

**Key question**

What factors enabled the Bolsheviks to gain in strength?

## 4 | The October Revolution

### The political shift in Petrograd

The measure of the Bolsheviks' recovery from the July Days and of their gains from the Kornilov Affair was soon apparent. By the middle of September they had gained a majority in both the Petrograd and Moscow soviets. However, this should not be seen as indicating a large swing of opinion in their favour, but rather as a reflection of the changing character of the soviets.

In the first few months after the February Revolution the meetings of the soviets had been fully attended. Over 2000 deputies had packed into the Petrograd Soviet at the Tauride Palace. But as the months passed enthusiasm waned. By the autumn of 1917 attendance was often down to a few hundred. This was a major advantage to the Bolsheviks. Their political dedication meant that they continued to turn up in force while the members of the other parties attended irregularly. The result was that the Bolshevik Party exerted an influence out of proportion to its numbers. This was especially the case in regard to the composition of the various sub-committees.

Broadly what happened in Petrograd following the Kornilov Affair was that the Petrograd Soviet moved to the left while the Provisional Government shifted to the right. This made some form of clash between the two bodies increasingly likely. Lenin put it as a matter of stark choice: 'Either a soviet government or Kornilovism. There is no middle course'.

### Lenin's strategy

From his exile in Finland, Lenin constantly appealed to his party to prepare for the immediate overthrow of Kerensky's government. He claimed that his earlier estimate of what would happen had proved wholly correct: that the Provisional Government, incapable of solving the war and land questions, was becoming increasingly reactionary. This left the Soviet as the only hope of true revolutionaries. He further argued that the Bolsheviks could not wait; they must seize the moment while the government was at its most vulnerable. In a sentence that was to become part of Bolshevik legend, Lenin wrote on 12 September: 'History will not forgive us if we do not assume power'.

Lenin's sense of urgency arose from his concern over two events that were due to take place in the autumn, and which he calculated would seriously limit the Bolsheviks' freedom of action. One was the meeting of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets in late October; the other was the November election for the Constituent Assembly. He was convinced that the Bolsheviks would have to take power before these events occurred. If, under the banner 'All Power to the Soviets', the Bolsheviks could topple the Provisional Government before the Congress met they could then present their new authority as a *fait accompli* that the Congress would have no reason to reject.

The elections to the Constituent Assembly presented a different problem. The Assembly was the body on which all **progressives**

**Key date**

Bolsheviks gain a majority in Petrograd Soviet: September 1917

**Key term****Progressives**

Those who believed in parliamentary government for Russia.

and reformers had set their hopes. Once it came into being its moral authority would be difficult to challenge. Lenin told his party that since it was impossible to forecast how successfully they would perform in the elections, they would have to be in power before the results were announced. This would provide the Bolsheviks with the authority to undermine the results should they go against them.

### The 'Pre-Parliament'

At the same time as Lenin pressed this policy upon his party, Kerensky tried to make his government less exposed by announcing plans for the creation of a 'Pre-Parliament' with authority to advise the government. Lenin condemned this as a manoeuvre not to broaden the government's base but to strengthen its grip on power. Acting on his orders, the Bolshevik members of the Soviet who were entitled to attend the Pre-Parliament first derided it and then walked out.

### Lenin returns to Petrograd

Emboldened by the Bolsheviks' success in undermining the Pre-Parliament, Lenin now began urging his party to prepare to overthrow the Provisional Government. Despite the passionate conviction with which Lenin put his arguments to his colleagues, there were Bolsheviks on the **Central Committee** of the party who doubted the wisdom of striking against the Provisional Government at this point.

In an effort to enforce his will, Lenin slipped back into Petrograd on 7 October. His personal presence stiffened Bolshevik resolve, but did not produce total unity. During the next two weeks he spent exhausting hours at a series of Central Committee meetings trying to convince the waverers. On 10 October, the Central Committee pledged itself to an armed insurrection, but failed to agree on a specific date. In the end, by another quirk of fate, it was Kerensky and the government, not the Bolsheviks, who initiated the actual rising.

### Kerensky makes the first move

Rumours of an imminent Bolshevik *coup* had been circulating in Petrograd for some weeks, but it was not until an article, written by two members of the Bolshevik Central Committee, appeared in a journal that the authorities felt they had sure proof. The writers of the article, Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, argued that it would be a mistake to attempt to overthrow the government in current circumstances. Kerensky interpreted this as indicating that a date had already been set. Rather than wait to be caught off guard, he ordered a pre-emptive attack on the Bolsheviks. On 23 October the Bolshevik newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, were closed down by government troops and an attempted round-up of the leading Bolsheviks began.

The Bolsheviks no longer had a choice; Lenin ordered the planned insurrection to begin.

#### 'Pre-Parliament'

This was to be a body drawn from a variety of parties, and thus be representative of a greater range of political opinion. It was intended to fill the interim before the Constituent Assembly came into being.

#### Central Committee

The decision-making body of the Bolshevik Party.

Key terms

Kerensky attempts to close down *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*; Bolshevik rising against the government begins: 23 October 1917

Key date

**Key date**  
 Petrograd Soviet set up the Military Revolutionary Committee: 9 October 1917

**Key terms**  
**Troika**  
 A three-man team.  
**Red Guards**  
 Despite the Bolshevik legend that these were the crack military forces of the Revolution, the Red Guards, who numbered some 10,000, were largely made up of fairly elderly men recruited from the workers in the factories.  
**Cossacks**  
 The remnants of the elite cavalry regiment of the tsars.

## Trotsky's role

That the Bolsheviks had a plan at all was the work not of Lenin but of Trotsky. While it was Lenin who was undoubtedly the great influence behind the October Rising, it was Trotsky who actually organised it. The key to Trotsky's success in this was his chairmanship of the Petrograd Soviet, to which he had been elected in September. On 9 October the Soviet set up the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) to organise the defence of Petrograd against a possible German attack or another Kornilov-type assault from within Russia.

It proved a critical decision. Realising that if the Bolsheviks could control the MRC they would control Petrograd, Trotsky used his influence to have himself accepted as one of the **troika** appointed to run the MRC. This meant he had at his disposal the only effective military force in Petrograd. Moreover, it was a legitimate force since theoretically it acted on the authority of the Soviet. Trotsky was now in a position to draft the plans for the overthrow of the Provisional Government. When Lenin gave the order for the uprising to begin, it was Trotsky who directed the **Red Guards** in their seizure of the key vantage points in Petrograd, such as the bridges and the telegraph offices.

## Collapse of the Provisional Government

In the three days (25–27 October) that it took for the city to fall under Bolshevik control there was remarkably little fighting. There were only six deaths during the whole episode and these were all Red Guards, most probably shot by mistake by their own side. The simple fact was that the Provisional Government had hardly any military forces on which to call. The Petrograd garrison that had turned out to defend the government on previous occasions did not come to its aid now. Desertions had reduced the garrison to a few loyal officer-cadets, a small group of **Cossacks** and a unit of female soldiers, known as the 'Amazons'.

When the Red Guards approached the Winter Palace, which housed the Provisional Government, they expected stiff resistance, but there was none. A black-and-white film of the dramatic, death-defying storming of the palace gates often appears in television documentaries about the October Revolution. Sometimes at the bottom of the screen will appear the word 'reconstruction'. This is very misleading since there was never such an event to reconstruct. The truth is there are no contemporary films of October 1917. What modern programme-makers invariably use are the powerful images from the feature film, *October*, made in 1927 on the tenth anniversary by the celebrated Bolshevik film-maker, Sergei Eisenstein.

The Bolshevik forces did not need to storm the gates; there was nobody defending them. The Winter Place was a vast building many times larger than London's Buckingham Palace. The Red Guards simply strolled in through the back doors. This was enough to make the defenders give up. The Cossacks walked off when confronted by the Red Guards. After that, it did not take much pressure to persuade the cadets and the Amazons that it was better for them to lay down their arms and go home rather than die in a futile struggle.



A contingent of Amazons under instruction in 1917. Kerensky had specially recruited these female soldiers, also known as 'the Women's Battalion of Death', as an example of the fighting spirit of the Russian people.

The sounding of its guns in a pre-arranged signal by the pro-Bolshevik crew of the cruiser *Aurora*, moored in the River Neva, convinced the remaining members of the government that their position was hopeless. As many as were able escaped unnoticed out of the building. Kerensky, having earlier left the city in a vain effort to raise loyal troops, fled to the American embassy. He later slipped out of Petrograd, disguised as a female nurse, and made his way to the United States where he eventually became a professor of history.

### The Bolsheviks take power

The Bolsheviks did not seize power; it fell into their hands. The speed and ease with which it had happened surprised even Lenin. In the early hours of 26 October he said to Trotsky 'from being on the run to supreme power makes one dizzy'. He then rolled himself up in a large fur coat, lay on the floor and went to sleep.

On the following evening the All-Russian Congress of Soviets began their first session. They had barely completed the opening formalities when the chairman, who happened to be Lev Kamenev, the Bolshevik who had originally opposed the rising, informed the delegates that they were now the supreme authority in Russia; the Petrograd Soviet had seized power in their name and had formed a new government. Kamenev then read out to the bewildered delegates the list of 14 names of the new government they had supposedly just appointed. The 14 were all Bolsheviks or left SRs. At the head of the list of **Commissars** who made up the new *Sovnarkom* was the name of the Chief Minister – Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

Winter Palace seized by Bolsheviks and Kerensky flees from Petrograd: 24–5 October 1917

First session of the Congress of Soviets: 26 October 1917

Bolsheviks established *Sovnarkom*: 26 October 1917

Lenin claimed power in the name of Congress of Soviets: 27 October 1917

Key dates

**Commissars**  
Russian for ministers – Lenin chose the word because he said 'it reeks of blood'.

*Sovnarkom*  
Russian for government or cabinet.

Key terms

От Воевод - Революционного Комитета при Петроградском Совете  
Рабочих и Солдатских Депутатов.

# Къ Гражданамъ Россіи.

Временное Правительство изложено. Государ-

ственная власть перешла въ руки органа Петро-

градскаго Совета Рабочихъ и Солдатскихъ Депута-

товъ Военно-Революціоннаго Комитета, состоящаго

во главѣ Петроградскаго пролетаріата и гарнизона.

Дѣло, за которое боролся народъ, неминуемое пред-

ложное демократическаго мира, отныня помѣняющей

состязности на землю, рабочій контроль надъ производ-

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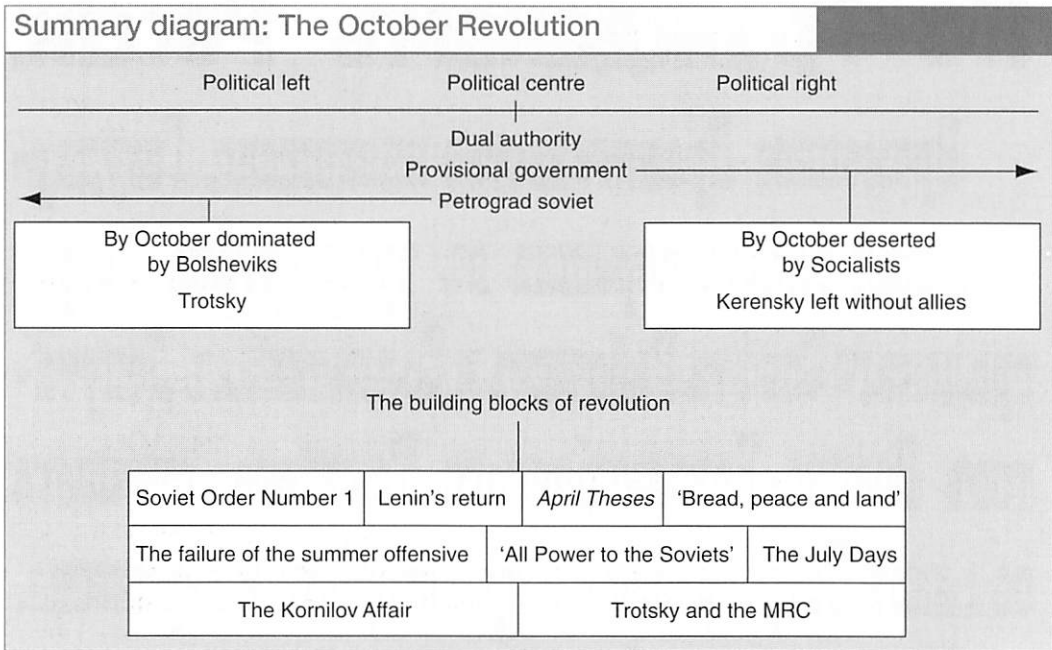
ДА ЭПРАВСТВЕТЬ РЕВОЛЮЦІЯ РАБОЧИХЪ, СОУЩАТЬ  
И КРЕСТЬЯНЫ

Военно-Революціоннаго Комитета  
при Петроградскомъ Советѣ  
Рабочихъ и Солдатскихъ Депутатовъ

25 октября 1917 г. № 1. 1917

To the People of Russia reads the headline of this poster, 25 October 1917, declaring that the Provisional Government has fallen. It goes on in the name of the Soviet to promise peace and land to the people.

The right-wing SRs and the Mensheviks walked out, protesting that it was not a taking of power by the Soviets but a Bolshevik *coup*. Trotsky jeered after them that they and their kind had ‘consigned themselves to the garbage heap of history’. Lenin then announced to the Bolshevik and SR delegates who had remained that they would now proceed ‘to construct the towering edifice of socialist society’.



## 5 | Reasons for Bolshevik Success

Trotsky later said that the key factors in the Bolshevik success of October 1917 were:

- the failure of the Petrograd garrison to resist
- the existence of the MRC.

He claimed that Soviet decision to create the MRC had sounded the death-knell of the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks' control of the MRC gave them 'three-quarters if not nine-tenths' of their victory in the October Revolution. Since Trotsky was a major player in the drama played out in October 1917, his views demand great respect. But his analysis was largely concerned with the immediate events of October. The success of the coup had as much to do with government weakness as Bolshevik strength, a weakness that was in-built into the Provisional Government from the start.

### Provisional Government weakness

The failure of the Provisional Government to rally effective military support in its hour of need followed from its political failure over the previous eight months. It was not that the Provisional

**Key question**  
 Why was there so little resistance to the Bolsheviks in October 1917?

Government was bitterly rejected by the Russian people, it was more a matter of its inability to arouse genuine enthusiasm. Kerensky's government had come nowhere near to solving Russia's problems. Its support had evaporated. Economically incompetent and militarily incapable, the Provisional Government was not considered worth struggling to save. In October 1917, the Bolsheviks were pushing against an already open door.

It should be emphasised that the Provisional Government had never been meant to last. As its very title suggested, it was intended to be an interim government. Along with its partner in the dual authority, the Petrograd Soviet, its role was to provide a caretaker administration until an all-Russian Constituent Assembly was formed after the autumn election. The Assembly was the ultimate dream of all liberals and democrats; it would be the first fully elected, nationwide parliament in Russia. All parties, including the Bolsheviks, were committed to it.

As a consequence, the Provisional Government was always open to the charge that as an unelected, self-appointed body it had no right to exercise the authority that properly belonged to the Constituent Assembly alone. Such limited strength as the Provisional Government had came from its claim to be the representative of the February Revolution. Lenin had made it his task to undermine that claim.

**Key question**  
Why was it the Bolsheviks, and not any of the other parties, who took power in October 1917?

### **The weakness of the non-Bolshevik parties**

An obvious question is why none of the other parties was able to mount a serious challenge to the Bolsheviks for the leadership of the Revolution between February and October. One answer is that they had all accepted February as a genuine revolution. Consequently, it made sense for them to co-operate with the Provisional Government, which claimed to represent the progressive forces in Russia. The result was that the supposedly revolutionary parties, such as the SRs, were prepared to enter into coalition with the Kadets, the dominant party in the government, and await the convening of the Constituent Assembly. This gave the Bolsheviks a powerful propaganda weapon, which Lenin exploited. He charged the socialists with having sold out to the bourgeoisie.

Another explanation is that the other parties were weakened by their support for the war. None of them opposed the continuation of the struggle against Germany with the consistency that Lenin's Bolsheviks did after April 1917. The non-Bolshevik parties regarded it as Russia's duty to defeat the enemy. The SRs, the Mensheviks and, indeed, some individual Bolsheviks believed wholeheartedly in a revolutionary war against bourgeois Germany. On the left of the Menshevik Party there was a vociferous wing of international revolutionaries who saw the war as the ideal opportunity for beginning the worldwide class struggle.

### **The Menshevik position**

As committed Marxists, the Mensheviks had good reason for co-operating with the Provisional Government rather than opposing

it. They saw the February Revolution as marking a critical stage in the class war, when the bourgeoisie had overthrown the old feudal forces represented by the tsar. This stage, as Marx had argued, was the necessary prelude to the revolution of the proletariat.

However, the Mensheviks judged that since Russia did not yet possess a proletariat large enough to be a truly revolutionary force, it was their immediate task to align themselves with the other parties and work for the consolidation of the bourgeois revolution. When this had been achieved the Mensheviks could then turn to the ultimate objective of a proletarian rising. One of the interesting paradoxes of the Russian Revolution is that, in strictly theoretical terms, the Mensheviks were always more consistent in their Marxism than were Lenin and his Bolsheviks.

### Russia's lack of a party-political tradition

It is important to remember the lack of a tradition of legitimate party politics in tsarist Russia. With the fall of tsardom, the various parties found themselves for a brief, heady period free to advance their views. But there were no accepted rules of political conduct that they could follow. The arts of negotiation and compromise, which had developed in more advanced political systems elsewhere, were unknown in Russia. In their absence, politics was reduced to a simple question of who could gain power and then assert it over others.

Lenin expressed it in the simple formulation: 'who, whom?'. What he was asking was who held power and over whom was it exercised? Democracy did not enter into it. Power would go to the most flexible and the most ruthless party. The Bolsheviks under Lenin perfectly fitted this requirement. They were prepared to adjust to circumstance if the occasion demanded. Their land policy was evidence of this (see page 100). But they never lost sight of their basic goal – the seizure of power.

### Bolshevik ruthlessness

Down to October 1917 the Bolshevik position was far from unassailable; the near-fiasco of the July Days had shown how narrow the gap between success and failure could be. Nor can it be said that the Bolshevik takeover in October was inevitable – that depended as much on the weakness and mistakes of their opponents as upon their own resolution. Yet, what is clear is that none of the contending parties was as well equipped as the Bolsheviks to exploit the crises facing Russia in 1917.

Tseretelli, a Menshevik and a leading member of the Petrograd Soviet before its domination by the Bolsheviks, admitted: 'Everything we did at that time was a vain effort to hold back a destructive elemental flood with a handful of insignificant chips'. Struve, a liberal *émigré*, observed: 'Only Bolshevism was logical about revolution and true to its essence, and therefore in the revolution it conquered'. Milyukov, the Kadet leader, shared Struve's view of the Bolsheviks: 'They knew where they were going, and they went in the direction which they had chosen once and for all toward a goal which came nearer with every new, unsuccessful, experiment or compromise'.

#### *Émigré*

The word refers to those who fled from Russia after the Revolution, either out of fear or a desire to plan a counter-strike against the Bolsheviks



Lenin's Bolsheviks were a new breed of politician: utterly self-confident, scornful of all other parties and ideas, and totally loyal to their leader. This drive and utter conviction came from the belief that they were an unstoppable force of history. As Trotsky put it: 'The party in the last analysis is always right, because the party is the only historical instrument given to the proletariat to resolve its fundamental tasks'. The ruthlessness of the Bolsheviks did not guarantee their success, but it did mean that no other party could hope to gain or hold power unless it was able to overcome the challenge of these dedicated revolutionaries. In the event, none of the other parties was ever in a position to do this.

**Key question**  
In what ways did the Bolsheviks and the Provisional Government overestimate each other's strength?

### The role of mutual misunderstanding

An irony of the pre-October situation was that both the Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks overestimated each other's power, each delaying their moves against the other for fear of overplaying their hand. Historians have often wondered why the Provisional Government did not make a more sustained effort to destroy the Bolsheviks politically. It is true that some arrests were made, but the government's efforts at suppression were half-hearted.

One reason, odd though it seems in retrospect, is that Kerensky's government was more frightened of an attack from the right than from the left. Fear of a tsarist reaction against the revolution pre-occupied the thoughts of many in the government. For much of 1917, Kornilov was regarded as a bigger threat than Lenin.

This was not entirely unrealistic. The Bolsheviks were not militarily strong. Sukhanov, a Menshevik eye-witness of the events of 1917, calculated that so limited was Bolshevik strength at the time of the October Rising that 'a good detachment of 500 men would have been enough to liquidate **Smolny** and everybody in it'. Trotsky agreed, but asked pointedly where the Provisional Government was to get 500 good men to fight for it.

For their part, the Bolsheviks similarly miscalculated the strength and determination of the Provisional Government. Lenin expected to be summarily shot if ever the government's agents found him. This was why he was either incognito or absent altogether from Petrograd for long periods during the critical months between the two revolutions of 1917.

**Key term**

**Smolny**  
The Bolshevik headquarters in Petrograd, housed in what had been a young ladies' finishing school.

## 6 | The Key Debate

How far was the Bolshevik success due to Lenin?

It says much for Lenin's forcefulness as leader that despite his frequent absences from Petrograd between February and October he continued to dominate the actions of the Bolshevik Party. Trotsky later made an interesting assessment of the part played by Lenin in the October Revolution:

Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, the October Revolution would still have taken place – *on the condition that Lenin was present and in command*. If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution.

However, most historians are now careful not to overstate Lenin's power to dictate events in 1917. In the standard Bolshevik version of what happened, Lenin was portrayed as having fulfilled his plans for revolution along the lines he had laid down in such writings as his 1902 pamphlet, *What Is To Be Done?* This had visualised the development of a tightly knit, disciplined Bolshevik Party that would seize power in the name of the masses at the opportune moment (see page 23). Yet, the structure and authority of his party in 1917 were markedly different from Lenin's 1902 model. The evidence of the many disputes within the Bolshevik ranks over policy between February and October 1917 and well into 1918 suggests that they were by no means as disciplined or centrally controlled as the party later claimed to have been.

Part of the explanation for this is that the composition of the party had changed in ways that Lenin and the Central Committee had not planned. After the February Revolution there had been a large increase in membership, which the Central Committee had not wanted but which, in the heady but politically confused situation following the fall of tsardom, they seemed unable to prevent. The following figures indicate the remarkable transformation that the Bolshevik Party underwent in 1917 (see Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1:** Membership of the Bolshevik party in 1917

February	24,000
April	100,000
October	340,000 (60,000 in Petrograd)

Modern commentators view this influx of party members as an aspect of the general **radicalisation** of Russian politics that occurred as the Provisional Government got into increasing difficulties. What had helped to prepare the ground for the successful Bolshevik *coup* in October was the growth in the Petrograd factories of workers' committees that, while not necessarily pro-Bolshevik, were certainly not pro-government. One result of the anti-government agitation of these committees was that, when the open challenge to the Provisional Government came in October, Kerensky's desperate appeal for support from the people of Petrograd went unheeded.

**Radicalisation**  
A movement towards more sweeping or revolutionary ideas.

Key term

## Summary diagram: Reasons for Bolshevik success

### Little resistance to the Bolsheviks in October 1917

Why?

#### 1. Provisional Government weaknesses



#### 2. Bolshevik strengths



## Study Guide: AS Questions

### In the style of AQA

Read the following source and then answer the questions that follow.

*Adapted from: Michael Kort, The Soviet Colossus, 1996.*

The Provisional Government's basic weakness was established at the very beginning by the Soviet's famous 'Order Number One'.

- What is meant by 'Order Number One' in the context of Russia between February and October 1917? (3 marks)
- Explain why the Bolsheviks were determined after April 1917 to infiltrate the Petrograd Soviet. (7 marks)
- 'The weakness of the Provisional Government in 1917 made another revolution more than likely'. Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement. (15 marks)

**Exam tips**

*The cross-references are intended to take you straight to the material that will help you answer the questions on page 113.*

- (a) The limited number of marks means you need to be brief. State what the main point in the Order was (page 91) and say how it limited the freedom of action of the Provisional Government.
- (b) Key points might include:
- The need of the Bolsheviks as a small party lacking popular support to find a covering body through which they could work (page 94).
  - As elected representatives of the workers and soldiers, the Soviet had considerable prestige, which the Bolsheviks wanted to share and exploit (page 91).
  - As part of the dual authority, the Soviet was a counterweight to the Provisional Government.
  - Lenin believed that the structure of the Soviet made it easy to manipulate and ultimately dominate (page 103).
  - The slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' provided a useful political weapon to use against the Provisional Government (page 95).
- (c) Note that you are not being asked whether the government was weak. Its weakness is stated as a fact in the quotation. Your task is to assess whether its lack of strength made another revolution likely. You need, therefore, to survey the government's record and then judge whether its overthrow was unavoidable. Its points of weakness are likely to include:
- Its lack of political strength – it never won enough support during its eight months' existence (see page 108).
  - Its failure to solve the land or food supply problem (page 100).
  - The fact that it was continually under attack from both the right and left, e.g. the July Days (page 97), the Kornilov Affair (page 101).
  - Its failure to end the war against Germany coupled with its lack of military success.
  - Its dependence financially on loans from the Western allies.
  - It was only ever intended to be an interim government, filling in before a Constituent Assembly was elected.
  - Its lack of unity – cabinet and ministerial change were frequent.
  - It also lacked the resolve to crush its opponents even when it appeared to have defeated them; e.g. the survival of the Bolsheviks after the July Days.

You may want to suggest that not all of these factors were equally weakening, and it would add to your answer if you were to arrange them in order of importance. But be careful. It would not be enough to quote the weaknesses and then simply assert that that was why there was a revolution. Try to offer a more subtle assessment. For example, you could well point out that you need revolutionaries to make a revolution. No matter how weak a regime is, revolution does not have to follow its failing. A government could collapse from within and be followed by a political vacuum. This did not happen in October 1917 because a revolutionary party, the Bolsheviks, were ready to take power.

### In the style of Edexcel

Study Sources 1–5 below and on pages 116–17 and then answer questions (a)–(e) that follow.

#### Source 1

*From: M. McCauley, The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State, 1975.*

Much was expected of the first Provisional Government. Soldiers waited for an end to the war; peasants hoped for more land; workers looked forward to an improvement in working conditions and in their living standards; the politically minded wanted freedom of association and a free press. The subject nationalities dreamed of self-determination and autonomy; the Allies aimed at encouraging Russia to stay in the war until victory was secure; in short, everyone expected a better life now that the Tsar and his autocratic rule had been toppled. Under peacetime conditions, any Russian government would have found it difficult to measure up to expectations. War, hunger and, most important of all, the fact that it was only provisional and therefore temporary, combined to confront the government with an almost insuperable task.

#### Source 2

*From: Resolution of Support for the Provisional Government by the All-Russian Conference of Soviets, 5 April 1917.*

1. In agreement with the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, the Provisional Government, formed in the course of the revolution, published a declaration containing a programme of governmental work.
2. The All-Russian Conference of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies recognises that this programme includes the basic political demands of Russian democracy and that so far the Provisional Government has, on the whole and in general, been fulfilling the obligations which it assumed.
3. Conference appeals to democracy to support the provisional government without assuming responsibility for all the work of the government, as long as the government steadfastly confirms and expands the gains of the revolution and so long as its foreign policy is based on the renunciation of ambitions of territorial expansion.

Source 3

*A contemporary painting representing Lenin's arrival in Petrograd in April 1917.*



Source 4

*From: Lenin's April Theses, published after his return to Russia in April 1917.*

The fact must be recognised that in most Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies our Party is in a minority. So far it is in a small minority, as against a bloc of all the petty-bourgeois opportunist elements. They have yielded to the influence of the bourgeoisie and are the conveyors of its influence to the proletariat, from the Socialist Revolutionaries down to the Organisation committee.

It must be explained to the masses that the Soviet of Workers' Deputies is the only possible form of revolutionary government. Therefore our task is, as long as this government submits to the influence of the bourgeoisie, to present a patient, systematic, and persistent explanation of the government's errors and tactics. This explanation must be especially adapted to the practical needs of the masses.

As long as we are in the minority, we must carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors. At the same time, we must advocate transferring the entire power of the state to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies.

#### Source 5

*From: Lenin's letter to the Central Committee and the Petrograd and Moscow committees of the Bolshevik Party, September 1917.*

The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals, can and must take power into their own hands.

They can do so because the active majority of revolutionary elements in the two chief cities is large enough to carry the people with it, to overcome our opponents' resistance to smash them, and to gain and retain power. The Bolsheviks, by immediately proposing a democratic peace, by immediately giving the land to the peasants and by re-establishing the democratic institutions and liberties which have been distorted and shattered by Kerensky, will form a government which nobody will be able to overthrow.

**(a) Study Source 2.**

What does Source 2 reveal about the attitudes of the workers and soldiers in the Soviets towards the Provisional Government in April 1917? (3 marks)

**(b) Use your own knowledge.**

Use your own knowledge to explain how and why Lenin returned to Russia in April 1917. (5 marks)

**(c) Study Sources 4 and 5.**

Does the evidence of these two sources suggest that Lenin's attitude to the government changed between April and September 1917? Explain your answer. (5 marks)

**(d) Study Sources 3 and 5.**

Compare their value as evidence to an historian inquiring into the role of Lenin in the failure of the Provisional Government. (5 marks)

**(e) Study Sources 1 and 4 and use your own knowledge.**

Do you agree with the view that the main reason for the failure of the Provisional Government was the skill and determination of Lenin? Explain your answer, using these two sources and your own knowledge. (12 marks)

*Source: Edexcel, May 2002*

**Exam tips**

The cross-references are intended to take you straight to the material that will help you answer the questions on page 117.

- (a) This is a piece of comprehension and inference. You need to show that you understand the source by drawing out the attitudes that underlie the apparent support of the Soviet for the government. Search out the implied threat in the words of the declaration. Show that you appreciate that the support of the workers and soldiers was conditional on the Provisional Government's continuing to act in ways acceptable to the Soviet.
- (b) Deal with both parts of this question, which is asking you to use your own knowledge, not the sources.
- The 'How' part is straightforward. Simply describe the sealed train episode involving Lenin and the Germans (page 93).
  - The 'why' part asks you to explain Lenin's motives (pages 94–5). Among the points you might include are:
    - The enforced delay Lenin suffered, which increased his anxiety to get back before the already returned Bolsheviks started taking decisions without him.
    - His anger at developments since the tsar's fall, which had seen the revolutionary parties support the Provisional Government.
    - His great desire to use the revolutionary situation in Petrograd to the Bolsheviks' advantage (page 9).
    - His *April theses*, which he delivered as soon as he arrived show why he had been so eager to return – to pursue a genuine revolution which February had not been.
- (c) Make sure you grasp what Lenin is saying in both documents before making your decision.
- Are they equally critical of the Provisional Government?
  - Is the key difference that Source 4 argues for patience because as yet the Bolsheviks are in a minority, whereas by the time Lenin wrote Source 5, the Bolsheviks are in a majority in the Soviets?
- It is the circumstances that have changed, not Lenin's basic opposition to the Provisional Government, which is one of total rejection. The times favoured action in September; they had not in April. If you develop your answer along these lines you are unlikely to omit any vital points.
- (d) It is worth your pointing out that Source 3 is an artist's impression not a photograph of an actual event. It is, therefore, a piece of evidence one would have to be very careful in using. It shows an enthusiastic crowd welcoming Lenin, but, except by a rather remote connection, it does not relate to the failure of the Provisional Government six months later. It may be said to portray the popularity of Lenin at a particular moment, but it would be straining the evidence to say much more than that.
- Source 5, in contrast, is directly relevant since it is a pronouncement by one of the major participants in the coup that brought down the Provisional Government. Such considerations should help you make up your mind as to the respective merits of the two sources as helpful evidence for an historian.



(e) Remember to incorporate your understanding of the sources into your own knowledge of 1917.

- What do you recall about Lenin's skill and determination?
- How is this illustrated, for example, through his own words in Source 4?
- In what way does Martin McCauley's later observation support or challenge this?
- Does McCauley say anything about Lenin or is his historian's concern, as shown in Source 1, solely to do with the Provisional Government's underlying, possibly fatal, weakness?

One way you can express your agreement or disagreement with the proposition in the question is to tie McCauley's analysis to what you know actually happened in October 1917.

- Did the Government fall because of the strains described in Source 1 or was it overthrown by a skilful Lenin using the cover of the Soviet, which the Bolsheviks had infiltrated along the lines advocated in the *April Theses*, to bring it down (pages 106–11)?

The decision is yours, but support it with your own knowledge and the evidence in the sources.

## In the style of OCR

Assess how far the transformation of the position of the Bolsheviks from February to October 1917 was a result of Lenin's leadership?

### **Exam tips**

*The cross-references are intended to take you straight to the material that will help you answer the question.*

To prepare the ground for considering the 'transformation', begin by describing the position of the Bolsheviks in February.

- How united were they (page 93)?
- How large were they as a party (page 112)?

Your answers to these two questions may well suggest that the Bolsheviks were in a weak position in February. Yet, eight months later they took power. This suggests there had been a major transformation. However, do not lose sight of the fact that numbers mattered little to Lenin. He was not looking in 1917 to build a great, democratic, popular party. He was an opportunist who wanted to lead his small but wholly committed party to success under the cover of the soviets. Consider that throughout the period February to October he was constantly on the run and that his party came close to destruction on at least one major occasion (page 97). Divisions within the party also occurred (page 104). It was Lenin's great political achievement never to allow these to divert the party from his goal of seizing the moment when it came to challenge the Provisional Government.

But remember that ultimately it was the government's own mistakes that put the Bolsheviks in a position to make a challenge. It is true that Lenin skilfully played upon Russia's problems, 'bread, peace and land' (page 95), to gain support for his ideas, but in the end it was not popular support that enabled the Bolsheviks to take power but the ineffectiveness of the Provisional Government they displaced.

Your assessment of the importance of Lenin's leadership depends on how much weight you put on his single-mindedness in keeping the Bolsheviks on course and how much allowance you make for the sheer good luck enjoyed by the Bolsheviks and the ineptitude of the Provisional Government. Remember, too, that had not Trotsky at a critical moment become head of the MRC (page 105), the only effective military force in Petrograd, all of Lenin's inspiring leadership might have been in vain.