Lenin in Power

Russell Tarr explains how the Bolsheviks established their grip on Russia after the 1917 Revolution, and at what cost.

**Lenin in 1920**

Introduction

Between 1917 and 1924 the Bolshevik party went through a baptism of fire which transformed it from a revolutionary splinter group into a party of government. During that period it faced intense opposition from a bewildering array of political, military, social and national groups. By the time of Lenin’s death, in January 1924, the regime was, despite all the odds, still in power – but at what cost was this success achieved and to what extent was it superficial rather than real?

**Political Opposition: Constituent Assembly to ‘Red Terror’**

Politically, the Bolshevik party faced massive opposition following its seizure of power in 1917. The Social Revolutionaries (the party of the peasants) had more support in the countryside, whilst the Bolsheviks (the party of the proletariat) did not command the overwhelming support of the Soviets. Nevertheless, having made so much political capital out of the Provisional Government’s failure to call a Constituent Assembly throughout 1917, Lenin had no choice but to call elections immediately. For the Bolsheviks, the results were depressingly predictable: they gained barely a quarter of the available seats, whilst the SRs gained almost half.

Given his precarious position, Lenin’s response to this setback at first sight appears reckless: he contemptuously dissolved the Assembly, calling his action ‘true democracy’ because he knew the needs of the proletariat better than they did themselves. He then set up Soviets throughout the country in a desperate attempt to break the power of the SR-dominated Zemstvos. By the end of May 1918 Lenin felt confident enough to expel opposition parties from the Central Executive Committee and to declare that ‘our party stands at the head of soviet power. Decrees and measures of soviet power emanate from our party.’ Trotsky justified this by saying that ‘We have trampled underfoot the principles of democracy for the sake of the loftier principles of a social revolution’. By the time of Lenin’s death political opposition parties had been formally banned and the Bolshevik Party (renamed the Communist Party in 1919) reigned supreme.

**Causes of Bolshevik Success**

(a) Weaknesses of opponents

The Social Revolutionaries in particular had suffered for years from bitter splits over such issues as the validity of terrorism, participation in the Duma and support for the Provisional Government. So it was no surprise that when the moment came they were deeply divided over whether they should participate in the new Bolshevik government. Ultimately, seven leftist Social Revolutionaries joined the government at the end of 1917 and helped to draft the decree which legitimised the seizure of the land by the peasants. This not only exacerbated the
divisions in the party, but consolidated the position of the Bolsheviks in the countryside.

(b) Ruthlessness of Bolsheviks

The weaknesses of their opponents made it much easier for the Bolsheviks to crush them. In summer 1918 a failed rebellion by the SRs in Moscow and an assassination attempt on Lenin persuaded the Bolsheviks to unleash the ‘Red Terror’. This was presided over by the CHEKA, formed shortly after the October Revolution under the leadership of Dzerzhinsky (‘we stand for organised terror: this should be frankly stated’). Within months, membership of the Menshevik and SR parties had fallen by two-thirds. The following year, Victor Serge felt that the Soviet state had ‘reverted to the procedures of the Inquisition’ and by the time of Lenin’s death an estimated 250,000 opponents had been liquidated.

Military Opposition: Brest-Litovsk and Civil War

Whilst the Constituent Assembly undermined the regime’s political opponents, the peace treaty signed with Germany in March 1918 served to unite its military opponents. Upon seizing power, Lenin was determined to secure ‘peace at any price’: the war had already brought down the Tsar and the Provisional Government, and if the Bolshevik regime was not to go the same way then the war needed to end. Under the punitive Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia ceded Finland, the Baltic states and Poland – a million square kilometres of territory containing 80 per cent of her coal mines and 30 per cent of her population.

Even within the Bolshevik party, the treaty was deeply unpopular: Lenin secured its ratification by the Central Committee only by threatening his resignation, and even then by only a majority of one. Given the unpopularity of the treaty within the party, it is hardly surprising that it united anti-Bolshevik military forces. Three ‘White Army’ commanders posed a serious threat to the Bolshevik regime based around Moscow: Kolchak attacked from the East, Denikin from the South, and Yudenitch from the West. This movement, which had in total over 250,000 troops, was united by a hatred of the Bolsheviks and a desire to restart the war against Germany. This latter objective won them the support of Russia’s former allies, who invaded Russia themselves: Britain and France took control of Murmansk and Archangel in the North, whilst the Americans attacked from the Far East, helping Japan to take control of Vladivostok. At one stage, the Bolsheviks had lost control of almost three-quarters of Russia. However, by spring 1920 all three armies had been defeated and Lenin could finally turn his attention to rebuilding the Russian economy.

Causes of Bolshevik success

(a) Personal unity

Although the Whites had a number of able generals, this advantage was offset by the fact that many of them (for example, Denikin and Kolchak) did not get on with each other and there was no effective overall leader to coordinate their efforts. The foreign powers too were divided: Lloyd George criticised both Churchill’s ‘obsession’ with the Civil War and the refusal of the French to commit resources to the campaign. In contrast, whilst the Reds had similar rivalries these were not as damaging because they had a recognised leader in Lenin.

(b) Ideological unity

The contrast between the fragmented Whites and the focused Reds was a result of ideology as much as personality: Red soldiers were not only twice as numerous as Whites, but were also united in a common cause. In contrast, the Whites had divided loyalties. Their patriotic rallying cry of ‘Russia: one and indivisible’ was both hopelessly vague and utterly unconvincing, given their reliance upon foreign aid, which was a propaganda disaster.

(c) Geographical unity

Personal and ideological factors were compounded by geographical considerations. Firstly, the position of the Bolsheviks in the compacted heartland of Russia gave them a strategic advantage. It not only made it easier for
them to organise and co-ordinate their defence but also gave them the largest chunk of the population and most of the war industry. Moscow and Petrograd stayed in Red hands for the entire Civil War. In contrast, the three main White armies were located at opposite ends of Russia – Denikin and Kolchak were 10,500 kilometres apart and had to communicate via Paris! Secondly, the large size of Russia gave the Reds strategic depth. When under attack on one front they could safely give ground until troops were transferred from other fronts to repel the attack.

Opposition from National Minorities

Whilst personal, ideological and geographical factors go some way to explaining the success of the Reds in the Civil War, the handling of national minorities – whose long-repressed national aspirations for independence suddenly re-emerged in the chaos of war – was another important factor.

As Lynch has pointed out, 'The sheer size of Russia meant that local and regional considerations predominated over larger ideological issues'. By 1918, there were 33 sovereign governments in Russia, and both Reds and Whites realised that the battle for the hearts and minds of national minorities was of paramount importance. However, the only way to win this propaganda war was to promise them independence – and neither side was prepared to fulfil this promise. The Whites made their slogan 'Russia, one and indivisible' whilst Joseph Stalin formulated a doctrine of 'proletarian self-determination' which stated that national independence would be recognised only 'upon the demand of the working population', which in practice only included those Bolsheviks subject to control by Moscow.

(a) Successes

The South – The Ukraine

After the Central Powers withdrew from the Ukraine at the end of 1918, this fertile area (Russia’s ‘bread basket’) descended into anarchy as Denikin’s White army, supplemented with Ukrainian nationalists, competed with the Red Army for control. Baron Peter Wrangel, Denikin’s successor and the ablest White general, employed Kadets to institute land reform, enabling him to win peasant support and to occupy considerable areas to the north. His resistance was only smashed in late 1920, when 150,000 Whites fled to Constantinople.

The East – Transcaucasia and Asia

In 1920, the Red Army attacked the three Transcaucasian Republics: in the spring, they conquered Azerbaijan; Armenia surrendered in the winter; and early in 1921 the Mensheviks were driven out of Georgia despite strong resistance. In Central Asia, the Bolsheviks conquered the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara and set up several artificial client national states.

(b) Failures

The North – Finland and the Baltic States

Anti-Communist Finns defeated Bolshevik-supported Red Finns to create an independent Finland in late 1917. The Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, assisted by German occupiers, declared independence and, despite attacks from Red forces, ultimately retained it until 1940.

The West – Poland

To reconstitute a Greater Poland, Marshal Pilsudski attacked Russia and captured Kiev in May 1920. A Soviet counter-offensive led by General Tukhachevsky almost succeeded in conquering the Poles; they eventually rallied, however, drove out the Red Army, and forced Soviet Russia to accept an armistice and later the unfavourable Treaty of Riga in March 1921.

‘War Communism’ (1918-21)

The crisis of civil war pushed the Bolsheviks towards a drastic economic policy called ‘War Communism' which
included the rapid nationalisation of all industry and the requisitioning of all surplus grain from the peasants. Whilst this succeeded in meeting the immediate needs of the Communist state, it created deep resentment in both the proletariat and the peasantry which eventually escalated into outright rebellion.

(a) Peasantry

At the outset of the Civil War, the peasantry preferred the Soviet programme of peace, land and worker control to that of the Whites, who wanted to restart the war with Germany and were sceptical both of land reform and of workers’ rights. Four out of five peasants conscripted into the White armies promptly deserted.

However, by early 1918 the honeymoon was over. The loss of the Ukraine, disruption of transport routes and the break-up of the most profitable farms produced chronic food shortages in Petrograd and Moscow which pushed the Bolsheviks towards a policy of requisition and collectivisation. Requisitioning was depicted in propaganda as a war of the poor peasants against the Kulaks, but in reality the average peasant resented grain requisitioning by workers and party officials from the towns. In 1918 over 7,000 members of requisition squads were murdered.

(b) Proletariat

The key to solving the problem of the peasantry was to provide the countryside with the industrial goods it needed, which would then give them an incentive to deliver foodstuffs for the towns and the army.

Initially, the proletariat formed the bedrock of Bolshevik support, and, Lenin – arguing that ‘any worker will master a ministry within a few days’ – used workers’ factory committees as a means of controlling management and directing economic policy. However, as with the peasantry, the honeymoon period did not last. Economic crisis convinced Lenin that the workers lacked the self-discipline to supply the Red Army with its essential needs. So in 1918 he introduced compulsory labour for all citizens between the ages of 16 and 50 and limited the influence of the Workers’ Councils by setting up a Supreme Council of the National Economy (Vesenkha) staffed by former plant owners, managers, and other bourgeois specialists (‘knowledgeable, experienced, businesslike people’).

On the one hand, the nationalisation of industry and the efforts of Vesenkha to control and coordinate the economy and labour force gave the Bolsheviks an overall view of available human and material resources which enabled them to organise munitions production and army supplies much better than could their White opponents. On the other hand, this policy was deeply divisive in a political sense. Left Communists and the proletariat in general, whilst in favour of nationalisation in principle, were critical of the use of capitalists and of the withdrawal of support for Workers’ Councils.

The Crisis year – 1921

By 1921, the policy of War Communism had brought the country to the verge of chaos. In the countryside, around 6 million peasants had died of starvation and reports circulated in the foreign press that mothers were tying their children to opposite corners of their huts for fear that they would eat each other. In the towns, riots broke out in Petrograd and Moscow, which had seen their populations fall by 70 per cent and 50 per cent respectively.

However, it was the Kronstadt naval rebellion in March 1921 that gave the regime its greatest scare and destroyed its credibility to the greatest degree. Kronstadt was a naval town on an island off the coast of Petrograd. It had initially been ‘the pride and joy of the revolution’ (Trotsky), training the guns of the battleship Aurora on the Winter Palace and crushing opposition to the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly the following year. Yet by 1921 16,000 soldiers and workers had signed a petition calling for ‘Soviets without Bolsheviks’: freely elected Soviets, and freedoms of speech, press and association. As in Moscow and Petrograd the Reds reacted brutally, dissolving the Kronstadt Soviet, executing several hundred ringleaders and expelling over 15,000 sailors from the fleet.

‘New Economic Policy’ (1921-24)

Though the rebellions were mercilessly crushed, Lenin now compared the communist state to a man ‘beaten to within an inch of his life’ and, describing Kronstadt as ‘the flash which lit up reality better than anything else’,
promptly replaced War Communism with the New Economic Policy (NEP). This permitted private ownership of small-scale industry and ended grain requisitioning in favour of a tax in kind (eventually settled at 10 per cent of the harvest), with peasants able to sell their surpluses on the open market. By the end of 1922 the crisis began to ease, aided by £20 million of aid from the American Relief Association, and by 1923 grain production had increased by half. As Lenin had predicted, a mixed economy had emerged, with the state controlling industry whilst agriculture and trade were in private hands.

However, whilst agriculture recovered rapidly, industry did not. Therefore, whilst agricultural prices fell, industrial prices continued to rise. This meant that farmers could not afford to buy industrial goods and were tempted back towards subsistence farming. By the time of the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923, industrial prices were running at three times the level of agricultural prices and Trotsky compared the growing gap between agricultural and industrial prices to the blades of a pair of scissors.

By the time of Lenin’s death industry was well on the way to recovery and the economic ‘scissors crisis’ was largely over, but socially the policy remained deeply divisive. Rumours circulated that NEP really stood for ‘New Exploitation of the Proletariat’, many members of which remained frustrated with the slow progress towards socialism and detested the new breed of Kulaks, retailers and traders known as Nepmen.

**Divisions in the party**

Their transformation from a party of revolutionary opposition to one of beleaguered government had a massive impact upon the Bolshevik Party. Within months of taking power, debate and internal democracy became an impossible luxury. By 1921, the official instrument of government – Sovnarkom – had been sidelined by the smaller and more cohesive Politburo and Ogburo, which lay at the heart of a single-party state that dealt with dissent through summary executions during the civil war.

Nevertheless, the growing power of the state only served to aggravate divisions within the party. During the period of War Communism, the Workers’ Opposition, led by Shliapnikov and Kollantai, opposed the reduction in the power of the Trade Unions and the Workers’ Councils. The Democratic Centralists resented the ‘dictatorship of party officiadom’ and had called for more involvement in the decision-making process by rank-and-file communists.

The Decree on Party Unity (1921) banned formal factions, but the partial revival of capitalism in the NEP that same year created still deeper divisions. The Right-wing of the party – led by Bukharin – vigorously defended the gradual, peasant-based socialism of the NEP. The Left Communists, however, quickly came to feel that more emphasis needed to be placed on a programme of massive and rapid industrialisation if the regime was to survive. They were represented most powerfully by Trotsky and his ‘platform of 46’, who described the NEP as ‘the first sign of the degeneration of Bolshevism’.

Lenin tried his best to keep the two wings of the party together by refusing to make clear whether NEP was a short-term tactical retreat or represented a radical rethinking of communism, but this merely postponed rather than avoided internal party conflict. In some of his speeches and writings, War Communism was dismissed as the product of ‘desperate necessity’ and the NEP was presented as ‘a radical modification in our whole outlook on socialism’. At other times, he presented War Communism as an ideologically motivated attempt to introduce ‘the communist principles of production and distribution by direct assault’ and described the NEP as a short-term tactical retreat (‘Let the peasants have their little bit of capitalism as long as we have the power’).

**Conclusion**

By 1922, when the USSR was formally proclaimed, it was clear that the Bolsheviks had succeeded in dealing with the immediate threats it had faced upon taking power. However, over the course of that year, Lenin suffered three strokes which left him partially paralysed and politically incapacitated. This served to highlight the cost at which success had been bought. As principles had been compromised and policies had become inconsistent, the party had become so divided that Lenin had dispensed with debate and democracy and relied upon brute force and personal dictatorship to hold the regime together. In the short term, this meant that the party rapidly fragmented
following his illness, allowing Stalin to play factions off against each other in order to secure his own ascendancy. In the longer term, it set a tragic ideological precedent which the ‘man of steel’ was to exploit with disastrous effects for the Russian people in the years following Lenin’s death. Far from ‘withering away’ as Marx had envisaged, the state had become all-powerful. Lenin had replaced one dictatorship with another.

**Issues to Debate**

- Were Lenin’s policies characterised more by principle or by expediency?
- To what extent did Lenin lay the foundations of Stalin’s dictatorship?
- To what extent had Lenin built a communist state by the time of his death?

Further reading:


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