

How were the Bolsheviks able to seize power in October 1917?

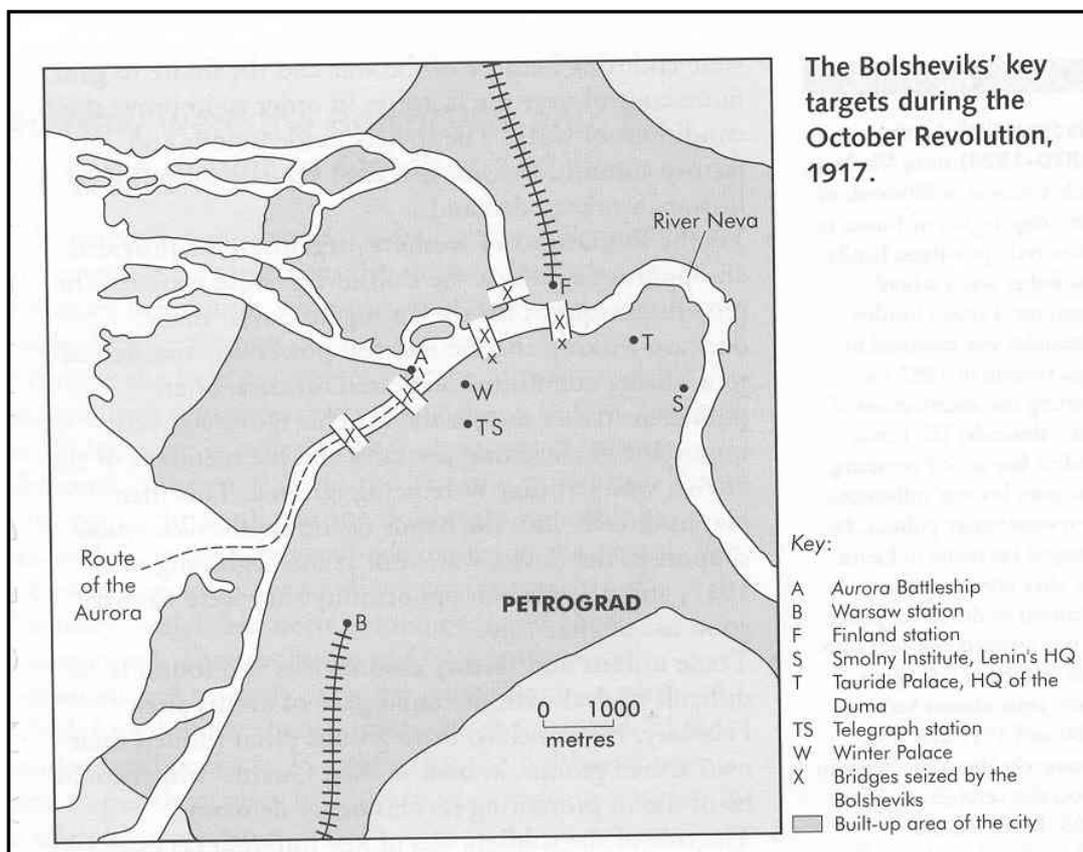
It is, perhaps, tempting to see the Bolshevik Revolution as an inevitable conclusion to the chaos unleashed after the February Revolution. However, this view would give a very misleading impression of the situation in 1917. In February the Bolsheviks were just one of many socialist groups, with a membership of only about 20,000. Many of its leaders were in exile or under arrest and there were divisions in the party about the best way to proceed. Yet in October of the same year the Bolsheviks were able to successfully stage a *coup* and take power in the capital. **The October Revolution was a direct contrast to that of February**, which had been spontaneous and largely unorganised. The revolution of October was a well-organised and masterly executed *coup d'etat* by a party which had skilfully aligned itself with the demands of the workers and peasants. It is clear that the Bolsheviks were able to put themselves in a highly advantageous position in a relatively short time.

The February Revolution caused fevered excitement amongst the workers, soldiers and peasants. The task the Bolsheviks successfully accomplished was to find the common ground between the demands of all these groups and articulate them in order to gain support. In doing so, the Bolsheviks gained support from a reasonably wide section of the working population and were able to organise this support in order to seize power. They were also helped by the general situation in Russia in early 1917.

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTED TO SUPPORT FOR THE BOLSHEVIKS?

- It soon became clear that the Provisional Government was not in a position to deliver the sort of reforms that many **industrial workers** wanted and, as a result, direct action was seen as the only way forward. The demands of the industrial workforce arose from the hardships they were enduring because of the war and the desire to gain more control over the factories in order to improve their conditions of work. The soviets, trade unions and factory committees were the ideal vehicles for pushing forward workers' demands.
- Yet the **limitations of workers' organisations** provided an opportunity which the Bolsheviks could exploit. The growth in support for the Petrograd Soviet made decision-making chaotic and real power was transferred to a smaller committee of elected officials, often politicians rather than workers. This move was very important in alienating the rank and file members of the Soviet, who felt they were being ignored. This then played directly into the hands of the Bolsheviks, whose support in the Soviet was weak at the beginning of 1917, and provided an opportunity they were to make good use of after July.
- **Trade unions and factory committees** also found it difficult to deal with the rapid pace of events after February. Nonetheless, these groups often formed their own armed groups, known as 'Red Guards' which could be of use in promoting revolutionary demands.
- The role of the **soldiers** was of key importance, especially after the inclusion of their representatives in the soviets. Although there is evidence that patriotism remained a strong force amongst front-line troops, those stationed in garrisons were particularly radical. It was to these groups that the Bolsheviks targeted their propaganda, calling for a separate peace with Germany to end the war.

- The **peasants**, who made up the bulk of the soldiers, were also keen to see the end of the war but their main priority was to return to the countryside and gain some land of their own and with it more control over their own lives. With the increase in desertions from the army, as peasants returned to their villages to seize land for themselves, this issue became urgent.
- The skill of the Bolsheviks was in gearing their ideas and slogans towards these three groups - workers, soldiers and peasants - and organising support to increase their power. Support for the Bolsheviks was greatly increased by their skilful use of propaganda. **Lenin's** arrival in Petrograd in April provided a major boost for Bolshevik morale. In his '**April Theses**' he described the Provisional Government as representing the bourgeois or middle-class stage of revolution which would move to a second stage of revolution where power would be transferred to the workers and peasants. He saw the Provisional Government as a spent force and advocated pushing for a workers' revolution. Lenin's promises to end the war, to give land 'to the people' and ensure adequate food supplies provided the useful rallying cry of '**peace, land and bread**'. This slogan also demonstrated the way in which the Bolsheviks were able to combine the demands of industrial workers, soldiers and peasants to maximise their appeal.
- Despite this growth in support there was the setback of the failure of the 'July Days', although this was temporary and in August the **Kornilov coup** revived Bolshevik fortunes, whilst at the same time undermining the position of the other socialist groups. The Bolsheviks' stand against Kornilov increased their support and gave them the renewed confidence of the workers. This quickly became evident in the September elections to the Petrograd Soviet. Trotsky became president of the Soviet and the Bolsheviks gained control. A majority was also gained in the Moscow Soviet. The Kornilov affair had also given the Bolsheviks a much stronger position in the Red Guards, now a force of 10,000.



THE SITUATION IN SEPTEMBER 1917

By September 1917 **Lenin was convinced that the time was right** to stage an armed attempt for power. Other Bolsheviks, including Kamenev and Zinoviev, were opposed to such an idea, arguing that a rising would leave the party in an isolated and uncertain position. But for Lenin the time was now right and any delay could lead to a downturn in their fortunes. It is here that the importance of Lenin is to be seen. He was **able to persuade his party of the necessity for immediate revolution**: a revolution which could be undertaken with the support of the Petrograd Soviet and the Red Guards.

What decided the timing of the revolution, however, was **Kerensky's action**. He decided to close down Bolshevik newspapers and arrest some leading Bolsheviks. Lenin and Trotsky then implemented the plans to seize power. Here the advantage of Lenin's insistence on a small elite organisation helped the Bolsheviks. Lenin's supporters were loyal and secrecy was maintained. The key positions in Petrograd were seized by **Red Guards** under the direction of a **Military Revolutionary Committee** (MRC) and co-ordinated by **Trotsky**. Power stations, police stations, bridges and the rail network in Petrograd were all in Bolshevik hands and with the help of a battleship pointing its guns at the Winter Palace, the Provisional Government surrendered what little power it had.

The chaotic situation under the Provisional Government created an enormous advantage for the Bolsheviks. Although the October Revolution was later presented by the Bolsheviks as an heroic struggle, including the storming of the Winter Palace, this was a gross exaggeration of the events of October 1917. **The palace was not stormed**, in fact the gates were open and very few casualties resulted. The Provisional Government held so little power by this time that it was hardly worth overthrowing. Nonetheless, the Bolshevik seizure of power cannot just be put down to the weaknesses of the Provisional Government. Although small in number, the Bolsheviks showed themselves to be skilful at reading the situation and understanding what was required in order to gain support and seize control. They were thus able to seize the moment. Lenin and Trotsky had shown themselves to be masters of revolution but **taking power was the easy part; holding on to it would be a much more difficult task**.

The role of Trotsky in the October revolution

Trotsky was regarded by suspicion by some Bolsheviks because he had previously been a supporter of the Mensheviks. Nonetheless, his role in the October Revolution was of key importance.

- Trotsky supported Lenin's idea of seizing power through an armed uprising when other Bolshevik leaders were more cautious.
- He planned the details of the seizure of power in Petrograd. This aimed at taking over key buildings in the city.
- He organised the Bolshevik Red Guard, taking responsibility for recruitment and discipline.
- He co-ordinated military operations through the Military revolutionary Committee.
- He was a great speaker, able to motivate Bolshevik supporters to carry out their actions.
- He was an inspiration through his unflinching energy.

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Summary Questions

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2. How did the October Revolution differ to the February Revolution?
3. Why were the Bolsheviks able to win support from (a) the peasants (b) the industrial workers and (c) soldiers during the summer of 1917?
4. What measures did Trotsky take to ensure that the October Revolution was successful?

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