

Chapter 6

Why were the Bolsheviks able to stay in power?

Source 1



Source 2

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.

From the *Dielo Naroda*, a Petrograd newspaper, Saturday 28 October 1917

Source 3

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.

Soldier Section of the SR Party, Saturday 28 October 1917

◀ A poster celebrating the first year of the 'proletarian dictatorship'. The words at the top read 'Workers of the world unite!'

Think about

To a partly illiterate population symbols were important.

- ▶ What symbols can you make out in the poster, Source 1?
- ▶ What do they represent?
- ▶ What image does it present of Communist Russia?
- ▶ Why was the image of the Bolsheviks important in those early days?

Introduction

In the last chapter we learned how the Bolsheviks were able to build support after the Tsar's abdication and then to seize control of the capital in October 1917. This chapter is devoted to the problems faced by the new government and its struggle to consolidate its position.

Key questions

- How did Russia become a one party state?
- Why was there a civil war in Russia?
- Why were the Bolsheviks able to win the Civil War?
- How did the Bolsheviks change Russia in the first few years of government?

How did the Bolsheviks establish their dictatorship?

On 26 October the Bolsheviks controlled little except Petrograd. Sources 2 and 3 show how unlikely many thought it was that the Bolsheviks could hang on to power. Even in the capital itself, loyal troops had to be used to overcome strikes by civil servants and bank employees. Fighting immediately broke out in Moscow and, after more than a thousand had died, the city was taken by the Bolsheviks. How would this party of only 300,000 members establish control over the vast expanses of the rest of Russia?

The approval of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets was critical for the government's future. The Provisional Government had failed to convince many Russians of its right to rule. Now the Second Congress of Soviets gave a seal of approval to the new regime. The October Revolution was also presented to the Russians as a rising by the Petrograd Soviet, in which many parties were represented. It was not immediately seen as a Bolshevik take-over. This made the new regime more acceptable to all those who had come to look on the Petrograd Soviet as the only organization to represent ordinary Russians. The Bolsheviks liked to present themselves as the leaders of a nation-wide movement, of workers and poor peasants, as Source 1 suggests.

More soviets continued to be set up in towns and cities across the country; many of these, but by no means all, soon had Bolshevik majorities. Most soviets, following the example of Petrograd, organized military revolutionary committees. These quickly seized power in their areas, often coming to blows with representatives of the old order and the bourgeoisie. Upon these fragile new bodies Bolshevik power now depended. In fact, huge parts of the former Russian Empire remained outside Bolshevik control for years, as you will read below.

Sovnarkom – a one party government

The Bolsheviks expected the October Revolution to mark the start of a new age, a complete break with Russia's past and a new beginning for the whole world. They, therefore, abandoned the bourgeois title 'Ministers' for the more proletarian 'People's Commissars'. The Cabinet now became Sovnarkom, the Soviet of People's Commissars. This body in theory was approved by, and authorized to make decrees by, the Congress of Soviets. Lenin appears to have been carried away with optimism in the first few weeks. However, he believed that only the Bolsheviks were capable of building this new world, and he, therefore, refused to invite other socialist parties into his government. Some leading figures in the party protested at this narrow view of politics.

Source 4

It is our view that a socialist government must be formed from all parties in the Soviet... We believe that, apart from this, there is only one other path: the retention of a purely Bolshevik government by means of political terror.

Statement issued by Kamenev, Zinoviev, and others in October 1917

The 'political terror' was abhorrent to many western liberals and some of his party, for Lenin and many of his Marxist comrades it was not something to be avoided. Instead it was an inevitable stage in building socialism. Marx had said that the revolution would be followed by the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Lenin believed the Bolsheviks, as the 'vanguard of the proletariat', had a right, indeed an obligation, to establish that dictatorship. The Russian Revolution had to succeed to inspire the wider revolutionary movement expected to sweep across Europe. Lenin, however, relented a little and in January some Left SRs briefly joined the government, but only after pressure within his party and the mainly Menshevik Union of Railway Workers.

The army

Control of the army was vital to the survival of the new government. Lenin knew the officer class was unlikely to support a workers' government. However, the High Command under General Dukhonin was already weakened by the officers' committees, which the troops had elected after the Tsar's abdication. The Bolsheviks' biggest asset was the desperate desire of almost all the troops for a quick end to the war, and this the Bolsheviks had promised to do.

Lenin ordered Dukhonin to sign an immediate armistice with the German forces. When he refused, Ensign (junior officer) Krylenko, a reliable Bolshevik, was sent with a train of loyal troops to the Army HQ at Mogilev to replace him. When his train arrived, Krylenko found Dukhonin's body at the station, murdered by his own troops. An armistice was quickly signed. Many officers fled the front and either returned to civilian life or fled to non-Bolshevik parts of Russia to join opposition groups. Only a small group of 600 Cossacks under General Krasnov were willing to fight for Kerensky in October, and they were wiped out when Bolshevik agitators arrived.

The Bolsheviks had survived their first emergency.

Cheka

Dictatorships rely to some extent on force or the threat of force. In November 1917 Sovnarkom set up its own secret police, Cheka, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, headed by the fanatical Bolshevik Dzerzhinsky. Lenin 'knew' all history was driven by class struggle and therefore he expected opposition to the new government from its class enemies, the bourgeoisie. These, therefore, must be crushed down. Cheka also arrested opponents on the left, including several hundred anarchists in April 1918, and even more SRs in July after they tried an unsuccessful coup. The growing size of the organization showed its importance in maintaining the Bolsheviks in power. In March 1918 Cheka had 120 employees; by 1921 this had risen to 143,000 (even 250,000 according to other estimates). They were not restricted by the law, executing supposed enemies without trial. In 1918 alone it has been estimated Cheka killed 50,000 people. The first labour camps were set up to contain so-called political prisoners.

Quotation

On the altar of this sacred ambition have been shed rivers of blood. Now the People's Commissars have ordered the murder of this democracy.

Maxim Gorky, 1918

Think about

- ▶ What proportion of the votes cast in the elections was for socialist parties?

Note

The Union of Railway Workers was able to cut the fuel and food supplies to the cities if it wished. These were already in very short supply.

Think about

- ▶ How true was it that the Soviets were 'the only organization of the all the exploited working classes'?
- ▶ Was the Constituent Assembly really 'an expression of the old regime'?

Note

A federation is an association of self-governing states which form a larger political unit.

Quotation

This is no time for speechmaking. Our revolution is in serious danger... We have no need for justice now. Now we have a battle to the death.

Felix Dzerzhinsky, December 1917

The death of the Constituent Assembly

In November, elections were held all over Russia to the Constituent Assembly. The long delayed elections had been arranged by the Provisional Government before its overthrow and were the first test of support for the new 'soviet' government. Since most voters were peasants, the Bolsheviks cannot have expected to emerge as the largest party. In fact the results for the larger parties were as follows:

	% of the votes
Socialist Revolutionaries	40.4
Bolsheviks	23.2
Mensheviks	2.9
Other Socialists	15.0
Kadets	4.6
National parties	7.7
Cossacks	2.2

Over 47 million of the 80 million electorate voted. It was the most representative body Russia had ever seen.

The Bolsheviks had criticized the Provisional Government for delaying the elections, but they had now produced a non-Bolshevik Assembly. On its first day, 5 January 1918, the Assembly elected the SR leader, Chernov, as its President and also approved some of Lenin's government's early decrees. (You can read about these below.) The next day, however, Bolshevik sailors prevented it meeting again. There were no popular demonstrations in the Assembly's favour either in Petrograd or anywhere else. Lenin justified the closing of the Assembly with these words:

Source 5

The Russian Revolution created the Soviets as the only organization 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 the authority belonged to the bourgeoisie.

At the end of January the closure of the Constituent Assembly was approved by the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which, of course, had a Bolshevik majority. This body also announced the setting up of The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). In July Lenin announced a new constitution for the new state.

How did the Bolshevik government try to change Russia?

It would be entirely wrong to think that the new government was completely preoccupied with the struggle to survive. It began a far-reaching programme of reforms. If it had not been able to offer the prospect of a better future to its supporters and millions of ordinary Russians, then it is difficult to see how the government could have survived. Decrees passed during the first few weeks after the October Revolution included:

1. The Decree on Peace
The first decree passed by the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets

invited 'all belligerents to open negotiations without delay for a just and democratic peace... a peace without annexations and indemnities.'

The Decree on Land
This abolished the landlords' right of property, also confiscating large estates from monasteries, churches and the nobility. Land was to be redistributed by the peasant soviets.

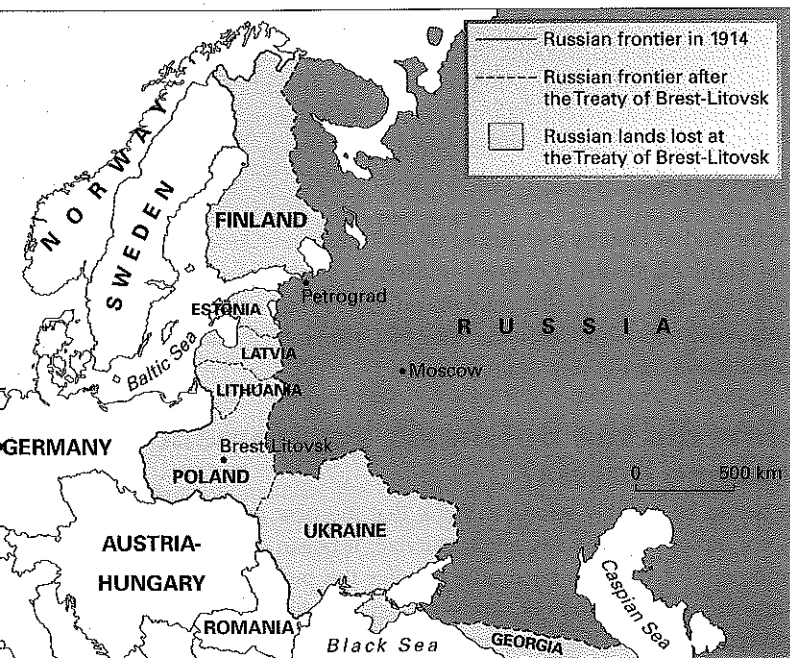
The Decree on Nationalities
This allowed the right of self-government to any national group. Housing in the cities was removed from private owners. Committees began to relocate poor families into the houses of the wealthy.

Civil marriage and divorce was introduced and made easier. A Commissariat of Public Education took all education out of the hands of the Church.

All titles were abolished. Comrade now became the title used by all. An Institute for the Protection of Mothers and Children was formed. Some larger factories were nationalized without compensation.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, March 1918

Lenin had wanted an immediate peace treaty with Germany and her allies. An armistice was signed on 2 December, but the terms the Germans demanded for permanent peace were so harsh that many in Sovnarkom refused to accept them. Lenin argued that the government had no choice but to sign the treaty whatever the cost, since Russia could not continue to fight. He knew that most Russians expected an end to the war. However, Trotsky, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, persuaded the Central Committee to adopt his own strategy of 'no peace, no war'. He hoped that dragging out the talks would enable Russian Communist soldiers to mix with members of the German army. This, he expected, would inspire the German army to mutiny and take the revolution back to Berlin.



The German army quickly grew tired of this tactic, ended the armistice and in January renewed their armed advance towards Petrograd. When bombs fell on Petrograd, the government was forced to move the capital to Moscow. Only

Think about

► Why was the Decree on Peace the first to be passed by the new government?

Think about

► Who stood to lose from these decrees?

Quotation

It is a question of signing the peace terms now or signing the death sentence of the Soviet Government three weeks later.

Lenin to the Central Committee
23 February

Source 6

◀ Russian land lost as a result of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

Facts and figures

Lenin was shot by the SR Dora Kaplan in August 1918. Cheka carried out arrests of many suspects in Petrograd afterwards.

then was Lenin able to persuade the party to accept the German terms – by threatening to resign. The terms were extremely harsh, as the map opposite shows. Russia lost one third of her European land and half of her industrial capacity. The loss of the Ukraine's grain was also a terrible blow.

Many patriotic Russians took up arms to oppose a government they regarded as having betrayed 'Mother Russia'.

The suppression of opposition, October 1917 – July 1918

Decrees of Sovnarkom soon banned all the bourgeois parties and their newspapers. Later this was extended to all other political parties. Although the Right SRs enjoyed the support of many Russian peasants, their support lay in the countryside and was difficult to organize. The Left SRs walked out of the government after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and were suppressed after their rising in July. The new government also used Cheka and loyal troops to prevent anti-government demonstrations. The Bolsheviks took control of many local soviets – sometimes by persuasion and sometimes by force. Opposition groups were either disbanded by force or went underground.

By July 1918, a Bolshevik dictatorship was in place.

Why was there a civil war in Russia?

Although the new government had established itself securely in many cities, from the summer of 1918 onwards the Communist government became more and more concerned about its survival as opposition gathered in other areas.

1. The collapse of the Russian Empire

Source 7

By the spring of 1918, the largest state in the world fell apart into innumerable overlapping entities. In a few months Russia reverted politically to the Middle Ages.

Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, 1919–1924*, 1994

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Russia began to split apart before the collapse of the Provisional Government. Lenin had decreed in November 1917 that territories were free to leave Russia. As a result many territories declared themselves independent of the RSFSR. Within Great Russia soviets took over large areas and often pursued their own policies. The Central Siberian Region Soviet in Irkutsk even rejected the peace with Germany. Volga Tatars and Bashkirs later set up their own republics. There were thirty-three sovereign governments in Russia in June 1918. Many patriotic Russians wanted to stop the disintegration of their country and keep 'Russia, one and indivisible' (General Denikin). Some fought the Civil War to achieve self-government; others fought to prevent it.

2. Political opposition

The policies and the actions of the Bolsheviks in their first few months in power (see pp. 115–117) made them many enemies. Because of these policies a number of opposition groups developed. The Union for the Defence of the Motherland and Liberty – founded in January 1918 – organized three armed revolts in July 1918 and the murder of Count Mirbach, the German ambassador.

Timeline

Declarations of Independence after the Revolution

Finland	6 Dec 1917
Lithuania	11 Dec 1917
Latvia	12 Jan 1918
Ukraine	22 Jan 1918
Estonia	24 Feb 1918
Transcaucasia	22 Apr 1918