

5 HOW DID THE BOLSHEVIKS KEEP POWER AFTER 1917?

How did the Bolsheviks stay in power?

LENIN HAD SEIZED power in Petrograd, but for how long could he hold on to it? A few days after the takeover, Kerensky sent troops to put the Provisional Government back in control, but they were easily stopped in the suburbs by a force of pro-Bolshevik workers, soldiers and sailors. In Moscow, the fighting was fiercer. Other cities also came out in favour of the Bolsheviks, but they controlled only a small area of Russia.

Meanwhile, Lenin set up his government, called the Sovnakom – the ‘Council of People’s Commissars’. Lenin was chairman, Trotsky was Commissar for War and Stalin was Commissar for Nationalities. There was only one woman in the Sovnakom – Alexandra Kollontai.

Lenin pushed ahead with his first measures. It was important that he carry out his promises: to end the war, to give land to the peasants and to get food to the cities. Otherwise, his support would disappear.

The first months

Decrees made by the Sovnakom in the first few months of power

November

- A maximum eight-hour day and 48-hour week declared for industrial workers
- Employment insurance introduced for workers for injuries, illness and unemployment
- All titles and class distinctions abolished – no dukes or lords, the title ‘comrade’ for everybody
- Women declared equal to men
- All non-Bolshevik newspapers banned

December

- Liberal party, the Cadets, banned
- All factories to be put under the control of workers’ committees
- All banks taken over by the government
- The army to be more democratic – officers to be elected, no ranks or saluting
- Church land to be confiscated by the state
- Divorce made easier and marriages do not have to be in churches



SOURCE 1 A collage of photographs showing members of Lenin’s new government

Land

In November, a decree was passed taking all the land away from the Tsar and the old landlords. Land was to be given to the peasants, who would form committees to divide it up fairly.

Food

Lenin put an absolute priority on getting food to the cities. Where peasants would not sell their produce, he sent out the police and the Cheka to take it.

The Cheka

In December 1917, Lenin set up the Cheka. The head of this secret police force was the cold and incorruptible Felix Dzerzhinski. He set up headquarters in the ‘Lubyanka’ in Moscow, a name that was to become feared because of the torture and executions that were carried out there.

The Cheka arrested people who were considered dangerous. After an assassination attempt on Lenin, the Cheka launched the Red Terror. Anybody who spoke out against the government was arrested, and many were shot without trial. Sometimes it was enough to be someone who might oppose the Bolsheviks. The use of terror to control people was to become a feature of the new regime.

Constituent Assembly

Lenin had been forced, in November 1917, into holding the elections promised by the Provisional Government. The railway workers said that they would shut down the railways if Lenin did not go ahead with Russia's first free elections. These were to choose a Constituent Assembly, which would work out how Russia would be governed in the future.

This was a real threat to Lenin, as the party with most votes would probably form a new government. The results of the elections can be seen in Source 2. Shortly after the Constituent Assembly met in January 1918, Lenin sent in soldiers to shut it down for good.

SOURCE 2 The results of the November 1917 election

Party	Seats in Constituent Assembly
Socialist Revolutionaries	370
Bolsheviks	175
Left Socialist Revolutionaries (supporters of Bolsheviks)	40
Cadets	17
Mensheviks	16
Others	89

A new name

In 1918, Lenin changed the name of the Bolshevik Party. They were now called COMMUNISTS.

Peace

Lenin sent Trotsky to meet the Germans to negotiate a peace treaty. Trotsky walked out of the talks because the Germans demanded so much territory. He said there would be 'no peace, no war'. However, Lenin sent him back, because he was sure that the Bolsheviks would stay in power only if the war could be ended quickly. The result was the harsh Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918.



SOURCE 3 A map showing land lost in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

TASK

1. Consider the following people. Decide which of Lenin's actions described on pages 50–51 would have been popular with each person and which would not. You could do this in the form of a chart, with the names of the people along the top and the different actions down the side. (Your teacher will give you a sheet to fill in.)

- woman worker
- Tsarist army officer
- industrialist
- Socialist Revolutionary
- peasant

- middle-class liberal
- soldier

2. a) Which of the actions mentioned would have increased support for Lenin?
b) Which do you think would have been most unpopular amongst different groups of people?
3. Had Lenin honoured his promises?
4. Which political party had been elected to form the new government of Russia?
5. How did Lenin deal with opposition and threats to his power?

How did the Communists win the Civil War?

BY THE SUMMER of 1918, the Communists (the new name for the Bolsheviks) found themselves under attack. They only controlled a small part of Russia and their enemies were determined that they should not remain in power for long. This was the beginning of a vicious civil war which was to tear Russia apart.

There were three main sides:

The Reds: the Bolsheviks or Communists (red was the colour of Communism).

The Whites: all the opponents of the Bolsheviks – tsarists and nobles, middle-class constitutional democrats, Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. The Whites got their name from the white uniforms worn by tsarist officers. This meant that the Whites were always associated with the Tsar and the old system of government.

The Greens: independent groups of nationalists, peasants or bandits who roamed Russia at this time. They fought anyone and raided villages and towns. The most famous was the Ukrainian nationalist, Nestor Makno, who shared his booty with local peasants.



SOURCE 1 A map showing the events of the Civil War

But the real struggle was between the Reds and the Whites. The Greens were fighting for themselves, not for control of Russia. A number of factors played a crucial role in the war. These included the aims of both sides, geographical factors, leadership and unity, and foreign intervention.

Geographical factors

Reds

- They held the central area of western Russia, which contained most of the large industrial centres able to produce munitions and war supplies.
- They had control of the railway lines which connected Petrograd and Moscow to the rest of the country. This meant that they could send soldiers and munitions quickly to any place in the battle area.

Whites

- They were scattered around this central area, often with hundreds of miles separating the different armies.
- Communications were difficult – that is, if the generals wanted to communicate.

Aims

Reds

- They had only one aim: to stay in power so that they could build the new Socialist society.

Whites

- The groups which made up the Whites had different aims: some wanted the Tsar back, some a military DICTATOR; others wanted constitutional government or revolutionary change. The only aim they had in common was to defeat the Bolsheviks; they agreed on little else.

Leadership and unity

Reds

- They had a superb leader in Trotsky. He built up the Red Army from nothing, introducing conscription for men over eighteen years of age. He brought in nearly 50,000 experienced former Tsarist officers and appointed political Commissars – fanatical Bolsheviks – to each unit of men to make sure the officers and soldiers carried out their orders.
- Trotsky was personally very courageous. He had a special train which took him and his army of hand-picked soldiers to the places where the fighting was hardest.

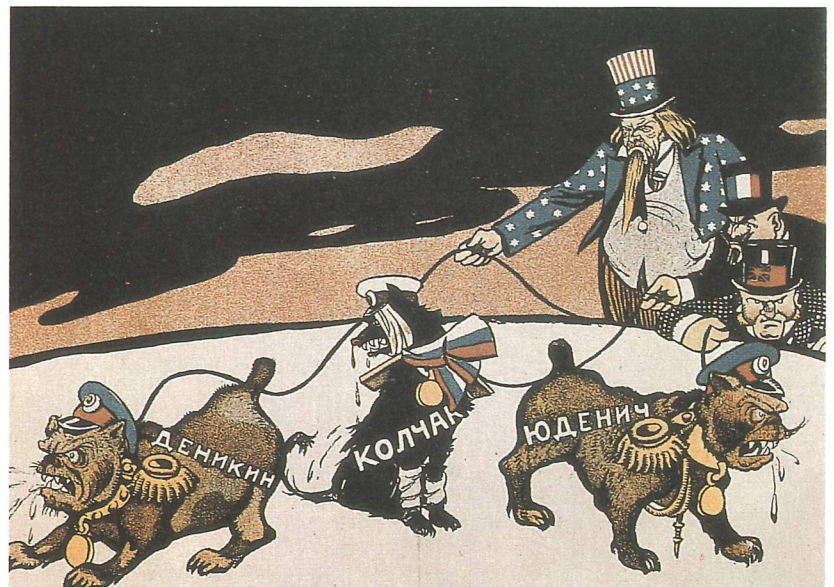
Whites

- They lacked good leaders. Often the commanders were cruel, treated their men with disrespect and set a bad example, drinking and taking drugs.
- The White generals did not trust each other and would not co-ordinate their attacks. This allowed the Reds to pick off the White armies one by one.
- The Whites had problems inside their armies, too. There was often fighting and squabbling, because groups had different aims and beliefs. It was particularly hard for revolutionaries to co-operate with supporters of the Tsar.

Foreign intervention

The Whites had the advantage of support from foreign powers. Britain, France, Japan and the USA, along with several other countries, sent forces to help them. Their governments did not want to see Bolshevism spread into Europe. However, although the supplies and armaments they gave to the Whites were very valuable, their troops did not fight. They were tired of war, and some of the soldiers were sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause. There was a mutiny of the French navy in the Black Sea, and the British Labour Party protested at the use of British troops to crush Russian workers. The Americans were there only to make sure that the Japanese did not seize territory in the east. So the Allied intervention was half-hearted and ineffective.

The intervention of foreign countries helped the Communists. They portrayed the Whites as being used by foreign CAPITALIST powers, while they themselves were the defenders of ordinary Russian people from foreign invaders.



SOURCE 2 A Bolshevik poster. The names of the dogs are Denikin, Kolchak and Yudenich

1. Who is holding the leads of the dogs in Source 2?
2. What is the message of the cartoon?
3. How does Source 1 help us understand why the Reds won the Civil War?
4. What do you think was the main problem facing the Whites?

The War

By the end of 1918, the Civil War was not going well for the Reds. White forces were pressing in from all sides, and the Reds suffered a series of defeats. Trotsky worked hard to organise the Red Army.

Fortunately for him, the White armies did not attack together. This allowed him to move his forces to deal with one attack at a time.

It was in the middle of 1919 that the real test came. In the west, General Yudenich came within 30 miles of Petrograd, only to be turned back by determined resistance led by Trotsky's special forces. General Denikin was also very successful, advancing from the south to within 200 miles of Moscow. Much depended on Admiral Kolchak's attack from the east linking up with Denikin's forces. But Kolchak's army fell apart because different groups would not co-operate and started arguing and fighting with each other. The Socialist Revolutionaries in particular refused to fight with Kolchak.

The Red Army now attacked ferociously, and Denikin was pushed further and further back. In the east, Kolchak's forces disintegrated and he was shot. By 1920, the main White threat was over. The war

lingered on, particularly in a desperate battle with the Poles, but this was settled by the Treaty of Riga in 1921.

Fighting in the Civil War was bitter and cruel. Both sides were guilty of atrocities. At Rostov miners supporting the Bolsheviks were buried alive in their mines. At Kharkov, Bolsheviks nailed epaulets to White soldiers while the victims were still alive.

The war was also confusing. Units of soldiers often changed sides, sometimes several times. Some units shot their officers and went home. The fighting moved back and forth across the country: Kiev changed hands sixteen times. And the people suffered whichever side was in control of their area. Both Red and White units looted and raided villages, requisitioning (taking) grain and animals.

The role of the peasants in the Civil War was crucial. They made up most of the armies on both sides, and the side they supported was likely to win. In the end, the peasants were more willing to support the Reds, because the Reds said they could keep the land. The Whites, on the other hand, made it clear that they would restore the land to the old landlords.



SOURCE 3 A photograph of Trotsky and his special train. The arrival of Trotsky's special train would raise morale, but the soldiers also knew they would have to fight hard

SOURCE 4 A White colonel describes the punishment of a village accused of supporting the Reds, in March 1918

“The mounted platoon entered the village, met the Bolshevik committee and put the members to death . . . After the execution, the houses of the culprits were burned and the whole male population under 45 whipped soundly . . . Then the population was ordered to deliver without pay the best cattle, pigs, fowl, forage and bread for the whole detachment, as well as the best horses. All this they kept bringing over until nightfall . . . The whole village set up a howl . . . ”

SOURCE 5 Isaac Babel was a volunteer in a revolutionary Cossack regiment. In his book *Red Cavalry* he wrote stories which reflected the savagery of the Civil War. This extract comes from a story he called ‘A Letter’, in which a family is split, with the father fighting on one side and his sons on the other

“Dear Mother, . . . I am alive and well . . . I hasten to describe to you about Dad, that he killed our brother Theodore a year ago. Our Red brigade was advancing on the town of Rostov. Dad was then with General Denikin (Whites), commanding a company . . . and they took us all prisoners . . . Dad noticed my brother Theodore. And Dad began cutting him about, saying, ‘Brute, Red cur, son of a bitch,’ and all sorts of other things, and went on cutting him about until dark and Theodore passed away . . .

I soon ran away from Dad and managed to get back to my unit . . . Then brother Simon and I began to pursue General Denikin, and killed thousands of them, and drove them into the Black Sea. Only Dad was nowhere to be seen. So Dear Mother, what d’you think Dad did? He had dyed his beard shamelessly from red to black and was staying in the town of Maykop in civvies . . .

But Simon got Dad all right and he began to whip Dad . . . and asked him:

‘You all right, Dad, in my hands?’

‘No,’ says Dad, ‘not all right.’

Then Simon said: ‘And Theo, was he all right in your hands when you killed him?’

‘No,’ says Dad. ‘Things went badly for Theo.’ . . .

Then Simon turned to us all and said: ‘And what I think is that if I got caught by his boys, there wouldn’t be no quarter for me – and now, Dad, we’re going to finish you off.’ ”



SOURCE 6 A White poster, showing Bolsheviks seizing grain

1. How does Source 4 help explain why the peasants would not support the Whites?
2. Why would the Whites produce a poster like the one in Source 6?
3. What do Sources 4–6 reveal about the nature of the Civil War?
4. Which do you think is more reliable – Source 4 or Source 5?

ACTIVITY

1. Draw up a chart to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the Reds and the Whites, using the headings below.

	Reds	Whites
Aims		
Geographical factors		
Leadership		
Unity		
Foreign intervention		
Peasant support		

2. Write a short essay explaining why the Reds won the Civil War. Use the headings in the chart as the key ideas for your paragraphs. You will find more useful information in the two investigations on pages 56–57 on a) the use of propaganda by the Reds; and b) the role of Trotsky.

How did the Communists use propaganda?

■ SOURCE INVESTIGATION

DURING THE period of the Civil War, the Communists produced over 3,000 political posters. Some of these used exciting new avant-garde designs, which became popular in Russia after the Revolution.

SOURCE 1 (right) 'Shoulder to shoulder in the defence of Petrograd'. This poster was used when Petrograd was under threat in 1919

1. Who are the people standing 'shoulder to shoulder'?
2. Why is this effective?



ЦАРСКИЕ ПОЛКИ И КРАСНАЯ АРМИЯ



SOURCE 2 (left) A Civil War poster showing Russia before and after the Revolution

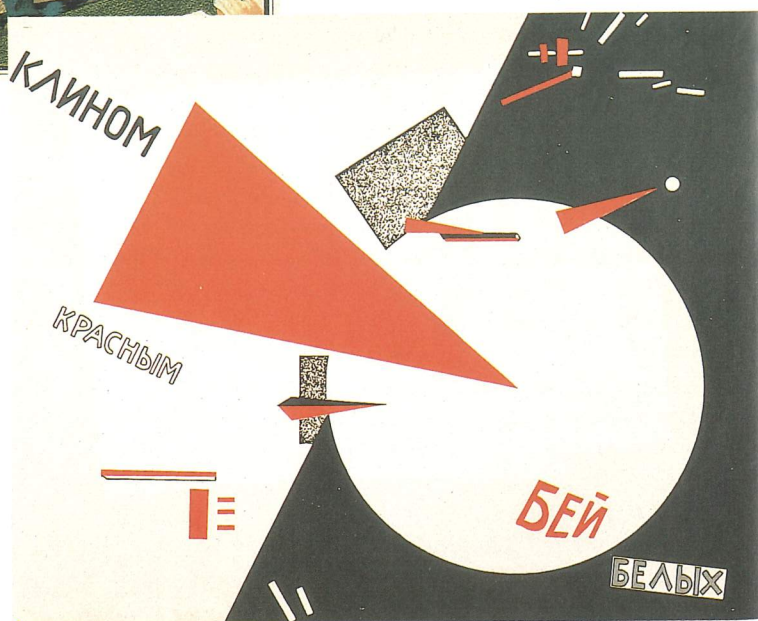
3. What were the soldiers fighting for before the Revolution?
4. What were the forces fighting for after the Revolution?

SOURCE 3 (below) 'Drive Red wedges into White troops!' A poster by El Lissitzky, 1920

5. What is the 'Red wedge'?

■ TASK

1. Imagine that you work in a museum and have to give a talk to a group of students using the posters on this page and the one on page 37. Explain:
 - the meaning of the posters, one by one
 - the different design styles
 - how effectively they put their messages across
 - which one you think is most effective and why.
2. Are these posters good evidence to show us what ordinary Russians were thinking during this period? If not, are they at all useful to historians?



How important was the role of Trotsky?

SOURCE 1 A photograph of Trotsky addressing the troops. He said, 'I issue this warning. If any detachment retreats without orders, the first to be shot will be the Commissar, the second the commander'

SOURCE 2 Orders to the Red Army from Trotsky, 1918

- “■ *Every scoundrel who incites anyone to retreat, to desert, or not to fulfil a military order, will be shot.*
- *Every soldier of the Red Army who voluntarily deserts his post will be shot.*
- *Every soldier who throws away his rifle or sells part of his equipment will be shot.*
- *Those guilty of harbouring deserters are liable to be shot.*”



SOURCE 3 From *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* by V. Serge

“*The news from the other fronts was so bad that Lenin was reluctant to sacrifice the last available forces in the defence of the doomed city [Petrograd]. Trotsky thought otherwise . . . He arrived at almost the last moment and his presence changed the atmosphere . . .*

Trotsky arrived with a train, that famous train which had been speeding to and fro along the different fronts . . . The train contained excellent motor cars . . . a printing shop for propaganda, sanitary squads, and specialists in engineering, provisioning, street fighting, all bound together by friendship and trust, all kept to a strict, vigorous discipline by a leader they admired, all dressed in black leather, red stars on their peaked caps, all exhaling energy. It was a nucleus of resolute and efficiently serviced organisers, who hastened wherever danger demanded their presence.”

SOURCE 4 Trotsky's comment on Bolshevik doubts about using former Tsarist officers in the Red Army

“*[Political] Commissars [attached to each army unit] were required to keep a record of the families of officers and would admit them to posts of authority provided it was possible in the event of betrayal to detain the family in question.*”

SOURCE 5 Trotsky describes how he built up the Red Army

“*The flabby, panicky mob would be transformed in two or three weeks into an efficient fighting force. What was needed for this? It needed good commanders, a few dozen experienced fighters, a dozen or so of Communists ready to make any sacrifice, boots for the barefooted, a bath-house, an energetic propaganda campaign, food, underwear, tobacco and matches. The train took care of all this.*”

1. Use Sources 1–5 and the section on leadership (Reds) on page 53 to explain why Trotsky's role in the Civil War was so important.