

Scott Reeves

The Bolshevik consolidation of power



Lenin's Bolshevik Party seized control of Russia during the October Revolution of 1917, but it faced an enormous task to retain power and build on it. The previous revolutionary government initially had mass support but only lasted a few months. The Bolsheviks started from an even weaker base. They were a minority party trying to impose their will on Russia. They faced fierce opposition both within the nation and from outside it. Lenin's first year would be a crucial battle for survival.

What made it even harder was that the Bolsheviks had not planned for this situation. They were revolutionaries focused on the overthrow of the tsarist and provisional governments, but the speed of events overtook them and few Bolsheviks had spent much time deciding how they would organise things once the revolution had been achieved. Marxists had always believed that centralised government would fade away after a proletariat revolution. Trotsky said that 'all we need to do is issue a few decrees, then shut up shop and go home'. If only it was that easy.

Source A

Storming of the Winter Palace, October 1917

1 What light do the extracts in Source B shed on the problems that the Bolsheviks faced after the October Revolution?

2 How do the extracts in Source D differ about the extent of Bolshevik support in October 1917?

Source B

Views on the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution: *A revolution is a rising of the people... But what have we here? Nothing but a handful of poor fools deceived by Lenin and Trotsky... Their decrees and their appeals will simply add to the museum of historical curiosities.*

Petrograd newspaper, 28 October 1917

The Bolshevik party will last no more than a few days.

Social Revolutionary leader speaking in November 1917

Trotsky was greeted with ironic laughter when he arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and introduced himself as the new minister; when he ordered them back to work, they left the building in protest.

From *A People's Tragedy* by Orlando Figes, 1997

Ending the war

The greatest problem that Lenin faced in the battle for Bolshevik survival was the threat of Germany, with whom Russia was still at war. The Russian military was exhausted, and could not continue the fight. Most Russian soldiers looked for a quick end to the war, and the Bolsheviks had been the only party to promise that. Now the troops wanted the Bolsheviks to keep their promise. They were happy when, within weeks of coming into power, Lenin

Source D

Two views on soldiers' attitudes to the Bolsheviks: *The insane attempt of the Bolsheviks is on the eve of collapse. The garrison is divided...the ministries are on strike and bread is getting scarcer. The Bolsheviks are alone.*

The views of soldiers in the Social Revolutionary party, 28 October 1917

The soldiers in the garrison towns in the rear follow the Bolsheviks to a man; and small wonder; for what interest have they to leave the towns and go to sit in trenches to fight about something that is of no interest to them, especially when they know that at the front they will get neither food to eat nor proper clothes against the winter cold? The workers in the factories are also strongly inclined to go with the Bolsheviks, because they know that only the end of the war will give them the food, for the lack of which they are half-starving.

A British journalist writing on 28 October 1917

agreed an armistice with Germany and fighting ceased. A few weeks later, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk formalised the end of the war.

The peace treaty was devastating. A third of Russia's European land was given to Germany or its allies, and Russia was ordered to pay 3 billion roubles in reparations. Not all Bolsheviks believed

Source C

Lenin addressing the crowd in Red Square, Moscow, October 1917



Source E

Peace negotiations between Russia and Germany

that they should accept the harsh terms, but the urgent need to stop the war was illustrated when the German army continued its advance towards Petrograd and shelled the city. Lenin and Trotsky also believed that time was on their side and that the socialist revolution would spread to Europe within a few years. Therefore, they were willing to sacrifice part of Russia in the short term, in the hope of long-term gains.

One-party government

At the end of the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks controlled little more than Petrograd and Moscow. Only 300,000 people were members of the party, yet Lenin wanted to spread Bolshevik control right across Russia. Many others were equally determined to stop him.

Source F

Two views on the closing of the Constituent Assembly: *The Russian Revolution created the Soviets as the only organisation of all the exploited working classes in a position to direct the struggle of those classes for their complete and economic liberation...The Constituent Assembly, elected on the old register, appeared as an expression of the old regime when authority belonged to the bourgeoisie.*

Lenin

The best Russians have lived for almost 100 years with the idea of a Constituent Assembly as a political organ which could provide Russian democracy as a whole with the possibility of freely exercising its will. On the altar of this sacred idea rivers of blood have been spilled — and now the 'people's commissars' have ordered the shooting of this democracy.

Maxim Gorky, a leading Bolshevik

The soviets

To legitimise his leadership and give the Bolsheviks a wider powerbase, Lenin claimed that the October Revolution had been spurred on by the soviets rather than the Bolshevik Party. He persistently declared that Sovnarkom (his revolutionary government) had been appointed to govern by the Congress of Soviets, which was in turn elected by local soviets.

The reality was very different. The Bolsheviks had outmanoeuvred their opposition and seized power. The Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, led by Lenin, provided all the ministers of Sovnarkom. The Bolsheviks made up their own rules, and the Congress of Soviets and local soviets did what they were told. Instead of power and authority flowing up from the soviets, as Lenin claimed, it flowed down from the top. Right from the beginning, it was the Bolsheviks who held power, not the soviets.

The Constituent Assembly

The October Revolution had come too late to stop the elections to the Constituent Assembly. Lenin had initially supported the elections as a means of disrupting the old Provisional Government, but now that he was in charge he had no intention of allowing his power to be diluted. Lenin's attitude hardened when the results of the election were announced. The Bolsheviks had only 175 of 717 seats in the new assembly and gained less than a quarter of the total votes cast. The Social Revolutionaries, on the other hand, had double the number of seats and votes.

Lenin decided that he was not going to work with the new body. Even though it approved many of his early decrees and actions, the Constituent Assembly was forcibly dissolved after 1 day by the Red Guards.

3 How far do the extracts in Source F indicate that the Bolsheviks were not united on the issue of Lenin taking political power?

4 What did Trotsky mean when he said what he did in Source G?

5 How did the Bolsheviks try to resurrect the Russian economy in 1917 and 1918?

Source G

Declaration by Trotsky to Social Revolutionaries and other left-wing groups:

You have played out your role. Go where you belong: to the dustbin of history.

Lenin justified his actions by saying that the reason for setting up the Constituent Assembly — to create a representative government — had already been achieved. In reality, Lenin was determined that all power would be reserved for the Bolsheviks and himself.

Ban on other political parties

Lenin issued decrees that banned all bourgeois parties and their newspapers. This ban was then extended to all other political parties. The Bolsheviks took control of many local soviets, either by persuasion or force. By the middle of July 1918, Russia was a one-party state and the Bolsheviks were in total political control.

Economic rehabilitation

Even though they had control of the political institutions, the Bolsheviks still needed to retain the backing of people. Lenin thought that the best way to do this was to resurrect the crippled economy. This also matched the aims of Marxism, because although the October Revolution was supposed to mark the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, there was much work left to do.

A difficult task lay ahead if the Bolsheviks were to transform the Russian economy. Lenin had few practical ideas of how he was going to overthrow capitalism and had no coherent plan for its replacement. In addition, the war against Germany had brought the Russian economy close to collapse:

- industrial production had dropped to 60% of 1914 levels
- inflation had surged
- grain supplies were 13 million tons short of what was required

Lenin argued that the change from capitalism to socialism could not take place overnight. He called the transitional stage between capitalism and socialism 'state capitalism'.

Decree on Land

Lenin introduced two new economic measures. The Decree on Land stated that private ownership of land was abolished and allowed peasants to overthrow their landlords and occupy their land. Large estates were confiscated from the church and nobility to be redistributed by the soviets. Much of this had already been going on since February 1917, so the Decree on Land merely legitimised what had already taken place. However, it also ensured that the Bolsheviks retained support among the peasants.

Decree on Workers' Control

Similarly, the Decree on Workers' Control legitimised the previous actions of many urban workers and won their support. It allowed them to take control of factories and said that their former owners should not receive compensation. The decree also introduced new rules and regulations to ensure that factories ran effectively and efficiently to help the economy recover, something which had often not been happening since the workers' committees had taken charge.

Vesenkha

Lenin also set up Vesenkha, a council that took control of key economic institutions like banks, railways, shipping companies and some of the more important factories. Vesenkha made it much easier for the Bolsheviks to control the centralised economy. It also cancelled foreign debts that Russia owed to other countries, freeing up money for use in Russia.

Social reform and control

As well as economic reform, Lenin hoped to win support by implementing new social policies. He wanted to define a clear break between the old system of government and the new Bolshevik system. He did this symbolically by formally renaming Russia as the Russian Socialist Federal

Source I

A statement issued by Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the Cheka, to its members:

Our Revolution is in danger. Do not concern yourselves with the forms of revolutionary justice. We have no need for justice now. Now we have need of a battle to the death! I propose, I demand, the use of the revolutionary sword which will put an end to all counter-revolutionaries.

Soviet Republic, and the Bolshevik Party was renamed the Communist Party. All titles were abolished, and 'comrade' became the standard greeting. The Russian calendar was also modernised and brought in line with the rest of Europe.

In more practical social reforms that affected the lives of the Russian people, the old legal system was replaced by the new people's courts and schools were brought under state control rather than being run by the church. Married women were given equal rights with their husbands, and civil marriage and divorce were made easier.

Of course, not all Russians happily accepted Bolshevism, and many remained antagonistic to Lenin. The creation of the Cheka (a secret police force) gave Lenin the power that he needed to deal with opposition, whether social, political or

economic. The Cheka was given the task of destroying counter-revolution, and had a wide range of powers that gave it almost complete freedom to do whatever it required to prop up Bolshevik rule. The bourgeoisie were hunted down and arrested, as were many Social Revolutionaries. The Cheka also made sure that criticism of the Bolsheviks was ruthlessly crushed and suppressed.

Conclusions

Lenin's strategy to consolidate the new Bolshevik government was a pragmatic response to the reality of the situation in which he found himself. He did not stick rigidly to Marxist principles, and he certainly did more than 'issue a few decrees, then shut up shop and go home'. Within a year of taking charge, the Bolsheviks had pushed through political changes that made Russia a one-party state and enacted economic and social changes both to win support from ordinary Russians and to implement Marxist ideas.

Of course, the Bolsheviks were not completely secure yet. Britain and France wanted to topple the Bolshevik regime, and the coming years would see civil war in Russia and infighting in the Communist Party. However, Lenin had achieved his primary aim: the Bolsheviks had survived, created a secure foundation, and begun to build on it.

7 Why did Felix Dzerzhinsky release Source I in 1918?

8 How did Lenin ensure that the Bolshevik regime did not repeat the fate of the Provisional Government and fail in its first year?

Source H

A Bolshevik poster produced in 1920. The text at the bottom reads 'This is what the October Revolution has given to the working and peasant women'. The buildings are labelled 'library', 'cafeteria', 'workers' club', 'school for adults' and 'house for mother and child'



6 How useful is Source H to a historian considering the success of the Bolsheviks' social policies?