



Consolidating the October Revolution

Why did Bolshevism survive 1918?

Jonathan Webb examines whether it was the strengths of the Bolshevik regime, or weaknesses in other parties, that allowed it to survive the October Revolution

Edexcel AS Russia in revolution 1881–1924: from autocracy to dictatorship

OCR (A) AS From autocracy to communism: Russia 1894–1941

OCR (A) A2 Russian revolutions 1894–1924

OCR (A) A2 Russia and its rulers 1855–1964

OCR (B) AS Russia in turmoil, 1900–1921

Argument

Revolution, civil war and terror

Survival of the Bolshevik regime in 1917–18 was not inevitable. It was, rather, due to a combination of the Bolsheviks' own skilful planning and manipulation of the prevailing system, incompetent opposition and some good luck.

At the start of 1918 few gave the Bolsheviks long odds on survival, Bolsheviks included. Yet they did survive 1918, despite being surrounded by internal and external enemies deeply opposed to their vision of social democracy. Though they were to face arguably greater challenges in 1919 and 1920 from determined White and Green forces, survival in 1918 proved pivotal to the Bolshevik experiment.

Later Soviet history, of course, attributed their success to the popular nature of the revolution. The law of history stated that counter-revolutionary pressures would attempt to subvert the revolution as they had, for example, during the French Revolution. But Russia in 1918 was different. Lenin had expected the Bolsheviks to be rescued by proletarian revolutions from abroad. Their failure to materialise necessitated a new Soviet interpretation. A class-conscious proletariat, guided by the 'vanguard party', had shown they were able to conquer the forces of reaction and establish the world's first Communist state. While popularity cannot be discounted, however, the survival of the Bolsheviks owed far more to a complex mix of chance factors and the political and organisational cunning of the Bolsheviks themselves.

The revolution was popular — but which revolution?

There is no doubt that core support in the urban areas proved crucial to Bolshevik survival in the revolution's early days. While the Bolsheviks may have polled only 24% of the national popular vote in the Constituent Assembly elections of January 1918, their ability to

Bolshevik steps to retain power in 1917–18

- The destruction of democracy through the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly after 1 day and the creation of state organs such as *Sovnarkom* and state planning departments.
- Local soviets increasingly interlocked with Moscow and internal democracy stifled.
- One-party rule: in June SRs and Mensheviks were expelled from the soviets.
- Tighter management of industry and the workforce.

capture the urban working-class vote, particularly in Moscow and Petrograd, was much higher at 45–50%. This gave them bedrock support which, while tested, was never fully alienated, even in the depths of the winter months of 1920–21.

Popular support did not, however, necessarily mean support for Bolshevik communism. The events of 1917 had certainly radicalised the mass of the Russian population, desperate for social change and an end to the war. What the Bolsheviks proved the masters of, and the other socialist parties particularly weak at, was the harnessing of, and responding to, that radicalised mass. Lenin's populist slogans — Peace, Bread and Land; Worker Control of Factories; and particularly All Power to the Soviets — proved pivotal in winning the hearts and minds of the urban proletariat.

Decrees such as the 8-hour day and bank nationalisation consolidated support. By adopting a land policy, which acquiesced in the general land grab of the peasants after February 1917, Lenin ensured that the Bolsheviks had, if not the active support, the passive acceptance of the peasants. In addition, the vast majority of returning soldiers voted for the Socialist Revolutionary Party or the Bolsheviks.

Bolsheviks gained 60% of the army vote in the North and Western Army groups — those closest to the great cities — and, crucially, over 80% in the actual garrisons of those cities.

By annexing popular support for the Soviet movement to the Bolshevik cause — by making it appear that a vote for the Bolsheviks was a vote for the Soviet movement — they were able to maintain the fiction that all other parties were a threat to the social revolution of 1917. By this means in August 1917 they had successfully defeated the threat of General Kornilov. This was given further impetus when the first White armies emerged in the spring of 1918, supported by foreign powers, and seemingly in league with other socialist parties.

Questions

- Was the use of terror to ensure the survival of a Bolshevik regime inherent in the circumstances that prevailed following the October 1917 coup?
- Account for the failure of opponents of the Bolshevik regime to unite and create a credible opposition and fighting force.
- Do you think the Bolshevik regime could have survived without Trotsky and the Red Army? List your reasons for and against.

Unpopular policies

One should not go too far in emphasising Bolshevik popularity, however. Many early policies were, indeed, deeply unpopular. The imposition of grain requisitioning in early 1918 through the Food Commissariat alienated many peasants and inspired localised revolts throughout 1918. Worker control of factories merely exacerbated industrial collapse and rampant inflation. Ad hoc nationalisation of industry did little to halt the catastrophic economic decline.

Whites The loose coalition of conservative anti-Bolshevik forces, whose core centred on ex-tsarist officers. They wanted to restore the power of imperial Russia.

Greens Localist peasant groups who resisted both Bolshevik food requisitioning and White attempts to restore land to the former landowners.

vanguard party Lenin's term for the Bolsheviks as the revolutionary intellectuals who would guide the proletariat towards communism.

Socialist Revolutionary Party Socialist peasant party whose main policy was land reform.

General Kornilov Tsarist general who in August 1917 marched on Petrograd and was defeated by troop mutinies and the Bolsheviks.

A food requisitioning unit heading for the countryside



Mensheviks Moderate wing of the Russian Social Democratic Party. They believed Russia was not sufficiently developed for communism.

Komuch SR-dominated 'Committee of Members of the Constitutional Assembly'. It claimed to be the legitimate government of Russia.

Sovnarkom Supreme Council established by Lenin in October 1917.

Oddly enough, however, Bolshevik power in the cities was aided by this general disintegration. Hunger and unemployment led to workers fleeing to rural areas. By 1919 Petrograd stood at 30% of its original population. This reduced the ability of opposition groups — Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) — to mount effective resistance to the Bolsheviks in the major cities. As historian Edward Acton argues, 'The processes which atomised [the Bolsheviks'] constituency of 1917 also prevented the emergence of a coherent popular movement against it.'

The lack of an alternative

The Bolsheviks were gifted power by the weak response of the other political parties after October. To be fair, Russia's middle class could do little given its overwhelming minority status — the Kadets (the party that represented Russia's small business and professional classes) polled only 5% nationally in January. Branded 'former people', they faced the ridicule of the masses, lost their homes and had to resort to hawking possessions on street corners to survive. The army's officer class felt isolated by a radicalised rank and file.

The failure of the socialist parties was more serious. The Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks were already damaged by association with the Provisional Government. While the SRs polled 40% of the popular vote in January 1918, their core support lay in the rural provinces.

The moderate SRs left the political centre, establishing their Komuch government in Samara. This government proved politically weak. Unable to recruit many peasants to fight — partly because Volga peasants had little problem with the Bolsheviks' land policy — their 30,000 troops were destroyed by Red Army forces, three times that size, by October 1918.

Peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk in 1917



Steps taken to rebuild the Red Army

- Central command by a Revolutionary Military Council, with Trotsky as chairman.
- Regional army groups.
- Restoration of ranks and the recruitment of ex-tsarist officers: 48,000 by 1920.
- Red terror: hostage taking of officers' families and the introduction of political commissars.
- Conscription: call-ups by the end of 1918 created an army of 700,000 — easily larger than all White forces put together.
- Use of the imperial arsenals: weapons stockpiled to equip an army of 9.6 million.

The radical Left SRs joined the Bolshevik government as junior partners, thus giving crucial legitimacy to the early decrees of *Sovnarkom* and the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet. They were eliminated as a political force in July 1918.

The Mensheviks proved even weaker. Despite official protests, they did little to oppose the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, having polled only 3% in the national elections. They clung on to their belief that Russia, with its large peasant population, was not ready for social revolution. Their 'wait and see' policy, expecting the Bolsheviks to collapse of their own accord, proved disastrous. Quickly marginalised, they were politically outmanoeuvred by Lenin.

Building the Soviet state

Bolshevik organisation in comparison to the other parties should not be exaggerated. The influx of party recruits in 1917 diluted the party's tight organisation. Credit must, however, be given to the Bolsheviks for taking radical steps to build a functioning soviet state — which its enemies dubbed *Sovdepia*.

Hand in hand with political organisation went the imposition of systematic and ruthless Red terror. The *Cheka* (state secret police), equating class origin with guilt, proved crucial in hunting down and executing opponents — as many as 140,000 in 1918 by some estimates. A Left SR attempt to seize power in Moscow in July 1918 was crushed by 18,000 Latvian riflemen.

Of perhaps greatest significance was the creation of the Red Army in 1918. The old imperial army had

Weblinks

www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUScivilwar.htm
www.historylearningsite.co.uk/russian_civil_war1.htm

These two useful websites give informative accounts of events, explaining who was who, who did what, and when and why they did it.

Chronology

- 1917 October** Bolsheviks seize power in St Petersburg and Moscow.
- 1918 January** Dissolution of Constituent Assembly. Establishing of Red Army.
- February** Defeat of Don Cossack and Ukrainian nationalist forces.
- March** Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.
- May** Re-emergence of Don and Kuban Cossack forces.
- June** Establishing of SR Komuch and beginning of Red Army's Volga campaign.
- October** Defeat of Komuch.
- November** Emergence of Kolchak in Siberia.

been destroyed by the Bolsheviks in January 1918. Lenin expected that revolutions across Europe would render armies obsolete. In its place a 'people's militia' would fight revolutionary class war. But the ease with which the Germans pushed almost 200 kilometres into Soviet territory in February 1918 proved these ideas to be illusory. The rebuilding of the Red Army in March 1918 came out of war in the Volga against the Komuch.

The initial period of fighting between October 1917 and February 1918, dubbed the 'railway war' due to the Bolshevik use of the railways to move volunteer detachments rapidly to war zones, led to the defeat of Cossack forces in the Don and Kuban regions and SR nationalists in Ukraine. Opposition to the emergence of Bolshevik regimes in the urban centres across Russia lacked coordination. By February 1918 only Finland, the Trans-Caucasus and Bessarabia were outside of Soviet power. With control of the Russian hinterland came control of a population of 60 million ethnic Russians — the most populous and industrially developed area of the Russian empire and crucial in the coming civil war.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

What proved critical to Bolshevik power was the securing of peace with Germany at the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. While the terms brought humiliation to Russia, losing vast swathes of its western lands, the political breathing-space it accorded the Bolsheviks was tremendous. It secured the western border, allowing troops to be redeployed against the emerging White forces — 'screens' — being deployed in the west.

The Germans, whose priority until November was the Western Front, proved complacent in their assumption that they could either deal with communism at a later date, or that it would implode under its own internal contradictions. Ironically, Bolshevik weakness now guaranteed Soviet Russia's survival, consolidating Lenin's undisputed leadership.

Brest-Litovsk, bizarrely, made the Bolsheviks the only pro-German political party in Russia. The landing of foreign troops — British in the north, French in the south and Japanese in the east — made little military impact on the civil war. The allied aim was to stop the advance of Germany rather than undermine the Soviet regime. In fact it served only to validate Lenin's claims that allied intervention amounted to an imperialist attempt to subvert the march of proletarian revolution, thus rallying the workers to the Bolshevik cause.

The emergence of the Whites

In the autumn of 1918 anti-Bolshevik forces emerged in the shape of Cossack armies in the Don under generals Krasnov and Denisov, and in the Kuban under generals Alekseev and Denikin. In the east, the ex-tsarist Admiral Kolchak established power in Omsk in November, assembling an army of conservatives, ex-tsarist officers and peasant conscripts. The weakness of these forces, and their ethnic geographical and organisational disunity, has been well documented. Policies of 'one Russia indivisible' and land restoration alienated nationalists and peasants respectively. Kolchak ended the socialist revolution outside of Bolshevism with his move against the SRs in November.

Further reading

- Acton, E. (1990) *Rethinking the Russian Revolution*, Arnold.
- Figes, O. (1996) *A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution 1891–1924*, Pimlico.
- Kowalski, R. (1997) *The Russian Revolution 1917–21*, Routledge.
- Mawdsley, E. (2008) *The Russian Civil War*, Birlinn.
- Service, R. (2000) *Lenin*, Macmillan.

Conclusion

While, arguably, 1919 posed the greatest danger to the Soviet regime as three powerful White armies converged on Moscow, the seeds of White defeat were sown in 1918. The overrunning of the Komuch regime in October and the Don Cossacks' inability to take Tsaritsyn in November, due to superior Red Army numbers, proved an ominous sign. The breathing-space given the Bolsheviks in early 1918 permitted consolidation of the Soviet state. With no viable socialist alternative, they emerged as the inheritors of the mass radicalisation of 1917. Tragically, only too late did many Russians realise that this meant terror, famine and dictatorship.

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