

WHY WERE THE BOLSHEVIKS ABLE TO SEIZE POWER IN NOVEMBER 1917?

Did the Provisional Government rule Russia well?



A question of dates

In 1917 Russia still used the Julian calendar. This was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used in the rest of Europe. This is important because it can cause confusion when talking about the two revolutions in 1917.

1. The February/March revolution took place between 23 and 27 February according to the old Russian dates, but 8 to 12 March on the modern calendar.
2. The October/November revolution took place on 26 October according to the old dates, but 7 November on the modern calendar.

The Communists changed to the modern calendar in 1918. In this book the modern calendar dates are used – we talk of the March and November revolutions. But many books (and Russians) talk of the February and October revolutions.

SOURCE 1 A timeline of events from March to November 1917

WHY WERE THE BOLSHEVIKS ABLE TO SEIZE POWER IN NOVEMBER 1917?

Did the Provisional Government rule Russia well?

March

- 12 Formation of Provisional Government and Petrograd Soviet
- 14 Order No. 1 issued by the Soviet
- 16 Tsar abdicates. Provisional Government declared

May

- 5 Non-Bolshevik Socialists become ministers in the Provisional Government

July

- 2 Major military offensive launched by Kerensky
- 16–19 July Days. Lenin goes into hiding in Finland

October

- 6 Bolsheviks win control of Petrograd Soviet
- 23 Lenin returns to Petrograd secretly and persuades Bolsheviks to seize power

April

- 16 Lenin returns to Petrograd from Switzerland
- 17 April Theses published

June

- 15 First all-Russian Congress of Soviets meets

September

- 15 Attempted coup by General Kornilov
- 19 Bolsheviks win control of Moscow Soviet

November

- 6–7 Bolsheviks take control of Petrograd and force out the Provisional Government

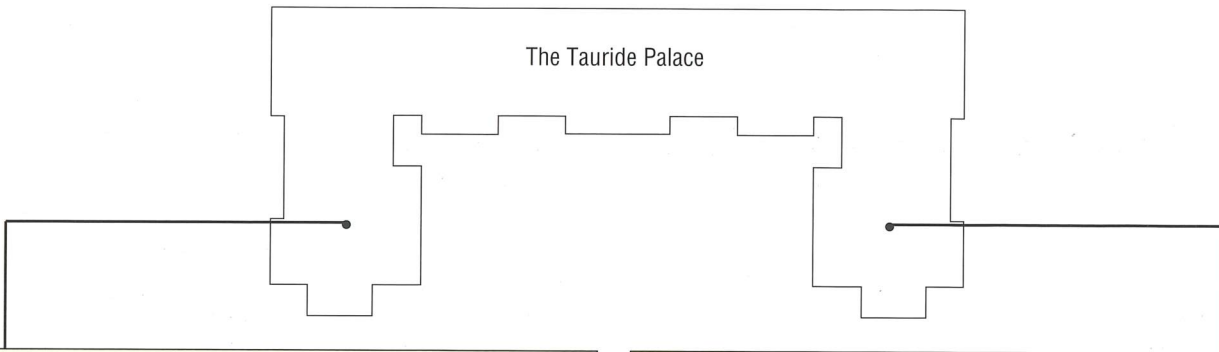
A question of dates

In 1917 Russia still used the Julian calendar. This was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used in the rest of Europe. This is important because it can cause confusion when talking about the two revolutions in 1917.

1. The February/March revolution took place between 23 and 27 February according to the old Russian dates, but 8 to 12 March on the modern calendar.
2. The October/November revolution took place on 26 October according to the old dates, but 7 November on the modern calendar.

The Communists changed to the modern calendar in 1918. In this book the modern calendar dates are used – we talk of the March and November revolutions. But many books (and Russians) talk of the February and October revolutions.

SOURCE 1 A timeline of events from March to November 1917



The Provisional Government

Who was going to rule Russia now that the Tsar had been thrown out? Crowds gathered outside the Tauride Palace, demanding that the Duma take charge. Inside, the members of the Duma were worried and frightened. What if generals loyal to the Tsar arrived with troops to execute them for treason? Some slipped away into the crowds and left the city. Those remaining discussed and argued long into the night.

They decided to form a temporary government – a Provisional Government. This would run the country until elections could be held to choose a government and decide how Russia was to be ruled in the future.

The Soviet

As the Provisional Government was being formed, another body, the Petrograd Soviet, was taking shape in a different part of the same building. Workers and soldiers sent representatives to form a soviet to look after their interests. In the next few weeks, soviets appeared all over Russia, but the Petrograd Soviet was the most important. The first thing the Soviet did was to issue Order No. 1, which gave it control of the armed forces in Petrograd.



SOURCE 2 A postcard, published in 1917, showing the main members of the Provisional Government. Prince Lvov, a liberal, became the leader. The rest of the government was mainly made up of middle-class liberals



SOURCE 3 A photograph of the members of the Petrograd Soviet

Dual Power

It was a strange situation: the Provisional Government was accepted as the government, but it could carry out its decisions only if the Soviet agreed. Most people were in favour of the first measures taken by the new government. Political prisoners were freed, and the government announced that there would be freedom of the press, freedom of speech, the right to strike and an end to social discrimination and the death penalty. Russians had more freedom now than they had had for centuries.

SOURCE 4 A letter from Guchkov, Minister for War in the Provisional Government, to General Alekseev, 22 March 1917

“The Provisional Government possesses no real power and its orders are executed only in so far as this is permitted by the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, which holds in its hands the most important elements of actual power, such as troops, railroads, postal and telegraph service . . . ”

SOURCE 5 Extracts from Order No.1, adapted from *Source Book of Russian History*, vol. 3, by Vernadsky

“The Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies has decided:

- *In all companies, battalions, squadrons and separate branches of military service of all kinds and on warships, committees . . . should be chosen immediately.*
- *The orders of . . . the State Duma [Provisional Government] shall be carried out only . . . [when] they do not contradict the orders and decisions of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.*
- *All kinds of arms, such as rifles and machine guns, must be . . . under the control of the company and battalion committees and must in no case be handed over to officers even at their demand.*
- *. . . the addressing of officers with titles such as ‘Your Excellency’, ‘Your Honour’, etc. is abolished and these titles are replaced by . . . ‘Mr General’, ‘Mr Colonel’ and so on . . . ”*

1. How do Sources 2–5 show:
 - a) the differences between the Provisional Government and the Soviet?
 - b) who held the power?
 - c) what the Soviet controlled?
2. What sections of Order No. 1 would be particularly worrying for the Provisional Government?
3. Why is it difficult for a government to rule effectively if it cannot get its decisions carried out?
4. Why was Kerensky (see panel) so important in the early days of the Revolution?

Alexander Kerensky



SOURCE 6 A photograph of Alexander Kerensky

A key person in these events was Alexander Kerensky. He had become involved in revolutionary activities as a young man but he had turned to the Socialist Revolutionaries rather than the Marxists. He had been elected to the Duma in 1912 and was famous for his emotional speeches, which the public loved.

It was Kerensky who met the crowds outside the Duma to discuss their demands and then helped persuade the Duma members to form the Provisional Government, in which he was made Minister of Justice. But he also became a member of the Petrograd Soviet. He went to meetings of both bodies, making sure that they understood each other. He was the bridge between them.

As 1917 progressed, Kerensky became more and more important, becoming first Minister for War and, at the end of July, Prime Minister. His powers of speech-making were put to great effect: in mass meetings for the war effort, women threw jewels at his feet. His actions were to be very important in deciding how matters turned out in Russia.

Two big issues faced the Provisional Government after the Revolution, and its survival depended on how it handled these.

Issue 1: War

The Provisional Government, with the agreement of the Soviet, decided to continue the war. Nobody wanted to be defeated by the Germans and they knew that the Germans would make them pay a heavy price if they tried to make peace. Also the Provisional Government wanted to keep the Allies – France and Britain – on their side for help in the future.

But the war continued to go badly, and soldiers began to desert in ever-increasing numbers. Food and fuel remained short as the war drained the country's resources. The people desperately wanted it to end.



SOURCE 7 A photograph showing soldiers deserting the front



SOURCE 9 A housekeeper speaking on 17 April, quoted in *The Russian Revolution of 1917, A Personal Record* by N. Sukanov

“The queues, well the queues haven’t got any smaller in the least; I think they’re even bigger. You stand half the day just as before . . . it’s all the same, there’s nothing to be had. They say it’s just the same, ‘The rich keep on fleecing the poor. The shopkeepers are the only ones making money.’”



SOURCE 8 The Women's Death Battalion was formed (to shame deserters) in July 1917 by Maria Bocharyova, a remarkable woman soldier who had been wounded three times. The top photo shows the battalion being blessed by a priest

Issue 2: Land

With the Tsar gone, the peasants believed that at last they could achieve their dream – to own their land. But the Provisional Government would not give it to them. It felt that this was such an important issue that it should be left to the properly elected government of Russia. They were also worried that a free-for-all for land would lead to the disintegration of the army, because the soldiers, most of whom were peasants, would desert to get their share. However, as 1917 went on, the peasants began taking the land for themselves whatever the government said.

5. Were the conditions in the cities much better after the Revolution?
6. Why did the peasants not support the Provisional Government?
7. Why did the people so desperately want the war to end?

How did the Bolsheviks seize power?

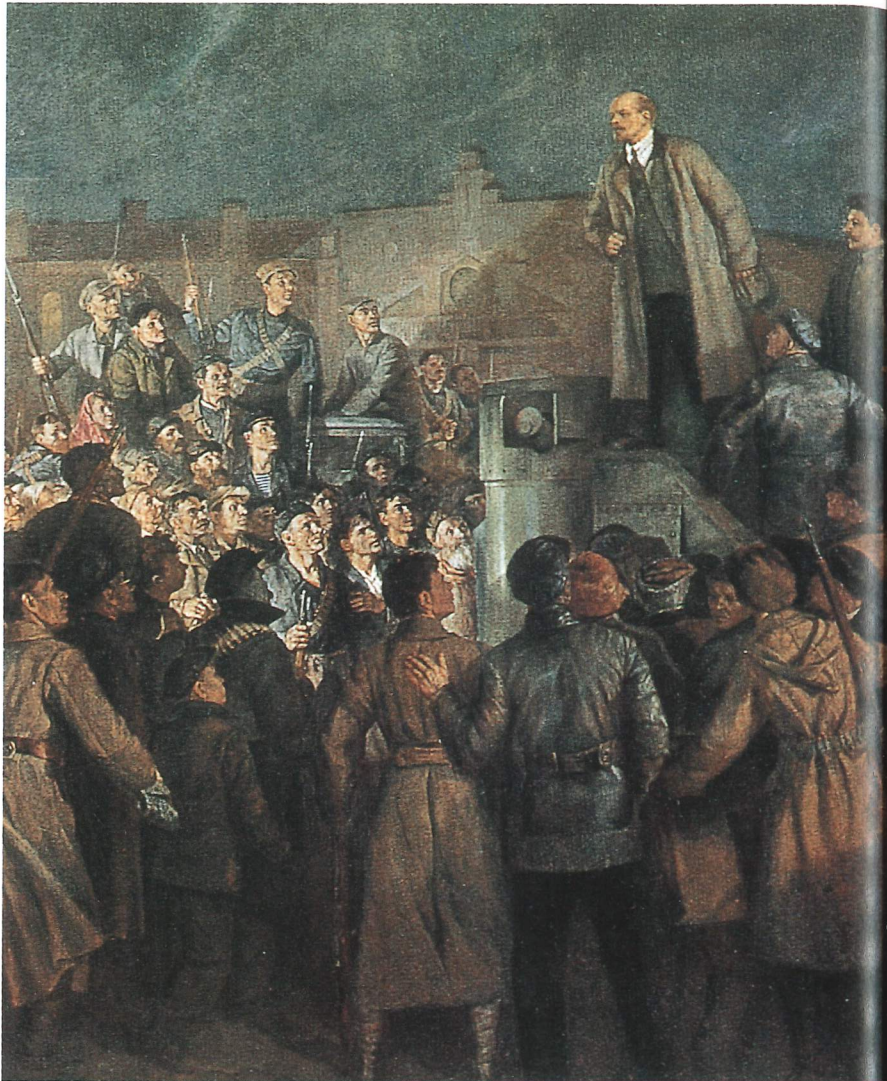
Lenin returns

THE ARRIVAL OF Lenin, leader of the Bolsheviks, was to change the whole course of the revolution. Lenin had been in Switzerland when the March Revolution took place, and at first he could not get back to Russia as he had to cross Germany, where the Russians were fighting. However, the Germans were pleased to help him, hoping that he would cause trouble for the Russian government. They gave him money and put him in a special sealed train, which travelled through Germany to Finland. He then made his way to Petrograd, arriving at the beginning of April.

The Germans were right. Lenin did cause a stir and he did make trouble. Immediately on his arrival he made a speech demanding that:

- there should be no co-operation with the Provisional Government
- the war should be ended immediately
- the land should be given to the peasants
- the Soviets should take power.

The points in Lenin's speech were later written up as the APRIL THESES, in which Lenin argued that there should be a second revolution – a Socialist revolution – in which the workers took power. Many Bolsheviks were surprised, and some did not take him seriously.



SOURCE 1 A 1930s painting of Lenin making a speech on his arrival at the Finland Station in Petrograd

The Bolshevik Party turned Lenin's ideas into the slogans 'Bread, Peace, Land' and 'All Power to the Soviets'. This was what the people wanted to hear. Support for the Bolsheviks began to grow, although as you can see from Source 2 they were outnumbered in the Soviets by other Socialists.



SOURCE 2 In June 1917 all the Soviets in Russia selected representatives to go to the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets. These were the results

Socialist Revolutionaries	285
Mensheviks	248
Bolsheviks	105
Other Socialists	105

July Days

The war was the big issue that distinguished the Bolsheviks from other groups. Only they opposed the war.

Over the summer of 1917, the ordinary people became more and more opposed to the war as shortages continued. Matters came to a head in July, when Kerensky launched a major attack on the Germans. This turned out to be a huge mistake, leading to a terrible defeat. It sparked an enormous demonstration in Petrograd, which became known as the 'July Days'. Soldiers, sailors and workers poured onto the streets on 16 and 17 July to protest about the war. Naturally, they turned to the Bolsheviks, the anti-war party, to lead them. But the Bolsheviks were not ready to seize power.

The demonstrations turned to rioting, and eventually troops were sent in to break up the mobs. Kerensky used this opportunity to produce evidence – letters – that seemed to show that Lenin was in the pay of the Germans. Lenin fled to Finland, and other leading Bolsheviks were arrested. It seemed that the Bolsheviks had missed their opportunity. Kerensky became Prime Minister.



SOURCE 3 Troops fire on demonstrators during the July Days

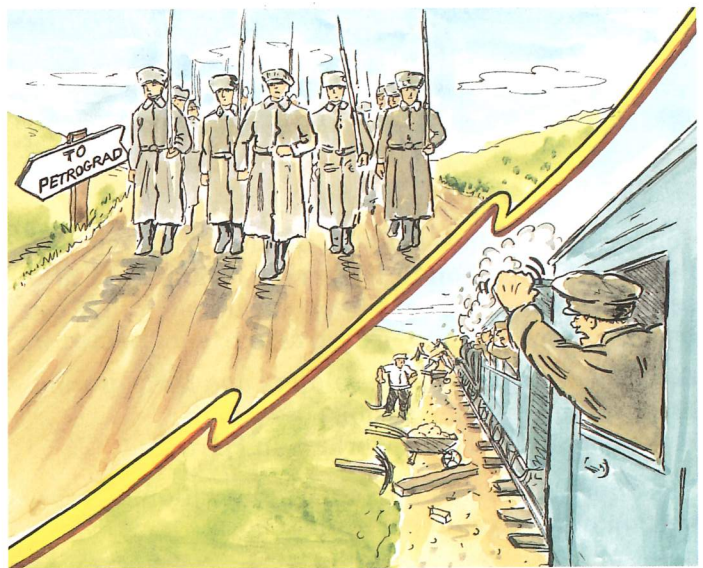
Autumn 1917 – a second chance

Fortunately for the Bolsheviks, events now started to work in their favour. Kerensky had appointed a general called Kornilov to be head of the army. But Kornilov decided that it was time to deal with the revolutionaries once and for all and to establish strong government in Russia – his own government. He ordered his Cossack troops to march on Petrograd.

The people in Petrograd panicked; there was bound to be violence and bloodshed. Kerensky also panicked and asked the Bolsheviks for help. He gave rifles to the Bolshevik Red Guard, groups of workers who had been training secretly, and who now appeared on the streets to help defend the city. But Kornilov's troops never arrived. The railway workers stopped the trains carrying the troops, and workers and other soldiers persuaded them not to fight their fellow Russians. However, the Red Guard kept their rifles.



SOURCE 4 Lenin had to shave off his beard to escape. Any films or photographs of Lenin during this time which show Lenin with a beard are fakes, usually produced well after the Revolution



The time is right

The Bolsheviks were now the 'saviours' of Petrograd, and their support was at an all-time high. They won an overall majority in elections to the Petrograd Soviet and Leon Trotsky, a recent recruit to the Bolsheviks, was elected chairman.

Meanwhile, the situation in the rest of Russia was deteriorating fast. In the countryside, the peasants were seizing land at an increased rate. Kerensky sent out punishment brigades to try to stop the land seizures, but this only made the peasants hate the Provisional Government more. Soldiers were deserting from the army in their thousands, trying to get back to their villages to get a share of the land. Food was rationed in the cities and prices were rising fast. It began to get cold as winter approached.

From his hiding place in Finland, Lenin sent messages to the Bolsheviks telling them to seize power now that they controlled the Soviets. But leading Bolsheviks refused to carry out his instructions. So Lenin returned to Petrograd in disguise. He spent the night of 23 October arguing with them until they gave in. He wanted them to seize power straight away, but Trotsky persuaded him to wait.

SOURCE 5 The situation at the end of the summer, reported by an eye-witness, N. Sukanov

“Lynch law, the destruction of homes and shops, jeering at and attacks on officers, unauthorised arrests, seizures and beatings up were recorded every day by tens and hundreds. In the country, burnings and destruction of country houses became more frequent.

Military discipline collapsed . . . There were masses of deserters. The soldiers, without leave, went off home in great floods. They filled all the trains, kicked out the passengers and threatened the entire transport system. ”

TASK

You have been chosen by the Bolsheviks to report on the general situation in Russia in October 1917 to see if various groups are likely to support you if you try to seize power. You are particularly interested in:

- the state of mind of the soldiers and their morale
- the attitude of the peasants
- the conditions of the workers in Petrograd.

Use Sources 5–7 and the other information in this section to help you make your report.

SOURCE 6 Bread rations per person per day in Petrograd in 1917

	March	April	September	October
Manual workers	675g	335g	225g	110g
Others	450g	335g	225g	110g

SOURCE 7 John Reed, an American journalist, describes Petrograd in *Ten Days that Shook the World*

“September and October are the worst months of the Russian year – especially the Petrograd year. Under dull grey skies, in the shortening days, the rain fell drenching, incessant . . .

It was dark from three in the afternoon till ten in the morning. Robberies and housebreaking increased. In the apartment houses the men took turns at all-night guard duty, armed with loaded rifles.

Week by week, food became scarcer. The daily allowance of bread fell . . . Towards the end there was a week without bread at all. Sugar one was entitled to at the rate of two pounds per month – if one could get it at all, which was seldom. A bar of chocolate cost anywhere from seven to ten roubles – at least a dollar. There was milk for half the babies in the city; most hotels and private houses never saw it for months. For milk and tobacco one had to stand in a queue long hours in the chill rain. ”



SOURCE 8 Bolsheviks distributing leaflets