

## Why Did the Bolsheviks Lead a Successful Revolution in October 1917?

In October 1917 Russia experienced its second revolution in less than a year, with Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik Party seizing control of Petrograd, Moscow, and a handful of other cities. The Bolshevik successes swept away the Provisional Government, responsible for governing Russia following the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II. For nearly a century, historians have debated why the Bolsheviks were able to seize power, with interpretations considering the strengths of individual Bolsheviks, the weaknesses of the Provisional Government, and several other factors.

### Vladimir Lenin

Lenin was instrumental in convincing the Bolsheviks to launch a bid for power. His April Theses were popular (Peace, Bread, Land) and proved Lenin understood the mood of the public better than any other politician. His demand for an uprising in Petrograd was decisive. He convinced other party members they could overcome counter-revolutionary forces. Lenin's flaws, however, were evident. He hesitated during the July Days, forcing him to flee to Finland.

### Leon Trotsky

On the ground, Trotsky played a significant role in converting workers to Bolshevism. While Lenin was in exile, Trotsky addressed meetings, gave speeches, and gained popular support. He organized the Bolshevik seizure of power skillfully, giving the impression the Provisional Government was being overthrown by the Soviets, not a revolutionary minority. Trotsky delegated important tasks to reliable forces, such as the Kronstadt sailors and Red Guards, while the Petrograd garrison were given less responsibility.

### Weaknesses of the Provisional Government

The name of the government implied it was temporary. It therefore lacked authority and legitimacy. Expectations were high after the fall of Tsarism. The continuation of food shortages and inflation led to widespread opposition to Russia's involvement in World War I. The Provisional Government alienated the public by continuing military campaigns. The Petrograd Soviet had the support of soldiers and trade unionists, giving it control over transport and communications infrastructure in Petrograd. The Provisional Government did not challenge the Soviet, and thus lacked the means of forcing others to obey orders. The Provisional Government hesitated on calling Constituent Assembly elections, which would have strengthened its power.

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### Other factors

Popular support: the Bolsheviks attracted huge support among the working classes in the major cities. This was strategically important. The Bolsheviks also had the support of around half of the members of Russia's armed forces (Constituent Assembly elections, 1917).

Luck: The Bolsheviks exploited the reckless actions of General Kornilov during the Kornilov Affair. This enabled them to make a comeback after the disappointment of the July Days.

### Conclusion

A number of factors were at play when the Bolsheviks successfully seized power in October 1917. The importance of each factor continues to be the subject of historiographical debate, with the strengths of the Bolsheviks and weaknesses of the Provisional Government the most popular explanations.

Article by John Tiplady.

John Tiplady is based in Manchester. He is a Private History Tutor and PhD candidate in American Studies at the University of Nottingham. His doctoral research focusses on the political repression of anti-Stalinist socialists by the U.S. federal government, 1941-1958.

### Sources

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### Further reading and viewing

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