits of this initial co-operation were shown in a set of progressive measures adopted by the Provisional Government:

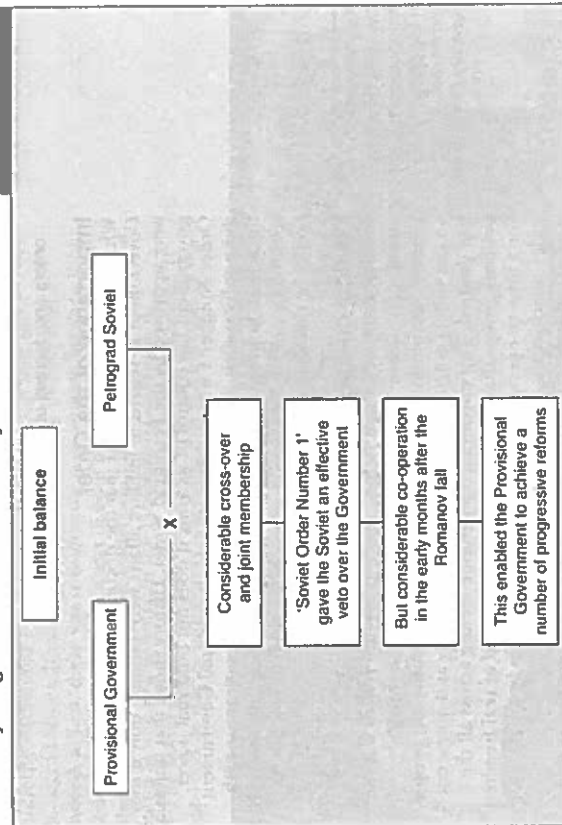
- An amnesty for political prisoners.
- The recognition of trade unions.
- The introduction of an eight-hour day for industrial workers.
- The replacement of the tsarist police with a 'people's militia'.
- The granting of full civil and religious freedoms.
- Preparations for the election of a constituent assembly.

Noticeably, however, these 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.

Key term

'People's militia'
A new set of volunteer law-enforcement officers drawn from ordinary people.

Summary diagram: The dual authority



2 | The Bolsheviks Return

The Impact of Stalin and Kamenev

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. Stalin's return was significant. Because of their standing in the Party, he and his fellow returnees, Lev Kamenev, became the leading voices among the Petrograd Bolsheviks. Initially this duo took an anti-Lenin line. Lenin, who did not reach Petrograd until nearly a month later, still tried to direct things from exile. In his *Letters from Afar* he urged

Key date

Stalin and Kamenev arrive in Petrograd: 12 March 1917

that the war that Russia was fighting should be turned into a class war; Bolsheviks should infiltrate the armies of the combatant nations and encourage the soldiers to turn their weapons against their officers as the first step towards overthrowing their governments. Lenin also instructed the Bolsheviks not to co-operate with the Provisional Government or with the other parties.

Stalin and Kamenev ignored Lenin's instructions. On the war issue, they argued that the best policy was to press for international negotiations to be started. Stalin wrote to the Bolsheviks in Petrograd telling them to 'put pressure on the Provisional Government to announce its willingness to start peace talks at once'. On the question of the Bolsheviks' relations with the Provisional Government, Kamenev insisted that circumstances made co-operation with it essential, at least for the time being, since it was 'genuinely struggling against the remnants of the old regime'. As to the other parties, Kamenev believed co-operation with them made perfect sense. He backed a proposal that it was 'possible and desirable' for the Bolshevik to consider linking again with the Mensheviks.

Clearly, at this juncture, there was a wide divergence of view between Lenin and the other two men. Interestingly, Kamenev appears to have been the dominant partner in his relations with Stalin, who later admitted that, in the period before Lenin arrived, Kamenev dominated Bolshevik discussions in Petrograd. What Kamenev was advancing, and what Stalin went along with, was often referred to as **accommodationism**. It was an approach that Lenin would totally reject once he was back in Petrograd.

Lenin's Return in April

Lenin arrived in Petrograd on 3 April. The manner of his return from Switzerland was a remarkable story in itself. His wife, Krupskaya, recorded it:

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.

Krupskaya's account was wholly accurate. 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.

Accommodationism
The idea that the Bolsheviks should accept the situation that followed the February Revolution, co-operating with the Provisional Government, and being prepared to work with the other revolutionary and reforming parties.

Key question
What impact did Lenin's return have on the situation in Petrograd?

Key term
Emigrant internationalists
Russian revolutionaries living in exile.

Was Lenin a German agent?

Since the outbreak of war in 1914 Lenin's opponents had continually accused him of being in the pay of the German government. 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. 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.

Lenin's Impact

There is no doubting the great significance of Lenin's return to Petrograd in April 1917. Before then, the Bolsheviks, led by Kamenev and Stalin, 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 reformist parties. Lenin changed all that. In his speech on his arrival at Petrograd's Finland Station on 3 April, he declared that February had not been a genuine Revolution; far from giving Russia political freedom, it had created a 'parliamentary-bourgeois republic'. He condemned the Provisional Government and called for its overthrow in a second revolution.

The April Theses

The following day he issued his *April Theses*, in which he spelt out future Bolshevik policy. To the bewilderment of those Bolsheviks who had been in Petrograd since February and expected to be praised for their efforts in working with the other revolutionary groups, Lenin condemned all that had happened since the fall of the tsar. He insisted that, since the Bolsheviks were the only truly revolutionary proletarian party, they must:

- abandon all co-operation with other parties
- work for the true revolution entirely by their own efforts
- overthrow the Provisional Government, which was simply the old, class-ridden *duma* in a new garb
- struggle, not to extend freedom to all classes, but to transfer power to the workers
- demand that authority pass to the soviets.

Lenin had ulterior motives in demanding the soviets take over government. 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. If it could infiltrate and dominate the soviets, the Bolshevik Party would be in a position to take over the state.

Key dates

Lenin arrives in Petrograd: 3 April 1917
Lenin issues his *April Theses*: 4 April 1917

Key term

'Parliamentary-bourgeois republic' Lenin's contemptuous term for the Provisional Government, which he dismissed as an unrepresentative mockery that had simply replaced the rule of the tsar with the rule of the reactionary *duma*.

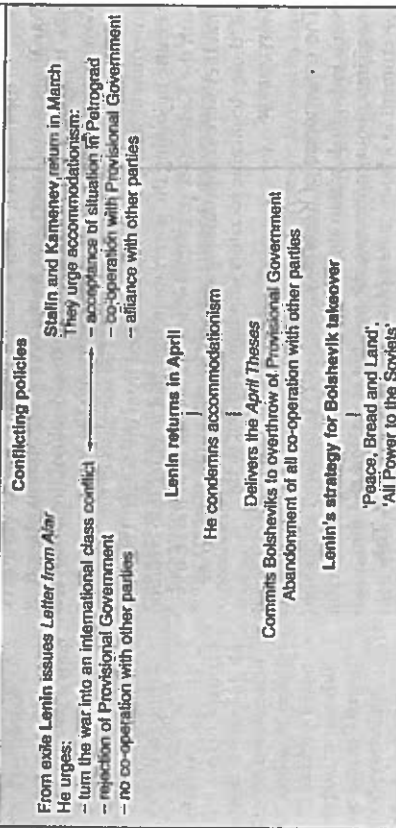
The essence of Lenin's argument was summed up in two provocative Bolshevik slogans: 'Peace, Bread and Land' and 'All Power to the Soviets'. But these were more than slogans. They were Lenin's way of presenting in simple, dramatic headings the basic problems confronting Russia:

- 'Peace' – the continuing war with Germany.
- 'Bread' – the chronic food shortage.
- 'Land' – the disruption in the countryside.

He asserted that as long as the Provisional Government stayed in power these problems could not be solved because the ministers governed only in the interests of their own class. They had no wish to end the war, which brought them profits, to supply food to the Russian people, whom they despised, or reform the land-holding system, which guaranteed their property rights and privileges. That is why Lenin wanted 'All Power to the Soviets'. The current ministers must be swept aside and replaced with a government of the soviets. Only then would the people's needs be addressed.

Lenin's analysis was perceptive. The Provisional Government's failure to deal with the three principal issues he had identified was, indeed, to prove its eventual downfall.

Summary diagram: The Bolsheviks return



Key question
What difficulties beset the Provisional Government?

Key term
War-credits
Money loaned on easy repayment terms to a country to help it finance its war effort.

3 | The Provisional Government and its Problems

From the outset, the Provisional Government was in a troubled position. The main problem was the war. For the Provisional Government after February 1917 there was no choice but to fight on. The reason was not idealistic but financial. 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 would carry on the war. The strain that this obligation imposed on the Provisional Government finally proved unsustainable. Its preoccupation with the war prevented the government 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.

Government crisis

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*, calling for 'peace without annexations or indemnities'. The government declared that it accepted the Address, but this appeared, at best, nonsense and, at worst, deliberate deceit, when it became known that Milyukov, the foreign minister, had pledged to the Allies that Russia would fight on until Germany was defeated.

Late in April a series of violent demonstrations occurred in Petrograd directed against Milyukov. These produced a government crisis. Milyukov and Guchkov, the War Minister, resigned early in May. These resignations were an illustration of the divisions within the government as well as of the outside pressures on it. In the reshuffled cabinet, Alexander Kerensky became 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.

However, the opposite happened. The socialists in the government tended to become isolated from the Soviet. This was because in joining the government they had to enter into coalition with the Kadets (see page 26), 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'.

The emergence of Kerensky

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 it. This would have mattered less had the Russian armies been successful, but the military situation continued to deteriorate, eroding the support the government had initially enjoyed. Lvov stayed as nominal head of the government but it was Kerensky who became the major influence. As War Minister, he campaigned for Russia to 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.'

Key date
Address to the people of the whole world issued by the Petrograd Soviet: 14 March 1917

Key term
Indemnities
Payment of war costs demanded by the victors from the losers.

Key terms

Political subversives
Kornilov's term for the Social Democrats and the Social Revolutionaries in Russia.

National minority governments
A number of Russia's ethnic peoples exploited the Provisional Government's difficulties by setting up their own governments, which were independent of central control.

Ukraine
The area in southern Russia containing the largest non-Russian collection of people (29 million) in the empire. It was also the nation's largest food-producing region, hence its great importance.

The government's troubles increase

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 agitators who encouraged them to disobey orders, 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.

The government's troubles were deepened by events on the island of Kronstadt, the naval base situated 15 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'.

The July Days

By the summer of 1917 it did, indeed, seem that the government was no longer in control of events. The most ominous signs were:

- the spread of soviets
- worker-control of the factories
- widespread seizure of land by the peasants
- the creation of breakaway national minority governments – most notably in the Ukraine.

It was the Ukrainian question that helped to provoke the July Days crisis. When the Kadet ministers in the government learned in late June that a Provisional Government deputation in Kiev had offered independence to the Ukraine, they resigned, protesting that only an all-Russian constituent assembly could properly decide such matters.

This ministerial clash 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.

The rising fails

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 physically 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.

It is not entirely clear who started 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 a general intention rather than a specific plan. There were also a number of SRs and other non-Bolshevik revolutionaries in the soviet who, for some time, had been demanding that the Petrograd Soviet take over from the Provisional Government.

Trotsky later referred to the July Days as a 'semi-insurrection' and argued that it had been started 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 Nikolai 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 for its failure.



Anti-government protesters scattering under rifle-fire during the suppression of the July Days. How were the Bolsheviks able to survive their failure in the July Days?

Key date
Failure of the 'July Days': 3-6 July

Key term
All-Russian Congress of Soviets
A gathering of representatives from all the soviets formed in Russia since February.

The consequences of the rising

While the origins of the July Days may have been uncertain, the results were not. The abortive rising revealed a number of important facts:

- the opposition movement was disunited
- the Bolsheviks were still far from being the dominant revolutionary party
- 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 Provisional Government and brought particular credit to Kerensky as War Minister. Two days after the rising had been crushed he became Prime Minister. He immediately turned the heat 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 sections show, was the critical misjudgements by the Provisional Government over the land question and the Kornilov Affair.



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 111).

Key date
Kerensky becomes Prime Minister: 8 July 1917

The land question

The Provisional Government had misread the public attitude towards the war. It similarly failed to appreciate the common view on the land question. Land shortage was a chronic problem in Russia. It had been a chief cause of peasant unrest since the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 (see page 7). The February Revolution had led the peasants to believe that they would soon benefit from a major land redistribution following a government takeover of the landowners' estates. When the government did no such thing, 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 be appropriate to describe this as a national peasants' revolt.

The Provisional Government had no real answer to the land problem. While it was true that it had set up a Land Commission with the object of redistributing land, this body made little progress in handling a massive task. It was doubtful, moreover, whether the government's heart was ever really in land reform. The majority of its members came from the landed and 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 to go to the peasants, but they had no intention of losing their own possessions in a state land grab. This had been the strength of Lenin's assertion in the *April Theses* that tsardom had been replaced not by a revolutionary but by a bourgeois regime.

The Bolshevik position on the land question

There was a sense in which the land issue was equally difficult for the Bolsheviks. They simply did not have a land policy. 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 that it would be pointless for the Bolsheviks, a proletarian party, to make an alliance with the backward 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 Russian 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 adaptation of Marxist theory thus allowed Lenin to add the Russian peasants to the proletarian cause.

Lacking a land policy of his own, Lenin simply stole the SRs'. 'Land to the Peasants', a slogan lifted straight from the SR programme, became the new Bolshevik catchphrase. What this meant in mid-1917 was that the Bolsheviks recognised the peasant land-seizures as perfectly legitimate. This produced a considerable 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.

Key question

How real a threat was the Kornilov Affair to the Provisional Government?

Kornilov becomes Commander-in-Chief: 18 July 1917

Key date

Key question

Why was the government unable to follow an effective land policy?

The Kornilov Affair

In August, Kerensky's 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.

Kornilov 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', he said, '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 increasing the 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. It was only afterwards, when he realised that Kornilov also intended to remove the Provisional Government and impose military rule, that he turned against him.

Other commentators, sympathetic to Kerensky, maintain that he had not plotted with Kornilov and that his actions had been wholly consistent. They also emphasise that a special Commission of Enquiry



Kerensky addressing Russian forces in May 1917.

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.

Kerensky's response

Furious that Kornilov would attack, 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 Kornilov's army to Petrograd. When he learned of this and of a mass workers' militia formed to oppose him, Kornilov abandoned the advance and allowed himself to be arrested. He was to die early in April 1918, killed by a stray shell at the start of the Civil War.

Bolshevik gains

It was the Bolsheviks who benefited most from the failure of the attempted *coup*. They had been able to present themselves as defenders of Petrograd and the Revolution, thus diverting attention away from their failure in the July Days. What further boosted the Bolsheviks was that, despite the obvious readiness of the people of Petrograd to defend their city, this could not be read as a sign of their belief in Provisional Government. Indeed, the episode had damaged the Provisional Government by revealing its political weakness and showing how vulnerable it was to military threat. Kerensky later admitted that the Kornilov affair had been 'the prelude to the October Revolution'.

Summary diagram: The Provisional Government and its problems

The war - Government obliged to continue the war in order to maintain loans from the Allies - Caused first serious split between Soviet and Provisional Government - Prevented resources being spent on other needs - Kerensky emerges as committed supporter of the war	National minorities question Caused ministerial crisis which led to ...
The land question - Provisional Government not genuinely committed to land reform - Enabled Bolsheviks to steal a march and gain peasant support	... The July Days Which saw near extinction of Bolsheviks
The Kornilov Affair - Provisional Government survived but gravely weakened - Bolsheviks began recovery - The prelude to the October Revolution	

4 | The October Revolution

The political shift in Petrograd

The measure of the Bolsheviks' recovery from the July Days and of their gains from the Kornilov Affair 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 2000 deputies had packed into 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'.

Lenin's strategy

From his exile in Finland, Lenin constantly appealed to 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, was becoming increasingly reactionary. This left the Soviet as 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 legend, Lenin wrote on 12 September: 'History will not forgive us if we do not assume power'.

Lenin's sense of urgency arose from his concern over two events that were due to take place in the autumn, and which he calculated would seriously limit the Bolsheviks' 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, under the banner 'All Power to the Soviets', the Bolsheviks could topple the Provisional Government before the Congress met they could then present their new authority as a *fait accompli* that 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

Key question
What factors enabled the Bolsheviks to gain in strength?

Key date
Bolsheviks gain a majority in Petrograd Soviet: September 1917

Key term
Progressives
Those who believed in parliamentary government for Russia.

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 forecast 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 go against them.

The 'Pre-Parliament'

At the same time as Lenin pressed this policy upon his party, Kerensky tried to make his government less exposed by announcing plans for the creation of a 'Pre-Parliament' with authority to advise the government. Lenin condemned this as a manoeuvre not to broaden the government's base but to strengthen its grip on power. Acting on his orders, the Bolshevik members of the Soviet who were entitled to attend the Pre-Parliament first decided it and then walked out.

Lenin returns to Petrograd

Emboldened by the Bolsheviks' success in undermining the Pre-Parliament, Lenin now began urging his party to prepare to overthrow the Provisional Government. Despite the passionate conviction 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 his will, 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.

Kerensky makes the first move

Rumours of an imminent Bolshevik *coup* had been circulating in Petrograd for some weeks, but it was not until an article, written by two members of the Bolshevik Central Committee, appeared in a journal that the authorities felt they had sure proof. The writers of the article, Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kameney, argued that it would be a mistake to attempt to overthrow the government in current circumstances. Kerensky interpreted this as indicating that a date had already 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.

Key terms

'Pre-Parliament'
This was to be a body drawn from a variety of parties, and thus be representative of a greater range of political opinion. It was intended to fill the interim before the Constituent Assembly came into being.

Central Committee
The decision-making body of the Bolshevik Party.

Key date

Kerensky attempts to close down *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*; Bolshevik rising against the government begins: 23 October 1917

Trotsky's role

That the Bolsheviks had 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. On 9 October the Soviet set up the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) to organise the defence of Petrograd against a possible German attack or another Kornilov-type assault from within Russia.

It proved a critical decision. Realising that if the Bolsheviks could control the MRC they would control Petrograd, Trotsky used his influence to have himself accepted as one of the *troika* appointed to run the MRC. This meant he had at his disposal the only effective military force in Petrograd. Moreover, it was a legitimate force since theoretically it acted on the authority of the Soviet.

Trotsky was now in a position to draft 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 vantage points in Petrograd, such as the bridges and the telegraph offices.

Collapse of the Provisional Government

In the three days (25–27 October) that it took for the city to fall under Bolshevik control there was remarkably little fighting. There were only six deaths during the whole episode and these were all Red Guards, most probably shot by mistake by their own side. The simple fact was that the Provisional Government had hardly any military forces on which to call. The Petrograd garrison that had turned out to defend the government on previous occasions did not come to its aid now. Desertions had reduced the garrison to a few loyal officer-cadets, a small group of Cossacks and a unit of female soldiers, known as the 'Amazons'.

When the Red Guards approached the Winter Palace, which housed the Provisional Government, they expected stiff resistance, but there was none. A black-and-white film of the dramatic, death-defying storming of the palace gates often appears in television documentaries about the October Revolution. Sometimes at the bottom of the screen will appear the word 'reconstruction'. This is very misleading since there was never such an event to reconstruct. The truth is there are no contemporary films of October 1917. What modern programme-makers invariably use are the powerful images from the feature film, *October*, made in 1927 on the tenth anniversary by the celebrated Bolshevik film-maker, Sergei Eisenstein.

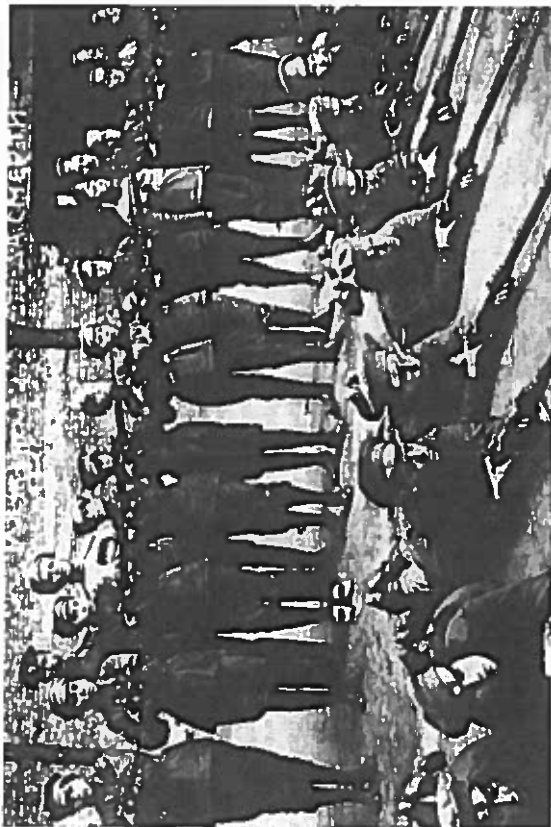
The Bolshevik forces did not need to storm the gates; there was nobody defending them. The Winter Palace was a vast building many times larger than London's Buckingham Palace. The Red Guards simply strolled in through the back doors. This was enough to make the defenders give up. The Cossacks walked off when confronted by the Red Guards. After that, it did not take much pressure to persuade the cadets and the Amazons that it was better for them to lay down their arms and go home rather than die in a futile struggle.

Petrograd Soviet set up the Military Revolutionary Committee.
9 October 1917

Troika
A three-man team.

Red Guards
Despite the Bolshevik legend that these were the crack military forces of the Revolution, the Red Guards, who numbered some 10,000, were largely made up of fairly elderly men recruited from the workers in the factories.

Cossacks
The remnants of the elite cavalry regiment of the Tsar.



A contingent of Amazons under instruction in 1917. Kerensky had specially recruited these female soldiers, also known as 'the Women's Battalion of Death', as an example of the fighting spirit of the Russian people

The sounding of its guns in a pre-arranged signal by the pro-Bolshevik crew of the cruiser *Albatross*, moored in the River Neva, convinced the remaining members of the government that their position was hopeless. As many as were able escaped unnoticed out of the building. Kerensky, having earlier left the city in a vain effort to raise loyal troops, fled to the American embassy. He later slipped out of Petrograd, disguised as a female nurse, and made his way to the United States where he eventually became a professor of history.

The Bolsheviks take power

The Bolsheviks did not seize power; it fell into their hands. The speed and ease with which it had happened surprised even Lenin. In the early hours of 26 October he said to Trotsky 'from being on the run to supreme power makes one dizzy'. He then rolled himself up in a large fur coat, lay on the floor and went to sleep.

On the following evening the All-Russian Congress of Soviets began their first session. They had barely completed the opening formalities when the chairman, who happened to be Lev Kamenev, the Bolshevik who had originally opposed the rising, informed the delegates that they were now the supreme authority in Russia; the Petrograd Soviet had seized power in their name and had formed a new government. Kamenev then read out to the bewildered delegates the list of 14 names of the new government they had supposedly just appointed. The 14 were all Bolsheviks or left SRs. At the head of the list of Commissars who made up the new *Sovnarkom* was the name of the Chief Minister – Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

Key dates

Winter Palace seized by Bolsheviks and Kerensky flees from Petrograd: 24–5 October 1917
First session of the Congress of Soviets: 26 October 1917
Bolsheviks established *Sovnarkom*: 26 October 1917
Lenin claimed power in the name of Congress of Soviets: 27 October 1917

Key terms

Commissars
Russian for ministers – Lenin chose the word because he said 'it looks like blood'.
Sovnarkom
Russian for government or cabinet.

Отъ Востанъ - Революціоннаго Комитета при Петроградскихъ Собраніяхъ и Союзныхъ Депутатахъ.

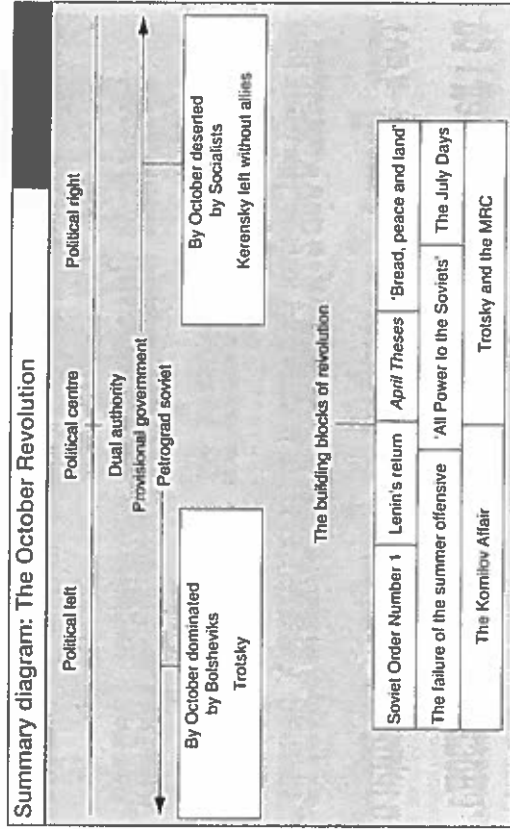
Къ Гражданамъ Россіи.
Временное Правительство изложено. Государственная власть перешла въ руки органа Петроградскаго Собрания Рабочихъ и Солдатскихъ Депутатовъ Военно-Революціоннаго Комитета, стоящаго во главѣ Петроградскаго пролетариата и гарнизона. Дѣло, за которое боролся народъ: немедленное предложеніе демократическаго мира, отъказа помѣщающей собственности на землю, рабочей контроль надъ производствомъ, созданіе Совѣтскаго Правительства — это дѣло осуществлено.

ДА ЗДРАВСТВУЕТЪ РЕВОЛЮЦІЯ РАБОЧИХЪ, СОЛДАТЪ И КРЕСТЬЯНЪ

Военно-Революціонный Комитетъ
при Петроградскихъ Собраніяхъ
Рабочихъ и Солдатскихъ Депутатовъ.
25 октября 1917 г. 10 ч. утра.

To the People of Russia reads the headline of this poster, 25 October 1917, declaring that the Provisional Government has fallen. It goes on in the name of the Soviet to promise peace and land to the people.

The right-wing SRs and the Mensheviks walked out, protesting that it was not a taking of power by the Soviets but a Bolshevik *coup*. Trotsky jeered after them that they and their kind had 'consigned themselves to the garbage heap of history'. Lenin then announced to the Bolshevik and SR delegates who had remained that they would now proceed 'to construct the towering edifice of socialist society'.



5 | Reasons for Bolshevik Success

Trotsky later said that the key factors in the Bolshevik success of October 1917 were:

- the failure of the Petrograd garrison to resist
- the existence of the MRC.

He claimed that Soviet decision to create the MRC had sounded the death-knell of the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks' control of the MRC gave them 'three-quarters if not nine-tenths' of their victory in the October Revolution. Since Trotsky was a major player in the drama played out in October 1917, his views demand great respect. But his analysis was largely concerned with the immediate events of October. The success of the coup had as much to do with government weakness as Bolshevik strength, a weakness that was in-built into the Provisional Government from the start.

Provisional Government weakness

The failure of the Provisional Government to rally effective military support in its hour of need followed from its 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. Its support had evaporated. Economically incompetent and militarily incapable, the Provisional Government was not considered worth struggling to save. In October 1917, the Bolsheviks were pushing against an already open door.

It should be emphasised that the Provisional Government 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 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.

The weakness of the non-Bolshevik parties

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, such as the SRs, 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 individual 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.

The Menshevik position

As committed Marxists, the Mensheviks had good reason for co-operating with the Provisional Government rather than opposing

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

Key question
Why was there so little resistance to the Bolsheviks in October 1917?

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 and work for the consolidation of the bourgeois revolution. When this had been achieved the Mensheviks could then turn to the ultimate objective of a 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.

Russia's lack of a party-political tradition

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 that 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?'. What he was asking was who held power and over whom was it exercised? 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 (see page 100). But they never lost sight of their basic goal – the seizure of power.

Bolshevik ruthlessness

Down to October 1917 the Bolshevik position was far from 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 the Bolshevik 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.

Tsereteli, 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 or 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. This drive and utter conviction came from the belief that they were an unstoppable force of history. As Trotsky put 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'. The ruthlessness of the Bolsheviks 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.

The role of mutual misunderstanding

An irony of the pre-October situation was that both the Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks overestimated each other's power, 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.

One reason, odd though it seems in retrospect, is that Kerensky's government was more frightened of an attack from the right than from the left. Fear of a tsarist reaction against the revolution preoccupied the thoughts of many in the government. For much of 1917, Kornilov was regarded as a bigger threat than Lenin.

This was not entirely unrealistic. The Bolsheviks were not militarily strong; Sukhanov, a Menshevik eye-witness of the events of 1917, calculated that so limited was Bolshevik strength at the time of the October Rising that 'a good detachment of 500 men would have been enough to liquidate Smolny and everybody in it'. Trotsky agreed, but asked pointedly where the Provisional Government was to get 500 good men to fight for it.

For their part, the Bolsheviks similarly miscalculated the strength and determination 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 between the two revolutions of 1917.

6 | The Key Debate

How far was the Bolshevik success due to Lenin?

It says much for Lenin's forcefulness as leader that despite his frequent absences from Petrograd between February and October he continued to dominate 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.

Key question
In what ways did the Bolsheviks and the Provisional Government overestimate each other's strength?

Key term
Smolny
The Bolshevik headquarters in Petrograd, housed in what had been a young ladies' finishing school.

Key term

Émigré
The word refers to those who fled from Russia after the Revolution, either out of fear or a desire to plan a counter-strike against the Bolsheviks.

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 that would seize power in the name of the masses at the opportune moment (see page 23). 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 1917 and well into 1918 suggests that they were by no means as disciplined or centrally controlled as the party later claimed to have been.

Part of the explanation for this is that the composition of the party had changed in ways that Lenin and the Central Committee had not planned. After the February Revolution there had been a large increase in membership, which the Central Committee had not wanted but which, in the heady but politically confused situation following the fall of tsardom, they seemed unable to prevent. The following figures indicate the remarkable transformation that the Bolshevik Party underwent in 1917 (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: 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 that, 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.

Key term

Radicalisation
A movement towards more sweeping or revolutionary ideas.

Summary diagram: Reasons for Bolshevik success

Little resistance to the Bolsheviks in October 1917

Why?

1. Provisional Government weaknesses

Never intended to be permanent
Lack of popular support
Internal divisions
Failure to destroy Lenin when it had the chance
Failure to solve land problem
Strain of continuing war
Low morale

Deserted by Petrograd garrison

2. Bolshevik strengths

Driving sense of purpose
Absence of challenge from the other parties
Radicalisation of politics in Petrograd
Lenin's leadership
Trotsky's organisation
Control of the MRC