

# **Bolshevik Consolidation of Power**

**(1)**

**Early Reforms**

**(3)**

**Single – Party  
State**

**(2)**

**Closure of the  
Constituent Assembly**

**(4)**

**Red Terror**

**Cheka**

**(5)**

**Red Army**

**(6)**

**War Communism**

## Why were the Bolsheviks so successful in establishing their authority over Russia in the years after 1917?

- 1) "Only through repression and force could Lenin's party stay in office and these were the main characteristics of the early Soviet regime."  
David R. Marples.
  
- 2) "Trotsky's outstanding achievement as commissar for War was his creation of the Red Army, which more than any other factor explains the survival of the Bolshevik government."  
Michael Lynch.
  
- 3) "Without doubt the Bolsheviks' early promises were a basic reason why they were able to seize and consolidate power in 1917-1918; their programme of Soviet power, peace, land reform, and workers' control was widely popular."  
Evan Mawdsley

The Bolshevik grip on power tightens



## The Bolshevik Consolidation of Power, 1917-1921

Between 1917 and 1921 Russia ended her involvement in the Great War, but suffered terribly from a widespread and damaging civil war. Because of the demands of this war, and in response to the opposition to the Bolsheviks, Lenin and his group supervised the setting up of instruments to ensure Bolshevik authority: a single party state, an army and a state police network.

- The Bolsheviks came to power in Russia with the support of a substantial minority of the population. They had to set about building up their power and consolidating their authority under very difficult conditions. The toppling of the Provisional Government meant that the Bolsheviks held power in the capital while claiming authority over the country as a whole. It was to be three years, however, before that claim could be enforced throughout Russia.
- With only minority support in the country, and soon confronted by an imposing array of enemies, how did the Bolsheviks consolidate and stabilise their rule? Three areas of activity are important in this: **the establishment of the single party state and the defeat of opposition, reconciliation with the population, and the structuring of the regime itself.**
- By the early 1920s Russia was in the authoritarian grip of a one-party dictatorship. The Communist Party had a ruthless leadership which was motivated to hold on to power no matter what the cost in terms of popularity.
- The Communists were prepared to use any means to retain power. They retained control by recreating central authority and it did this by reintroducing many traditional features of the old hierarchical system—a centralised police force, a proper army and so on. By June Russia had in effect become a one-party state as elections were rigged or set aside and elected representatives of other parties were banned or arrested.
- The Bolsheviks had a ruthless determination to hold on to power at all costs. To do this they restored an authoritarian government backed by force and terror, not dissimilar to the old Tsarist system but it turned out to be much more cruel. The Bolsheviks had no compunction about shooting striking workers or obstructive peasants.

## The Early Bolshevik Reforms

The Bolsheviks' earliest reforms were designed to ensure their regime's short-term survival. Quite simply, the workers and peasants were given what they wanted. The Land Decree (November 1917) legitimised the peasant land seizures of 1917, and the Decree on Workers' Control (November 1917) effectively handed the management of factories over to shop stewards and trade unionists.

To ensure their survival in the first months after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks had handed over control of the land to the peasants and control of the factories to the workers committees. The pressure from peasants and workers had been irresistible.

After ousting the Provisional Government in October 1917, the Bolsheviks sought to broaden their basis of support. To achieve this, they introduced a number of decrees granting the people what they had been demanding. Decrees were adopted passing land into the hands of those who cultivated it and establishing workers' control in industrial enterprises with more than five employees. The government immediately started peace negotiations with Germany. Independence was formally granted to Poland and Finland, and the right of national self-determination confirmed in principle. These measures signalled to the population that the new Bolshevik regime was intent on responding to their concerns. They were also means of building up popular support.

## Early decrees issued by Sovnarkom.

To survive the first few months Lenin could not afford to ignore the tide of popular aspiration that had swept away Kerensky and the Provisional Government, so he gave the workers and peasants what they wanted. In key areas, the Bolsheviks compromised their principles to keep popular support.

- **Land decree** This gave peasants the right to take over the estates of the gentry, without compensation, and to decide for themselves the best way to divide it up (since they were doing this anyway). Land could no longer be bought, sold or rented; it belonged to the 'entire people'. It was not what the Bolsheviks wanted. Privately owned land was not part of their socialist vision.
- **Workers' control decree** Factory committees were given the right to control production and finance in workplaces and to 'supervise' management. This decree did not give direct management to the workers but some committees took it to mean that. This went far beyond what many Bolshevik leaders wanted, but they could not resist the strength of workers' pressure for reform.
- **Rights of the People of Russia decree** This gave the right of self-determination to the national minorities in the former Russian empire. Of course, the Bolsheviks did not have control of the areas in which most of these people lived, so this was nothing more than a paper measure.

## The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

Lenin knew that he had to have peace at any price to ensure the survival of the Bolshevik regime. Opposition to the war had been a key factor in the Bolshevik success in October and he had to honour his promise. Furthermore, there was now no army to fight the Germans, who began to advance into the Ukraine. Lenin even feared that they might move on Petrograd and throw him and his government out. Under pressure from Lenin, representatives of the Bolsheviks reluctantly signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1918.

### The Treaty of Brest Litovsk

“A separate peace with Germany would give the Bolsheviks the ‘breathing spell’ they needed to consolidate their power base, restore the economy and build up their own revolutionary army.”

Orlando Figes.

“Russia had been brought to its knees after three long years of total war and its people wanted peace above all else.”

Orlando Figes

Lenin was quick to realise that Bolshevik consolidation would be extremely difficult to achieve while the war against Germany continued. He did not want the Bolsheviks to suffer the same fate as the Provisional Government and so needed to end Russian involvement in the First World War speedily. Peace was concluded through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918), which took Russia out of the war at a great cost.

Many Russians opposed the Bolsheviks because of their acceptance of peace at any price. But Lenin had little choice but to accept the terms since Russia was in no state to defend herself. He had pledged peace, and most Russians wanted the slaughter to stop, no matter what the cost.

The settlement gave the new Soviet government a valuable breathing space; time to organise the administration, consolidate itself in power, and to begin to rebuild the army.

## The Constituent Assembly

The Constituent Assembly posed a big threat to Lenin. Elected by the people in the first free elections in centuries, it could claim to be the legitimate body to decide the make-up of the future government of Russia. When the election results became known, the Bolsheviks found they had won only 175 seats against 410 for the Socialist Revolutionaries. However, Lenin asserted that his Soviet government represented a higher stage of democracy than an elected assembly containing different political parties. He said that the Constituent Assembly smacked of bourgeois parliamentary democracy and declared it redundant. The Assembly was allowed to meet for one day-5 January 1918-then the doors were closed and the deputies told to go home. A crowd which demonstrated in favour of the Assembly was fired on by soldiers loyal to the Sovnarkom, the first time that soldiers had fired in this way on unarmed demonstrators since February 1917.

## The Constituent Assembly

After seizing power, Lenin aimed to construct a new Bolshevik authority over the whole empire. The first task, Lenin believed, was to destroy the proposed Constituent Assembly. The second task was to ensure that the soviets came fully under Bolshevik influence and control.

The elections to the Constituent Assembly were held on 12th November 1917. The Bolsheviks won only 175 seats. Social Revolutionaries had an overall majority, with 410 out of the 808 seats. Clearly the Bolsheviks were not the party favoured by the majority of voters. At this point Lenin argued that a Constituent Assembly was no longer necessary now that the soviets had taken control of Russia. The soviets, alone would rule. Only the soviets would decide on the nature of Russia's constitution.

The Constituent Assembly eventually met on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1918. After a lengthy debate, the only vote on a policy issue was lost by the Bolsheviks, who then walked out of the Assembly because of the 'counter-revolutionary majority' present. The Assembly broke up, planning to meet again the next evening; but before then Lenin had declared that it was dissolved. Army Bolshevik supporters, the 'Red Guard', the forerunner of the Red Army, were placed at its meeting place, the Tauride Palace. The Constituent Assembly never met again. A few protest risings occurred, mainly in Petrograd, but Red Guards quelled these by shooting dead an unspecified number of people who were later referred to as 'armed conspirators'.

In place of the disabled Constituent Assembly, the third All-Russian Congress of Soviets met at the Tauride Palace the next day. Russia's new political structure was announced. Russia was declared a republic. A new government called the Council of People's Commissars or Sovnarkom was established. Local soviets could deal only with local matters. "Questions of national importance" were to be left to the Bolshevik-controlled central authorities. Local soviets only had control over what the central authority allowed them to control.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1918 Russia's new constitution was published. The Russia empire was to become a one-party state, with all real authority lying with the central Bolshevik command in Moscow.



## Russia becomes a one-party state

Lenin moved quickly to impose dictatorial rule upon the country. Lenin simply replaced one autocratic power base with another of his own making. The tactics he and the Bolsheviks employed from their first days in office were based upon brutality and coercion. Lenin would brook no opposition or criticism. All opponents were seen as evil and deserving elimination.

Lenin established a more systematic method of control. He reintroduced the death penalty and established the Cheka in December 1917. He also banned all middle-class political parties, censored the press, curtailed free speech and the right of free assembly, and resorted to the use of forced labour in areas of immediate economic need. The Bolsheviks also resorted to murder. By the middle of 1918 all anti-Bolshevik parties had been forced to disband. Formally, the opposition had ceased to exist.

### Sovnarkom

Lenin had proclaimed Soviet power but he did not exercise power through the Soviet. He formed an entirely new body- the Council of People's Commissars, or the Sovnarkom. It was exclusively made up of Bolsheviks. The reason for this was clear: Lenin had no intention of sharing power with the Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and other socialist groups in the Soviet. The Sovnarkom ruled by decree without going to the Soviet for approval.

### Creation of a one-party state.

Immediately on seizing power, the Bolsheviks built forces of terror to wipe out the opposition. One of the first measures of the new Bolshevik regime was to close down the opposition press: first the newspapers of the centre and the right, and later the socialist press. Next, attention was turned on opposition political parties. The Kadet Party, which had done quite well in the Constituent Assembly elections, was denounced and outlawed. Leading Kadets were arrested and two were brutally beaten to death by Bolshevik sailors.

They were soon followed into prison by leading right-wing Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks-all this before the end of 1917. The engine of political terror was being cranked up.

## The Single Party State

The government Lenin presented to the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets on the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> October was all-Bolshevik in composition. This was unacceptable both to elements in the party and to socialist forces in Russia as a whole. Under pressure, Lenin reluctantly agreed to the formation of a coalition government. On 17<sup>th</sup> November, a coalition government between the Left SRs and the Bolsheviks was formed. The basis of unity between the two parties was weak, however. The coalition collapsed when the Left SRs walked out of the government on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1918 in protest at the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany. **Henceforth, the Bolsheviks were the only party in government.**

## The Demise of the Opposition.

The consolidation of single party rule involved the elimination of the Kadets, SRs and Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks arrested their party leaders, closed their party presses, and effectively broke up the parties. Their political life in Russia was at an end.

## Restructuring the Political Area.

The elimination of alternative parties was accompanied by the restructuring of the political area. The Constituent Assembly seemed to pose a major problem for the Bolsheviks. But when the Assembly met on the evening of 5-6 January 1918, it was dispersed by the Bolsheviks with a minimum of force and no meaningful opposition.

The other institution in which political parties might have been able to act was the soviets. As a result of a surge of popular support for the Bolsheviks, soviets throughout the country fell under the control of their executive committees. Increasingly they came under Bolshevik domination.

## The Cheka

The Bolsheviks began to take action against their political opponents as early as November 1917, when dozens of Cadet leaders were arrested and imprisoned as “enemies of the people”. A few weeks later a political police force known as the Cheka was established.

The Cheka was headed by “Iron” Felix Dzerzhinsky. Under a variety of names, it became a permanent feature of Communist rule in Russia. The Cheka operated outside the law. Its victims were not given the benefit of a trial.

From the outset, the Cheka had a reputation for savagery. The most notorious of its early actions was the murder of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in July 1918. The methods used by the Cheka included executions, imprisonment in labour camps, hostage-taking and torture of the most gruesome kind.

## The “Red Terror”

During the “Red Terror”, the bourgeoisie were driven from their homes, deprived of food rations and forced to do degrading work. Sometimes they were indiscriminately shot. Felix Dzerzhinsky, much-feared founder of Lenin’s secret police, the cheka, was intent on searching out, and eliminating, counter-revolutionaries. Former officials, landlords and priests were executed and whole families wiped out for no other reason than they had once been rich. All suspicious persons were detained in concentration camps. Any opposition to the Bolshevik authorities was dealt with by violence. Peasants who resisted the requisitioning of their crops or who hoarded grain were punished, often by shooting. Industrial unrest was similarly crushed.

## The Red Army

Lenin wanted Communist Russia to have its own reliable force. The Communists required a loyal army to protect the revolution and to consolidate it throughout the former Tsarist Empire.

In March 1918, Trotsky was given the task of creating a professional army. In order to establish a working army with an effective command structure, Trotsky had to reverse most of the concessions won by Russian soldiers since the February Revolution. He expressed the view that soldiers' committees could not lead regiments in time of war; he insisted that a return to military discipline was required; and he demanded that the Red Army should have proper, central control.

Quality officers were at a premium, and Trotsky had to accept former Tsarist officers who were prepared to serve in the Red Army. Precautions were subsequently used during the Civil War to ensure that these officers would think twice about switching allegiance. For example, a register of their families was kept and Trotsky made it known that their families would be used as hostages if they deserted from the Red Army. In addition, a Communist commissar was placed at each officer's side to ensure the politically correct nature of judgements made.

There were immense problems in all this, and it is to Trotsky's credit that an effective fighting force did emerge during the years of the Civil War. At the end of the Civil War, the Communists could claim victory and could point to an army of five million men.

## War Communism

- 1) During the Civil War the Bolsheviks took strict measures to organise industry and food supplies in the areas under their control. They had two aims: to keep the Red Army supplied with food and weapons, and to introduce a system of communism- the equal sharing of wealth. These measures were together known as War Communism.

There were five aspects of War Communism:

1. All factories with more than ten workers were nationalised-that is, taken over by the government. A government body called Vesenkha (the Supreme Council of National Economy) decided exactly what each industry should produce.
- 2) All workers were under government control. There was military discipline in the factories, including the death penalty for strikers. The unemployed were made to join 'Labour Armies', cutting trees or building roads, for example.
- 3) Private trading was banned. Peasants had to give their surplus food to the government: they could not sell it for profit.
- 4) The government allowed money to lose its value through inflation. It abolished rents, railway fares, postal charges and many other money payments. In place of money, people were encouraged to barter.
5. In cities food was strictly rationed.

War Communism succeeded in one of its aims: the Red Army was kept supplied with food and weapons, and it won the civil war in 1920.

- 2) While Trotsky's reforms of the Red Army played a vital part in the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War, so too did the economic policy that Lenin adopted. This was known as "War Communism". The whole point of this policy was to ensure that the Red Army had enough food and supplies. If the civil war was lost then it would be the end of Communism in Russia and so no sacrifice was too great to achieve victory.