

Jason Yanowitz, author of *The Makhno Myth: Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, published in 2007, wrote:

'February was the product of ... concentrated effort by revolutionary socialist cadres [small bands of activists] from a number of groups. They planned for it. They agitated for it. They were accountable to each other. They tried to generalise and extend every action of workers. And they saw the combativeness and confidence of the Petrograd working class increase.'

The case is not yet closed, and various interpretations are still being offered. However, it is more common today to see the roots of the February revolution in the rise of the working-class movement before 1914, and to see the war as a catalyst that accelerated developments.

Why has there been so much disagreement between historians about the causes of the revolution of February 1917?

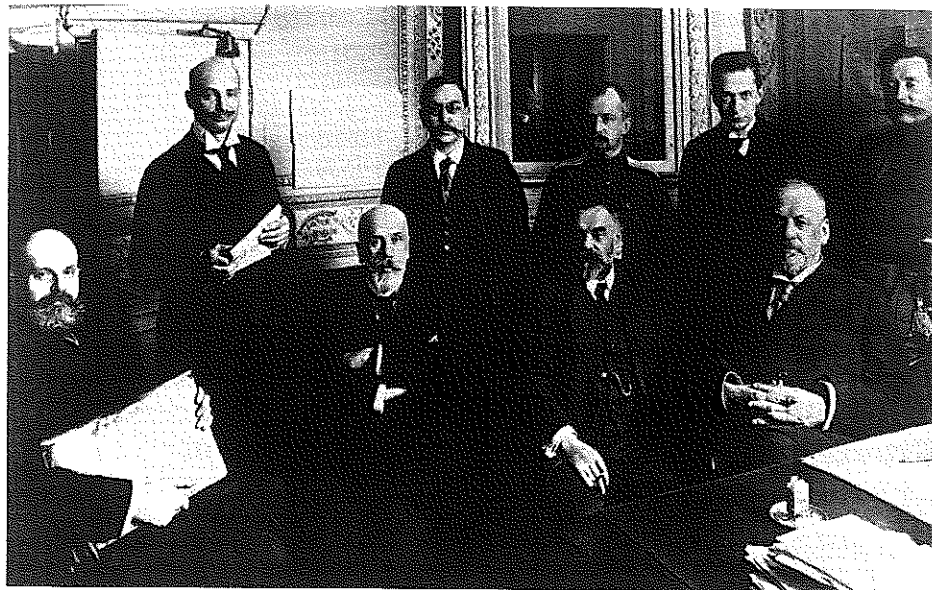
What problems were faced by the Provisional Government and the system of Dual Power?

The establishment of the Dual Power

The Provisional Committee of the Duma appointed a range of ministers in order to create a new Provisional Government on 1 March. They included liberals, moderate socialists, Constitutional Democrats and others who had formerly favoured the idea of constitutional monarchy. Some had not been members of the fourth Duma but together they represented a cross-section of influential society, bringing together landowners, industrialists, and both moderate and radical members of the intelligentsia. The chairman was Prince Georgi Lvov, an aristocrat, wealthy landowner and zemstvo leader. Milyukov was made foreign minister, Guchkov became minister of war, Konovalov was appointed minister of trade, and Alexander Kerensky became minister of justice.

When Grand-Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich rejected the offer of the tsardom on 3 March, he passed authority to the Provisional Government, thereby giving it some legitimacy – although he never intended to prolong the Provisional Government's rule. He made it clear that elections should be held as soon as possible, and a new Constituent Assembly should draw up a new constitution for Russia. Nevertheless, Mikhail's gesture enabled the Provisional Government to command the initial loyalty of the tsarist civil service, army officers and police, even though both the army and police force had been seriously weakened by desertions during the February crisis.

Being a self-appointed group, the Provisional Government was seen as undemocratic and untrustworthy by many workers, soldiers and peasants. The people believed it was dominated by rich landowners and tainted by its former co-operation with tsardom. Consequently, most workers, and many of the ordinary soldiers in Petrograd, had more faith in the alternative source of power – the Petrograd Soviet.



The leaders of the Provisional Government after the February revolution: Kerensky (standing, second right), Lvov (seated, second left) and Rodzianko (seated, first right)

The Petrograd Soviet was largely made up of Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (together with a few Bolsheviks) and had never compromised with the old autocracy. Whilst the Provisional Government had set itself up in the Duma chamber in the east (right) wing of the Tauride Palace, the Soviet established its headquarters in the west (left) wing.

Soviets (elected committees) of all types soon sprang up across Russia. Peasants organised themselves to take control of their own affairs and seize their landlords' land. Factory committees appeared in both large industrial enterprises and workshops. Soldiers along the front line created similar soviets, using them to nominate their own officers and dispose of those officers of whom they disapproved. By June 1917, when the first All-Russian Congress of Soviets met in Petrograd, 350 towns, villages and military bases throughout Russia were in a position to send representatives.

Although the Petrograd Soviet's meetings could be rough and disorderly, it could at least claim to have direct democratic authority and its members were united in wishing to bring about a true revolution and achieve workers' power. With the workers behind it, the Soviet had more support than the Provisional Government. Yet it made no attempt to take complete control, and was cautious in its approaches to the Provisional Government. It has been suggested that this was because the Soviet's leaders did not feel that capitalism was advanced enough in Russia for the country to become a socialist state.

SOURCE C

Nikolai Sukhanov, an early Soviet leader, later gave his view on why the Soviet did not take control.

Our revolution lacked both the material power and the indispensable prerequisites for an immediate Socialist transformation of Russia ... The Soviet democracy had to entrust the power to the propertied elements, its class enemy, without whose participation it could not now master the technique of administration, nor deal with the forces of tsarism and of the bourgeoisie united against it.

Quoted in Christian, D. 1997. *Imperial and Soviet Russia*. Basingstoke, UK. Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 181–82.

This ideological explanation probably hides a more practical one: the Soviet leadership actually feared the responsibility of governing. As the Soviet was primarily composed of radical socialist intellectuals, and only seven of the first 42 members of the executive committee were workers themselves, the leaders may well have doubted their ability to control the strong forces they were representing.

Following negotiations conducted by Kerensky (who was the only member of both the Provisional Government and the Soviet), the Soviet agreed to co-operate with the Provisional Government – in return for several promised concessions. These included a general amnesty for political prisoners; the granting of basic civil liberties; the abolition of legal inequalities based on class, religion and nationality; the right to organise trade unions and to strike; and the promise of a Constituent Assembly.

In line with its cautious approach at this stage, the Soviet made no attempt to gain concessions on land redistribution or the nationalisation of industry.

For its part, the Provisional Government welcomed the approval of the revolutionary Soviet, which at least had some control over the masses. Their agreement laid the foundations for the period of *dvoevlastie* (meaning 'Dual Power'), whereby Russia was governed by an alliance of the Provisional Government and Soviet. Between them, the two groups could claim to represent the whole spectrum of Russian society, except for the minority of extreme tsarists.

The Provisional Government's early decrees were popular. On 26 April, it promised that the power of the state would in future be based on the consent of the Russian people, rather than on violence and coercion (force). Freedom of religion and the press were proclaimed, the death penalty was abolished for soldiers who deserted from the front line, and the tsarist police force was replaced by a 'people's militia'. The tsar's provincial governors were also dismissed and their duties were handed over to the elected *zemstva*. Such changes suggested that the Provisional Government and Soviet would together be able to plan a better, fairer future for the Russian people.

Activity

Before reading the next section, make your own notes on the strengths and weaknesses of the Dual Power arrangement.

The problems faced by the Dual Power system

Despite all the initial optimism, the Dual Power arrangement faced many problems. The Provisional Government and the Soviet had very different ideas as to what might bring about a 'better future' for Russia. The moderate, liberal Dual Power government that assumed control was therefore forced to rely on extreme radicals with whom it had little in common. As the Soviet was at first dominated by Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks who did not agree with all that the Provisional Government wanted, the Dual Power arrangement was always bound to be difficult.

The removal of the tsarist police force and other instruments of coercion left the Provisional Government with none of the traditional means of disciplining disobedient troops or enforcing its will in the towns and countryside. The Soviet proved unhelpful and tended to encourage (rather than prevent) disturbances among peasants and workers. In March, there were peasant disorders in 34 districts; in April, there were 174 disturbances; in July, there were 325.

The supply of munitions was disrupted, as order broke down in the Petrograd factories, and large areas of the countryside were soon beyond the government's control. The problems were all made worse by the Provisional Government's determination to continue the war. Most ministers had seen the tsar's abdication as a way of improving Russia's chances in the war. Rather than seeking to end the fighting, they hoped the change of government would offer an opportunity to renew their efforts and fight more effectively.

However, the politicians' attitude was very different from that of the mass of the population. Most ordinary Russians believed the February revolution would mark the end of the problems – of tsarist control and also of wartime deprivation. But in April, Milyukov announced that the government would continue fighting until a 'just peace' had been won. This led to a massive anti-war demonstration in Petrograd, which forced the resignations of Milyukov and Guchkov.

The peasants, who made up most of the conscripts, had no interest in fighting the Germans. They were far keener to return to their villages and seize land for themselves. Propaganda spread subversive ideas at the front, and the number of military desertions rose. There had been 195,000 desertions between 1914 and February 1917; between March and May 1917, there were over 365,000. General Alexei Brusilov undertook a major offensive in Galicia, in June, in the hope of rallying the nation. However, the Russian advance was beaten back (with heavy losses) and anti-war sentiment grew still stronger. Desertions reached a peak, and the death penalty was reinstated in an effort to control the troops.

Although the government tried to pass laws to satisfy both upper and lower classes, it proved unable to reconcile the two and instead ended up alienating both. The upper classes turned against a government that failed to maintain order, protect their property or achieve wartime success. A clear consensus emerged amongst the landowners, entrepreneurs and army officers that the country needed a stronger government.

The right wing feared the Provisional Government had been hijacked by the left. Milyukov and Guchkov were replaced by socialists from the Soviet and Victor Chernov (founder of the Social Revolutionary Party) became minister of agriculture, Kerensky became minister of war and two further Mensheviks were added to the Cabinet. The replacement of Prince Lvov as chairman, by Kerensky in July 1917, further heightened the right-wingers' fear of a left-wing takeover.



General Kornilov inspecting the troops in August 1917

There was an attempted coup in early July, which was blamed on the Bolsheviks. However, this was perhaps unfair, since the Bolsheviks did not organise the coup but only joined in so as to maintain their profile (see page 160). After this, the élites increasingly pinned their hopes on General Lavr Kornilov, whom Kerensky appointed as commander-in-chief of the army on 16 July. Kornilov appeared a likely candidate to restore order and he had the support of Milyukov, Rodzianko and Guchkov, as well as the backing of the new Union of Army and Navy Officers.

At the end of August, Kornilov ordered six regiments of troops from the mighty Caucasian Native Division to march on Petrograd – presumably intending to crush the Soviet and establish a military dictatorship. However, Kerensky (who had at first supported Kornilov) panicked and asked the Soviet to help defeat the general. Kerensky released imprisoned Bolsheviks and provided the Soviet with weapons from the government's armouries. Kornilov (who, according to Alekseev, the former Army Chief of Staff, had 'a lion's heart and the brains of a sheep') found his supply lines cut. The coup failed, and Kornilov and his supporters were arrested for treason.

Activity

Find out more about the Kornilov coup. The details of this coup are not very clear, since it was planned in secret and historians have had to piece together the existing evidence in the light of their own views on what is likely to have occurred. Does this make the study of the Kornilov coup into a fictional exercise?

The lower classes also became alienated from the government. The continuation of the war was a major issue, but the government's refusal to do anything about land redistribution was equally important. Even though the peasants were actively seizing land, it was argued that nothing could be done until after the election of the Constituent Assembly. However, immediate hopes for such an assembly were dashed, as the Provisional Government claimed it was impossible to organise elections in wartime conditions. An electoral commission was eventually set up in May, to arrange elections for November. But working people remained suspicious that the 'bourgeois' government was deliberately delaying a move to greater democracy in order to preserve its own power.

Workers were also disappointed to find that they experienced little real improvement in their conditions. Although the government granted an eight-hour day, the real value of wages fell even more rapidly than before, as prices rose. In January 1917 prices were 300% of 1914 levels. By October they had risen to 755%. Food supplies were also unreliable, with frequent shortages.

Furthermore, in August the government confirmed the right of factory owners to dismiss workers. It also banned meetings of factory committees during working hours (despite their previous acceptance of unions, factory committees and strikes). Not surprisingly, many workers claimed that the Provisional Government was not legitimate and said that they would only take orders from the Soviet.

Why did a second revolution occur in October 1917?

The October revolution, which overthrew the Provisional Government, followed a Bolshevik coup. However, it is unlikely that this coup could have come about if there had not been profound disillusionment with the Provisional Government by that time.

In February 1917, the Bolsheviks were still only a small party of 25,000 members. They had just 40 representatives in the 1500-strong Soviet, and all their major leaders were living abroad or in exile. The likelihood of this group staging a coup must have seemed very remote in the early months of 1917. Although Lev Kamenev and Joseph Stalin returned in mid March, they simply followed the other left-wing socialists in supporting the Provisional Government.

It was only after Lenin's return in April, with new promises of 'peace, bread, land' and 'all power to the soviets', that the Bolsheviks increasingly won over the workers, peasants and soldiers. As the Provisional Government grew weaker, so Bolshevik membership rose. By June, most factory committees in Petrograd, as well as the sailors at the Kronstadt naval base, were all supporting the Bolshevik cause. At the first All-Russian Congress of Soviets that month, the Bolsheviks had 105 delegates (though this was still fewer than the Mensheviks with 248, and the Social Revolutionaries with 285). Trotsky and his followers joined the Bolsheviks in July. On 3 July, pro-Bolshevik units in the army refused to be sent to the front. They joined other frustrated left-wing radical protesters on the streets, including the sailors from Kronstadt. A crowd of 250,000 people went to the Tauride Palace, demanding an end to the war and a handover of power to the soviets.

The riots, which were referred to as 'the July Days', were not organised by the Bolshevik leadership. However, after the disturbances were suppressed by government forces two days later, *Pravda* (the Bolshevik newspaper) was closed down and the Bolsheviks were blamed. Kerensky published letters showing that the Bolsheviks were receiving finance from the Germans. This undermined their popularity and several Bolshevik leaders, including Trotsky, were arrested (although Trotsky was soon released because insufficient evidence could be found against him). Lenin was accused of being a German agent. He chose to flee, along with Grigori Zinoviev, and eventually crossed into Finland.

The Bolshevik Party survived the damage. Although officially banned, it managed to hold a secret conference in Petrograd in mid July. In early August, when Kornilov staged his coup, the Bolsheviks not only gained a pardon for their leaders (except Lenin) but also weapons, which their Red Guards used against Kornilov but subsequently refused to return.

By early September, the Bolsheviks had gained a majority on the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet (and shortly afterwards in the Moscow Soviet too). They also won local government elections in several towns and cities. The Executive Committee therefore readily supported a Bolshevik resolution that power should be transferred to the soviets. Trotsky became chairman and on 16 October created a Military Revolutionary Committee, to give the Soviet a fighting force. It was no secret that plans for a Bolshevik coup were underway. On 22 October, Kerensky tried to prevent the coup by ordering the arrest of the Military Revolutionary Committee. The next day, Bolshevik newspapers were closed down and the telephone lines to the Bolshevik headquarters at the Smolny Institute were cut.

Kerensky's action provoked the very coup that he had been seeking to avoid. On 24 October, under the direction of the Military Revolutionary Committee, Bolshevik Red Guards (mainly young Bolshevik factory workers) and other troops loyal to the Soviet took action. They seized key communication points in the city (including bridges, railway stations, the central post office and the telephone exchange) and met very little resistance.

A propaganda painting showing the Bolsheviks storming the Winter Palace



The so-called revolution of 25 October was in reality quite a tame affair. Military units surrounded the Winter Palace, where the remaining members of the Provisional Government were meeting. Between 9 and 10 pm, sailors aboard the battleship *Aurora*, moored on the River Neva, fired a series of blank shots. These did little damage but were sufficient to persuade most of the teenage cadets and women soldiers defending the palace to surrender. Shots were also fired from the artillery in the Peter and Paul Fortress on the opposite side of the River Neva (although only one actually hit the palace).

On hearing the shots, soldiers entered through a back door and eventually found their way to the room where the remaining members of the government were waiting. The government representatives were duly arrested. (Kerensky had already managed to escape in a car belonging to the US Embassy. After a failed attempt to rally loyal forces, he lived out the rest of his life in exile in Paris and New York.) The incident was soon over and there were only two recorded deaths.

Problems of interpretation

In one sense, it is easy to understand why there was a second revolution in 1917 because the February revolution had clearly left many issues unresolved. However, the enormous growth of Bolshevik power and influence between February and October also had a big impact on the nature and timing of the October revolution.

Traditional Soviet historians, at least until the end of the Stalinist era (1953), interpreted the October revolution as 'logically predetermined'. For many years, it was regarded in Russia as the 'victory of the workers' (represented by the Soviet) over 'the bourgeoisie' (represented by the Provisional Government). All these events were thought to have been guided, of course, by the wise hand of Lenin.

The Western approach during the early Cold War, at least until the 1960s, was to brand the Bolsheviks as a ruthless minority party. According to Western historians, the Bolsheviks' determination enabled them to impose their will on the majority in October, when the Provisional Government was in a weakened state. Indeed, these historians saw the behaviour of the leaders of the October revolution as foreshadowing Stalin's totalitarian approach (complete state control, under one all-powerful leader).



Theory of knowledge

History and bias

How easy is it for historians to avoid national bias when writing history? What other forms of bias can affect the way historians write?

Since the 1960s, there have been considerable reappraisals on both sides. This became particularly marked in the East with the introduction of *glasnost* ('openness') in the 1980s and the break-up of the USSR in 1991. These events not only allowed greater freedom of interpretation, but also permitted access to archives that had previously been kept hidden. Some post-Stalinist historians, such as Eduard Burdzhakov and Pavel Volobuev, bravely challenged the official Communist Party line. Likewise, some Western historians (critical of American policies in the years following the Vietnam War) also challenged earlier Western accounts.

Yet it is only in the last 20 years that historians have come to accept that the October revolution was the result of a variety of factors (economic and social as well as political and linked to its leadership). It is now widely believed that Bolshevism succeeded less because of the party's centralisation, unity and discipline (all of which have been questioned) than because of its flexibility in the face of circumstances. Nevertheless, the question of how much weight should be assigned to each of these factors is still unresolved.

Whatever the underlying causes, it is now widely agreed that the actual events of 25–26 October were instigated by a small band of determined revolutionaries at a time when the Provisional Government had neither the support nor the coercive powers needed to retain control. Despite the later Bolshevik myths partly spread by Sergei Eisenstein's film *October* (in which more damage was done to the Winter Palace than in the real October 1917), the 'storming' was not a spectacular people-led uprising. In fact, at the time, the majority of those living in Petrograd – let alone the rest of Russia – were hardly aware of what was going on. It should also be remembered that the 'revolution' was supposedly carried out in the name of the Petrograd Soviet, through its Military Committee. It was on the Petrograd Soviet's authority that the Provisional Government was ultimately disbanded and power transferred to the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. However, in practice, the victory was dominated by the Bolsheviks and they rapidly made it their own.

The historical debate about the October 1917 coup is discussed further on pages 168–69. Some of the questions include the nature of the roles of Lenin and Trotsky, and whether it was indeed a Bolshevik coup or simply a tide of revolution on which the Bolsheviks were prepared to ride.

What roles did Lenin and Trotsky play in the events of 1917?

In many respects, the October revolution was the work of two very single-minded 'professional' revolutionaries: Lenin, who provided the leadership and fire; and Trotsky, who contributed the military brain. Neither had been in a position to play any part in the February revolution, since they were both in exile. Nevertheless, once the autocracy crumbled, both were determined to return to Russia and influence its future.

Neither Lenin nor Trotsky was very familiar with the lives of the ordinary people of Russia. They were both educated men from relatively wealthy backgrounds, who had spent most of their adult lives abroad. Lenin had lived outside Russia since 1900 (except for a very brief return during the 1905 revolution) and had spent the latter years in Switzerland. Meanwhile, Trotsky had spent most of the previous ten years in exile, living in various cities including Vienna, Zurich, Paris and – from January 1917 – New York. The two men shared a deep hatred of the old regime and a commitment to Marxism and political activism.

From Switzerland, Lenin tried to gain re-entry to Russia in 1917 through negotiations with the Germans, who believed his return would cause chaos and so undermine the Russian war effort. Nevertheless, the Germans were prepared to offer him safe passage by train through Frankfurt, Berlin and Stockholm (in neutral Sweden), although only in a 'sealed' train, confining Lenin and his band of followers to a locked compartment.

Lenin's arrival at Petrograd on 3 April marked the beginning of a series of events that would propel Russia towards the October revolution. Lenin was uncertain of what sort of reception awaited him, and half-expected to be arrested on leaving the train. However, his fears turned out to be unfounded. His reputation had gone before him, and he was greeted by a cheering band of soldiers and workers who were convinced that Lenin could somehow ensure that their needs were met.

SOURCE

On arriving in Petrograd in 1917, Lenin made an inspiring declaration.

... the worldwide socialist revolution is dawning; European capitalism is on the brink of collapse. Soldiers, comrades! We must fight for a socialist revolution in Russia! We must fight until [we achieve] the total victory of the proletariat! Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!

Quoted in Sixsmith, M. 2011. Russia. London, UK. BBC Books. p. 194.

Lenin's absolute confidence that a proletarian revolution would soon be achieved within Russia ensured that he stood out from other socialist leaders, who had argued that Russia had to go through a bourgeois/liberal phase before it would be possible to establish a working man's government. Lenin had reached the conclusion (as had Trotsky before him) that it was both possible and desirable to create a working-class government in Russia, despite the country's backwardness. He believed that the creation of such a government would help trigger revolutions in the more developed capitalist countries, which would in turn give support to the Russian workers. This theory of 'permanent revolution' made a proletarian revolution an immediate possibility. It also made it vital to have a policy of 'no compromise' with the bourgeoisie. The first two Bolsheviks to return from exile (in Siberia), Stalin and Kamenev, supported the Provisional Government. However, Lenin demonstrated his authority and leadership by declaring himself firmly against any such agreement.

Lenin also believed that the Provisional Government's liberal democracy was not in the proletariat's interests. He described it as a mere façade for the dictatorship (rule) of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, because the trade unions wanted to work with the capitalists to improve their members' conditions, he condemned these unions too. According to Lenin, true revolutionary action on the proletariat's behalf required a vanguard party (a pioneering group) to educate the workers and peasants politically. This education would help them rise above the low political expectations of 'trade-union consciousness'. Lenin's theorising helped him to justify the Bolsheviks' quest for power. He claimed that the Bolsheviks were that vanguard party, who would develop 'true revolutionary class consciousness' and fulfil the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. In other words, they would rule by, and in the interests of, the ordinary working people.

Lenin's first act in the Petrograd Soviet was to produce a manifesto, which became known as the April Theses. In this manifesto, he urged the soviets to overthrow the Provisional Government and create a dictatorship of the proletariat. He concluded with the powerful slogan 'All power to the soviets!' even though the Bolshevik Party was, as yet, only a minor influence within the soviets.

The April Theses also made promises that other leaders had hesitated to offer, such as an end to the war, land for the peasants, and an improvement in the food supplies in the towns. This was just what the workers, peasants and soldiers wanted to hear, and 'peace, bread and land' became their rallying cry. Lenin rapidly understood and responded to the public mood. By June 1917, he was able to stand up in the Petrograd Soviet and declare, 'To those who say there is no political party ready to take full responsibility for power in Russia, I say, Yes there is! ... We Bolsheviks will not shirk the task. We are ready here and now to assume the fullness of power.'

Trotsky left New York in March, but his ship was detained by British naval officials in Canada and he only arrived back in Russia on 4 May. Although Trotsky shared Lenin's ideas on permanent revolution, he did not commit himself to the Bolshevik Party immediately. Nevertheless, he quickly established his influence, joining the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which had been formed in June.

Trotsky was arrested after the unsuccessful July Days rising in Petrograd. While he was in prison, he became a committed Bolshevik. After his release, following Kornilov's unsuccessful uprising, Trotsky was elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet on 26 September. (The Bolsheviks had recently come to dominate the Petrograd Soviet by altering the membership regulations.) Trotsky was an expert strategist and he immediately set about turning the Soviet into an arm of the Bolshevik Party.

On 5 October, the commander of the Petrograd Military District, following Kerensky's instructions, ordered most of the capital's revolutionary-leaning garrison units to prepare for immediate transfer to the front. This action sparked a general mutiny, with most of the troops declaring their loyalty to the Petrograd Soviet. On 9 October, the Soviet adopted a militant resolution, written by Trotsky. This called for the creation of a 'military revolutionary centre' to 'facilitate the defence of Petrograd from the attacks being openly prepared by military and civil Kornilovites'.

Lenin, still in exile in Finland, believed the time was right for an immediate coup. However, his letters to the Bolshevik Central Committee in Petrograd did not find immediate favour. Even Trotsky initially urged that they should wait for the second Congress of Soviets before launching the revolution. Such was Lenin's frustration that he returned secretly and in disguise to a meeting of the Central Committee in Petrograd, on 10 October. At the meeting, he bullied the committee into supporting his plans. Trotsky was persuaded and took Lenin's side against Zinoviev and Kamenev. The vote was eventually agreed: ten in favour of an immediate coup, and two (Zinoviev and Kamenev) against such action.

It was largely left to Trotsky to organise the revolution. Speakers were sent round factories to ensure the vital support that was needed for success. Trotsky took personal charge of the new Military Revolutionary Committee of the Soviet, which (from 18 October onwards) began to gather troops at the Bolshevik headquarters in the Smolny Institute. Since the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries refused to join this group, it became a Bolshevik fighting force, which was made up of militias from the Bolshevik Red Guards, former soldiers and policemen.

Red Guards marching through Moscow in 1917



The garrison crisis (see page 166) escalated and the Military Revolutionary Committee appointed commissars who were sent to all the city's troop units to win their loyalty. In total, 15 of the 18 garrisons declared allegiance to the Soviet rather than the Provisional Government. According to Czech historian Michael Reiman, this was the beginning of the October revolution. He wrote:

'Already on October 21st and 22nd the Military Revolutionary Committee, in effect, took upon itself authority over the [Petrograd] garrison. Its actions, from both a practical and a judicial standpoint, would be considered by any nation a clear case of mutiny and insurrection.'

Trotsky too argued, in *Lessons of October*, that the Petrograd Soviet entered a state of armed revolution before 25 October. He wrote:

'From the moment when we, as the Petrograd Soviet, invalidated Kerensky's order transferring two-thirds of the garrison to the front, we had actually entered a state of armed insurrection ... the outcome of the insurrection of October 25 was at least three-quarters settled, if not more, the moment that we opposed the transfer of the Petrograd garrison and created the Military Revolutionary Committee.'

Discussion point

Was the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 inevitable? Was the Provisional Government doomed from the start? Should such questions be asked by historians?

Problems of interpretation

This interpretation of the events of October 1917 suggests that Trotsky's role was vital to the success of the revolution. It also suggests that he played a bigger part than Lenin, who eventually emerged from hiding to take charge on the night of 25 October only after the Military Revolutionary Committee had directed its units to seize the key points of the capital. But Eisenstein's film *October*, which originally gave both Lenin and Trotsky starring roles, was re-cut in the Stalinist era to portray Trotsky as a coward who hesitated at the start of revolution while the Bolshevik troops marched forward. Consequently, Trotsky was never given any credit by Soviet historians for his actions in October 1917. Indeed, some books on the period still emphasise the importance of Lenin's role, at Trotsky's expense.

The parts played by Lenin and Trotsky, both individually and collectively, are still interpreted in different ways. For example, Richard Pipes suggests that Lenin's drive, as the leader of a coup, was the main factor behind the October revolution. However, he also acknowledges the crucial role played by Trotsky in the actual organisation of the revolution. His view is that Lenin and Trotsky led an 'aggressive minority' and exploited the confusion that existed in Russia by October 1917 in order to seize power.

Stephen Smith challenges this interpretation and stresses the importance of the lower ranks of the Bolshevik Party. He also puts forward the view that the revolution was essentially a 'popular uprising', which both Lenin and Trotsky harnessed but did not propel.

Sheila Fitzpatrick also takes this line and questions Lenin's control over the party. She emphasises the importance of the radicalism of workers, peasants and soldiers. While she acknowledges Lenin's ability to mobilise the masses and his mastery of propaganda, and praises Trotsky's organisational skills, she suggests the revolution was driven 'from below'.

Alexander Rabinowitch supports this view and stresses the extent to which the leadership responded to grass-roots radicalism in the cities. In short, while no one denies the significance of the parts played by both Lenin and Trotsky, the most recent historical appraisals suggest their roles were more organisational than inspirational.

Activity

Work with a partner to create a suitable diagram that provides the key facts to support detailed appraisal of the roles of Lenin and Trotsky in the events of 1917. Take one individual each, and complete the diagram as far as possible. You can return to this diagram and add further detail after you have studied Bolshevik Russia.

End of chapter activities

Paper 3 exam practice

Question

Why, despite the abdication of the tsar in February/March 1917, was there a second revolution in Russia in October/November 1917? [20 marks]

Skill focus

Avoiding a narrative-based answer

Examiner's tips

Even once you have read the question carefully (and so avoided the temptation of including irrelevant material), produced your plan and written your introductory paragraph, it is still possible to go wrong.

By 'writing a narrative answer', history examiners mean supplying material that is potentially relevant to the question (and may well be very precise and accurate) **but** which is not clearly used in a way that answers the question. Instead of supporting comments that respond to the question, it merely **describes** what happened.

Your essay should be an argument, not simply an 'answer' in which you 'tell a story' or describe issues and developments. You should **address the demands/key words of the question** – and your response needs to be consistently analytical. You need to link each paragraph to the question and to the previous paragraph, in order to produce a clear 'joined-up' answer.

There is an increased danger of lapsing into a narrative essay when answering the final question – especially if you are running short of time. Despite all your good intentions at the start of the exam, you may be so keen to get started on your final (and perhaps least well-known) question that you set out without sufficient planning, before forming a proper judgement and so with little idea of 'where' you are going. If you are not careful, this will lead you to produce an **account**, as opposed to an analysis – writing around the question, rather than answering it directly. So, even if you are short of time, try to think and plan first and then write several analytical paragraphs that convey a view and show your understanding of the supporting information.

A good way of avoiding a narrative approach is to keep referring back to the question and to use its key words in your answer. This will help you to produce an answer that is focused on the specific demands of the question – rather than just giving information about the broad topic or period.

For this question, you will need to cover the following aspects:

- what changed as a result of the tsar's abdication in February 1917 – which grievances were resolved, and which remained or emerged
- why there was a revolution in October 1917 – the importance of the remaining/new grievances after February 1917 versus the importance of other factors
- your judgement as to why there was a second revolution in October 1917 – whether the tsar's abdication resolved anything, and whether it made the second revolution more or less likely.

Common mistakes

Every year, even candidates who have clearly revised well (and therefore have a good knowledge of the topic and of any historical debate surrounding it) still end up producing mainly narrative-based or descriptive answers. Very often, this is the result of not having drawn up a proper plan.

The extracts from the student's answer below show an approach that essentially just describes the revolutions of 1917, without any analysis linking the answer to the question.

Remember to refer to the simplified Paper 3 markscheme on page 215.

Sample paragraphs of narrative-based approach

Nicholas II abdicated in February/March 1917 because of the riots that broke out in Petrograd. On Thursday 23 February, International Women's Day, a march of women through the city centre turned political. Women who had been queuing for bread and unemployed workers from the nearby Putilov Works joined in. Fifty factories stopped work in the course of that day and there was chaos in the city. This led to three days of rioting and the crowds grew larger each day. The next thing to happen was that, as the violence escalated, some soldiers refused to fire on the rioters and instead joined them.

By this point, almost the whole of the city's workforce has come out on strike and Petrograd is at a standstill. Although the Duma president Rodzianko contacts Nicholas to tell him that all is not well and that he needs to return, when Nicholas gets the telegram, he ignores it. Then he has second thoughts and orders Major-General Khabalov, who is the commander in Petrograd, to open fire on the crowds. Following this, even more soldiers mutiny and this turns the protests into a revolution ...

[The rest of the essay continues in the same way. There is plenty of accurate/relevant description of the February/March revolution and the events of March to August 1917, but time runs out and the later events are rushed and less detailed. There is only just time to mention that there was a revolution in October/November 1917, in the final paragraph. The whole point of the question – why there was a revolution in Russia in October/November 1917 – has been missed.]

*This example, while accurate and detailed, shows what examiners mean by a narrative/descriptive answer. Note the 'time words' (such as 'By this point', 'Then' and 'Following this') and the way the writer slips into the present tense in order to 'tell the story'. This is something you should **not** copy!*

Activity

In this chapter, the focus is on avoiding writing narrative-based answers. Using the information from this chapter, and any other sources of information available to you, try to answer **one** of the Paper 3 practice questions on page 173 in a way that avoids description. Do not use 'time words' and make sure your paragraphs begin with comments linking them to the question, so that they do not lead into narrative.

Paper 3 practice questions

- 1 Compare and contrast the causes, nature and consequences of the two Russian revolutions of 1917.
- 2 Analyse the reasons for the overthrow of the tsar in the Russian revolution of February/March 1917.
- 3 'The Russian revolutions of 1917 showed the depths of the Russian people's discontent.' How far do you agree with this statement?
- 4 'It was the Dual Power arrangement that prevented the Provisional Government from consolidating and maintaining its power in Russia.' Assess the validity of this view.
- 5 'A coup driven by Bolshevik ideology' or 'a protest against the inadequacies of the Provisional Government'? Which is the more appropriate description of the events of October/November 1917?
- 6 Analyse the roles of Lenin and Trotsky in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.