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# Reaction and Revolution: Russia

1894–1924

MICHAEL LYNCH

FIFTH EDITION



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## Dedication

### **Keith Randell (1943–2002)**

The *Access to History* series was conceived and developed by Keith, who created a series to 'cater for students as they are, not as we might wish them to be'. He leaves a living legacy of a series that for over 20 years has provided a trusted, stimulating and well-loved accompaniment to post-16 study. Our aim with these new editions is to continue to offer students the best possible support for their studies.

## CHAPTER 5

# 1917: From Provisional Government to October Revolution

The fall of the Romanovs was followed by an eight-month period in which the Provisional Government, initially in cooperation with the Petrograd soviet, struggled to resolve Russia's major problems: food shortages, disruption on the land and the continuing war with Germany and Austria. Troubles deepened as the Russian armies failed to achieve a significant victory. Led by Lenin, often from exile, the Bolsheviks strove to exploit the government's difficulties. After a thwarted attempt to seize power in July, they were again in a position in October to challenge for power. Kerensky's government, deprived by desertion of military support, caved in and fled. Carried to power in this bloodless way, Lenin proceeded to claim authority in the name of the soviets and establish a Bolshevik government. This chapter examines these developments under the following themes:

- ◆ The Dual Authority
- ◆ The return of the Bolsheviks
- ◆ The Provisional Government and its problems
- ◆ The October Revolution
- ◆ Reasons for Bolshevik success

The key debate on page 130 of this chapter asks the question: What was the true character of the October Revolution?

### KEY DATES

<b>1917 Feb. 28</b>	Provisional Government claimed authority	<b>1917 Oct. 12</b>	Petrograd soviet set up Military Revolutionary Committee
<b>March 1</b>	Petrograd soviet issued Soviet Order Number 1	<b>Oct. 23</b>	Bolsheviks rose against Kerensky's government
<b>March 12</b>	Bolsheviks began to return to Petrograd	<b>Oct. 24–25</b>	Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd
<b>April 3</b>	Lenin returned to Petrograd	<b>Oct. 25–26</b>	Kerensky fled from Petrograd
<b>April 4</b>	Lenin issued his <i>April Theses</i>	<b>Oct. 26</b>	Bolsheviks established <i>Sovnarkom</i> , with Lenin as chairman
<b>July 3–6</b>	Failure of the Bolshevik 'July Days' uprising	<b>Oct. 27</b>	Lenin informed the Congress of Soviets that the Bolsheviks had taken power in their name
<b>July 8</b>	Kerensky became prime minister		
<b>Sept. 1</b>	Kornilov's abortive march on Petrograd		
<b>Sept. 25</b>	Bolsheviks gained majority in Petrograd soviet		



# 1 The Dual Authority

## ■ What were the basic weaknesses of the Provisional Government?

The Provisional Government, led by **Prince Lvov**, which picked up the reins of authority after the tsar's abdication (see page 93), was really the old *duma* in a new form. When Paul Milyukov, the foreign minister, read out the list of ministers in the newly formed government, someone in the listening crowd called out, 'Who appointed you lot, then?' Milyukov replied, 'We were appointed by the revolution itself.'

In that exchange were expressed the two crippling weaknesses of the Provisional Government throughout the eight months of its existence:

- It was not an elected body, having come into being as a rebellious committee of the old *duma*, refusing to disband at the tsar's order. As a consequence, it had no legitimate authority and, therefore, no constitutional claim on the loyalty of the Russian people. Lacking this, it would be judged entirely on how well it dealt with the nation's problems.
- Its authority was limited by its unofficial partnership with the Petrograd soviet. It was not that the soviet was initially hostile. Indeed, at first, there was considerable cooperation between them with some individuals being members of both bodies. For example, **Alexander Kerensky**, the Social Revolutionary (SR) leader, was for a time chairman of the soviet as well as a minister in the Provisional Government.

## Role of the Petrograd soviet

The soviet did not set out to be an alternative government. It regarded its role as supervisory, checking that the interests of the soldiers and workers were fully understood by the new government. However, in the uncertain times that followed the February Revolution, the Provisional Government often seemed unsure of its own authority. This tended to give the soviet greater prominence.

In addition, there was the impressive fact that in the aftermath of the February Revolution, soviets were rapidly set up in all of the major cities and towns of Russia. Yet, although the soviets were to play an increasingly important role in the development of the revolution, in the early stages the Bolsheviks did not dominate them. The soviets were not, therefore, necessarily opposed to the Provisional Government. Nevertheless, even before the Bolshevik influence became dominant, the ability of the Petrograd soviet to restrict the Provisional Government's authority had been clearly revealed. In one of its first moves as an organisation it had issued its 'Soviet Order Number 1', which declared that, in military matters, the orders of the Provisional Government were to be obeyed 'only when they do not contradict the orders and decrees of the soviet'.

## KEY FIGURES

### Prince Lvov (1861–1925)

A prominent landowner and progressive reformer, he headed the Provisional Government from March to July 1917.

### Alexander Kerensky (1881–1970)

Radical SR lawyer, agitated in the *duma* against the tsarist regime, became leader of the Provisional government July to October, 1917; following the Bolshevik takeover, he fled from Russia to the USA where he suffered the fate of becoming a history professor.

### ? SOURCE QUESTION

Study Source A. Why was the presence of the Bolsheviks in Petrograd soviet meetings so politically important between March and October 1917?

#### SOURCE A



An overflowing meeting of the Petrograd soviet in March 1917. Huge numbers of soldiers and workers, sometimes as many 3000, attended the early meetings. By the autumn, this had dropped to a few hundred but the Bolsheviks kept up their numbers, which gave them a disproportionate influence in the soviet.

### Importance of Soviet Order Number 1

What the order meant was that the decrees of the Provisional Government were not binding unless they were approved by the Petrograd soviet. History shows that unless a government has control of its army it does not hold real power.

Order Number 1 made it clear that the Provisional Government did not have such power. It had, therefore, to compromise with the soviet. Between February and April 1917 this arrangement worked reasonably well; there were no serious disputes between the two bodies in the 'Dual Authority'.

### Early political cooperation

An important factor promoting this early cooperation was the widespread elation in Petrograd in the weeks following the February Revolution. Excitement was in the air; people on the streets greeted each other with enthusiasm as if a new era had dawned. There was a genuine feeling across all the political groups, including the Bolsheviks initially, that Russia had entered a period of real freedom. For a time, cooperation between opposing parties became much easier to achieve.

#### KEY TERMS

**Anarchy** Absence of government or authority, leading to disorder.

**Monarchists**

Reactionaries who wanted a restoration of tsardom.

There was also a general acceptance that the new liberty that had come with the collapse of tsardom should not be allowed to slip into **anarchy**. This created a willingness to maintain state authority at the centre of affairs. Furthermore, at the beginning, both the Provisional Government and the Petrograd soviet contained a wide range of political representation. In the first meetings of the soviet, moderate socialists had a bigger influence than the SRs or SDs. In addition, all parties, apart from the Bolsheviks and the **monarchists**, were

represented in the Provisional Government during its early weeks. As the year wore on and the problems mounted, the Provisional Government moved increasingly to the right and the soviet to the left. But before that shift occurred there had been considerable harmony.

A further fact was that the socialist parties, not being as extreme as the Bolsheviks, who were not yet a major influence, were reluctant to demand too much, too soon. They judged that their relative weakness limited how far they could go and that they had to rely on the administrators from the old regime.

**Nicolai Sukhanov**, a leading Menshevik member of the Petrograd soviet, later defined this attitude: 'the Soviet democracy had to entrust the power to the propertied classes, its class enemy, without whose participation it could not now master the technique of administration in the desperate conditions of disintegration'.

## Early achievements of the Provisional Government

The fruits of the early harmony between the soviet and the government were shown in a set of progressive measures adopted by the Provisional Government:

- amnesty for political prisoners
- trade unions legally recognised
- an eight-hour day for industrial workers
- replacement of the tsarist police with a **people's militia**
- granting of full civil and religious freedoms
- preparations made for the election of a constituent assembly.

Noticeably, however, these changes did not touch on the critical issues of the war and the land. It would be these that would destroy the always tenuous partnership of the Dual Authority, and it would be Lenin who would begin the process of destruction.

### KEY FIGURE

#### Nicolai Sukhanov (1882–1940)

An SD activist who wrote an insider's account of 1917; he was later arrested during the Stalinist purges and shot.

### KEY TERM

**People's militia** A new set of volunteer law-enforcement officers drawn from ordinary people.

### ONLINE EXTRAS OCR

WWW

Test your understanding of the Dual Authority by completing Worksheet 17 at [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras)

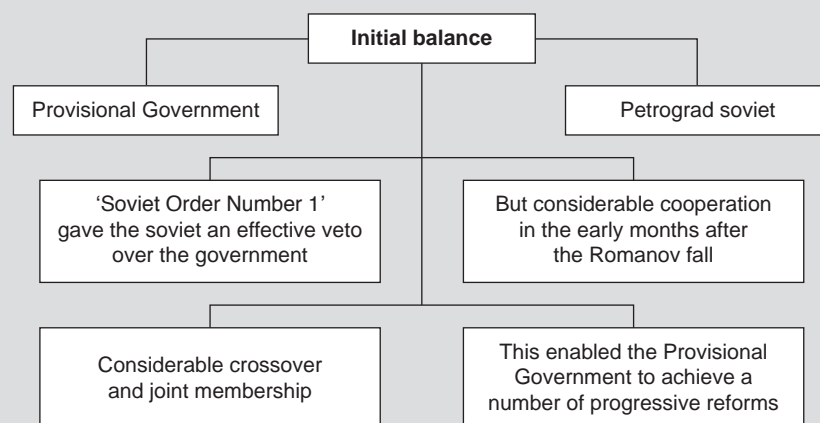
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WWW

Get to grips with the Dual Authority by completing Worksheet 19 at [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras)

## SUMMARY DIAGRAM

### THE DUAL AUTHORITY



## CHAPTER SUMMARY

The February Revolution was followed by the establishment of a Dual Authority, which saw initial cooperation between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd soviet. This harmony had broken down by the summer months and, prompted by Lenin, who had returned in April to demand the end of the Bolsheviks' cooperation with the other parties, his party began to consider rising against the government. An attempt to do so in July proved premature and brought the Bolsheviks to the verge of destruction. They were saved only by the government's mishandling of the Kornilov Affair, which enabled them to act as defenders of Petrograd against tsarist reaction.

Unable to deal with the major problems facing Russia – disastrous war losses, food shortages and a rebellious peasantry – Kerensky's government by the autumn had forfeited popular support. To avoid arrest, Lenin stayed only intermittently in Petrograd but, such was his influence from afar, that by late October he had persuaded his followers to strike against the government. Trotsky, in the name of the soviet, whose chairman and military chief he had become, organised the October Revolution which overthrew a barely resistant government.

## Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter.

- 1** Why was there so little initial political conflict between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd soviet?
- 2** What did Stalin and Kamenev think Bolshevik policy should be after the February Revolution?
- 3** What was the essential argument in Lenin's *April Theses*?
- 4** How were the Bolsheviks able to survive their failure in the July Days?
- 5** How real a threat was the Kornilov Affair to the Provisional Government?
- 6** Why was land such a contentious issue in Russia between February and October 1917?
- 7** Why did the Provisional Government continue the war against Germany?
- 8** Why was it the Bolsheviks, and not any of the other parties, who took power in October 1917?
- 9** In what ways did the Bolsheviks and the Provisional Government overestimate each other's strength?
- 10** What roles did Lenin and Trotsky play in the October rising?



## Question practice: OCR

### Essay question

- 1 To what extent was the October Revolution of 1917 due to the weaknesses of the Provisional Government?

**EXAM HINT** Responses should identify a range of reasons for the October Revolution, including the weakness of the Provisional Government and other issues such as the actions of the Bolsheviks and the land problem. For each issue discussed, reach a judgement as to its importance in bringing about the revolution.

## Question practice: Pearson Edexcel

### Essay questions

- 1 How accurate is it to say that the return of Lenin to Petrograd in April 1917 fundamentally changed the political situation in Petrograd? [AS level]

**EXAM HINT** This relates to consequences. To what extent did the return of Lenin change the political situation in Petrograd? Consider what the term 'fundamentally' would refer to? What would you expect to see if there had been fundamental changes? Now look at what happened when Lenin returned and assess how far this took place.

- 2 How accurate is it to say that it was the weakness of the Provisional Government, not the strength of the revolutionaries, that enabled the Bolsheviks to take power in October 1917. [A level]

**EXAM HINT** This is a causal question weighing up two factors against each other. You have the statement of fact: the Bolsheviks did take power in October 1917. Now you need to consider the main causation of the weakness of the Provisional Government and then the strength of the revolutionaries.

### Source questions

- 1 Why is Source 1 valuable to the historian for an enquiry into Lenin's attitude towards a rising against the Provisional Government in 1917? Explain your answer using the source, the information given about it and your own knowledge of the historical context. [AS level]

**EXAM HINT** These types of questions just want you to say why the source has value, you do not need to point out any problems. Just look at the source provenance and what it says. What do you know about both of these that would give the source particular value in assessing the question?

- 2 How far could the historian make use of Sources 1 and 2 together to investigate the disputes within the Bolshevik Party regarding an insurrection against the Provisional Government? Explain your answer, using both sources, the information given about them and your own knowledge of the historical context. [A level]

**EXAM HINT** As set out in previous hints on these types of source questions, remember that you are saying how a historian would use the source, not saying whether it is or is not useful. All sources are useful in some way. Use the content and context to assess this and point out any problems before saying how, despite any issues, it is useful.

- 3** How far could the historian make use of Sources 1 and 2 together to investigate the reasons why there were disagreements among the Bolsheviks over the timing of a rising against the Provisional Government in 1917? Explain your answer using both sources, the information given about them and your own knowledge of the historical context. [A level]

**EXAM HINT** These questions require a bit more analysis than the previous question on value. What do you know about the provenance of the source that would give the source particular insight into the question? Does the source say anything that is accurate that would help give it weight?

#### SOURCE 1

Lenin's letter to the Central Petrograd Committee and to Bolshevik members of the Petrograd soviet, 1 October 1917. Here, anxious that events might overtake the Bolsheviks, Lenin urges an immediate rising. Quoted in V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Progress Publishers, 1971, p. 361.

*Without losing a single moment [we must] organise a headquarters of the insurgent detachments, distribute our forces, move the reliable regiments to the most important points, surround the Alexandrinsky Theatre, occupy the Peter and Paul fortress, arrest the General Staff and the government, and move against the officer cadets – those detachments which would rather die than allow the enemy to approach the strategic points of the city. We must mobilise the armed workers and call them to fight the last desperate fight, occupy the telegraph and the telephone exchange and connect it by telephone with all the factories, all the regiments, all the points of armed fighting, etc.*

*Of course, this is all by way of example, only to illustrate the fact that at the present moment it is impossible to remain loyal to Marxism, to remain loyal to the revolution unless insurrection is treated as an art.*

#### SOURCE 2

From an article of 11 October 1917, written by leading Bolsheviks, Lev Kamenev and Grigor Zinoviev, in which they caution against the Bolsheviks' attempting an armed rising. Quoted in Martin McCauley, *The Russian Revolution & the Soviet State 1917–21: Documents*, Macmillan, 1984, p. 115.

*A current is forming and growing in workers' groups which see the only way out in an immediate declaration of an armed uprising. Now all the timescales have coincided so that if one is to speak of such an uprising, one has plainly to fix a date and moreover for the immediate future. This question is already being debated in one form or another in all the periodical press, in workers' meetings and is occupying the minds of a wide circle of party workers. We, in our turn, regard it as our duty and our right to speak out on this question with full frankness.*

*We are most profoundly convinced that to declare at once an armed uprising would mean to stake not only the fate of our party, but also the fate of the Russian and international revolution. There is no doubt that there are such historical situations that an oppressed class has to acknowledge that it is better to join battle and lose than to surrender without a fight. Is the Russian working class in such a position now? No, and a thousand times no.*

**ONLINE EXTRAS**  
Pearson Edexcel

WWW

Practise your source analysis skills in relation to the Kamenev and Zinoviev article by completing Worksheet 27 at [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras)

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## FIFTH EDITION

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