

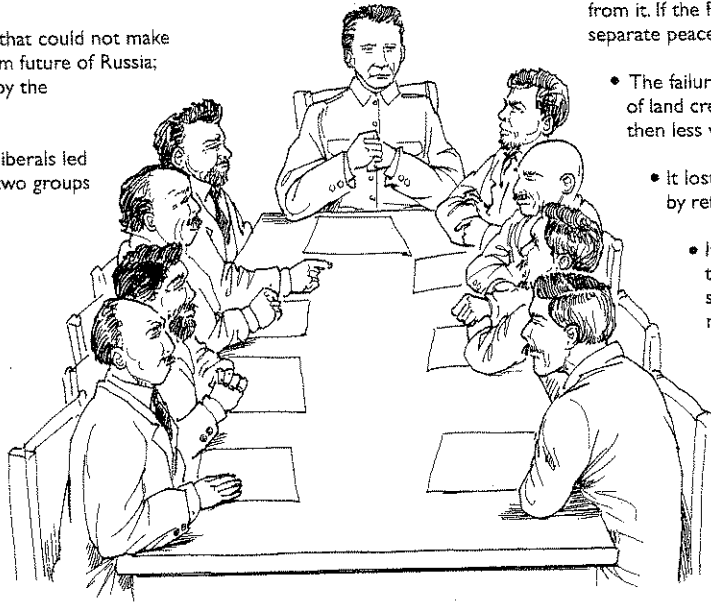
Section 2 Review: Why were the Bolsheviks successful in October 1917?

The main focus of Section 2 is the key question: Why were the Bolsheviks successful in October 1917? The two diagrams on pages 111 and 112 summarise the main points relating to this question that have been covered in the last two chapters and add one or two new ideas. You can use these diagrams to help you to write an essay, as suggested on page 112, or for revision in an exam.

■ A The weaknesses and failures of the Provisional Government

The nature of the Provisional Government

- Its scope for action was limited because real power was held by the Soviet.
- It saw itself as a temporary body that could not make binding decisions for the long-term future of Russia; such decisions were to be made by the Constituent Assembly.
- Divisions between socialists and liberals led to a lack of clear policies, as the two groups often blocked each other.



Policies

- The decision to continue the war created a huge amount of opposition, and other problems stemmed from it. If the Provisional Government had made a separate peace with Germany, it might have survived.
- The failure to legitimise the peasant take-over of land created a rift with the peasants, who were then less willing to supply food to the cities.
- It lost the support of the national minorities by refusing to give them a degree of autonomy.
- It did nothing about the deterioration of the economy; together with the lack of social reform this contributed to the radicalisation of the workers.

Mistakes by Kerensky

- He decided to launch a new offensive against Germany in June.
- The Kornilov affair left him discredited. Officers would not fight for him or the Provisional Government because they felt he had betrayed Kornilov and might betray them.
- He underestimated the strength of the Bolsheviks. By moving against them in October, he gave them an excuse for seizing power, thereby increasing their popularity and allowing them to claim that they were seizing power in the name of the Soviet.

Other factors

- Moderate socialists lost contact with their supporters – the workers and peasants.
- The government failed to call the Constituent Assembly early enough.
- Alarmed by violence and the power of the working class, the Kadets moved further to the right and became identified with reactionary military officers, industrialists and landowners.

Summary: By October 1917, the Provisional Government was thoroughly discredited and attracted hatred and contempt.

■ B Bolshevik strengths and factors in their favour

Policies

- Bolsheviks opposed the Provisional Government and urged its overthrow. The identification of other socialist parties with the discredited government was fatal for them. It meant that opposition to the Provisional Government became focused around the Bolsheviks.
- The Bolsheviks were the only party that opposed continuing the war – this greatly increased their popularity.
- They secured the tacit, if not active, support of the peasants with the promise of land redistribution.
- Their radical policies were in tune with workers' and soldiers' aspirations; their slogans of 'Peace, Bread and All Power to the Soviets' fitted in perfectly with what the workers and soldiers wanted (even if the Bolsheviks had a different idea about what these policies actually meant).

Luck

- The military and economic collapse in September/October offered a unique opportunity that the Bolsheviks seized. The army was not in a position to do much, and hunger was an important factor in October.
- Radicalised workers who favoured soviet power were prepared to support the party that seemed to offer this.
- The Provisional Government, particularly Kerensky, played into the Bolsheviks' hands with its half-hearted attempt to counter the rising.



The party

- The role of Lenin was crucial – his strong, determined leadership and prestige in the party meant he could force through key policy decisions (such as the April Theses) and the October Revolution. There would probably have been no October Revolution without Lenin.
- Although it was probably not the well-disciplined body it was once thought to be, its organisation was better than that of other parties and it broadly followed directives from the party leadership.
- Trotsky's role in persuading Lenin to postpone the date of the uprising and organising the take-over was very important. It was a good tactic to use the All-Russian Congress of Soviets as the vehicle for the seizure of power.

Other factors

- The Bolsheviks had their greatest number of active supporters, particularly soldiers and sailors, around Petrograd and Moscow, key places in the revolution.
- Whilst only a small minority of the Petrograd garrison actively supported the Bolsheviks, the majority of soldiers remained neutral and refused to oppose them; this guaranteed their success in October.

Summary: By October, the Bolsheviks had become the focus of opposition to the Provisional Government. The people wanted soviet power and the Bolsheviks became identified with this aim. Some historians have suggested that it was not so much what they did as the situation in which they found themselves – the revolution literally fell into their hands because of profound disillusionment with the existing government, the dire economic situation and the radicalised nature of the workers. Nevertheless, it is clear that Lenin played a key role in forcing through the October insurrection.

ACTIVITY

You could use Charts A and B (pages 111 and 112) to help you write an essay:

- 1 Why were the Bolsheviks successful in October 1917? or
- 2 It was the weakness of the Provisional Government that brought about the October Revolution rather than the strengths of the Bolsheviks.

Use the points in the charts as a guide. Decide what your main points are and which point could be used to support these main points. Go back to the notes you have made on your Focus Route activities (or the main text) for help in developing your arguments.