THREATS TO LENIN AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS RULE

How did the Bolsheviks deal with the threat from people who opposed them?

While one element of the Bolsheviks’ strategy to stay in power was to go along with the popular demands, the other was to build its forces of terror and wipe out 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. The Bolsheviks, who had pumped enormous amounts of money into their papers and periodicals during 1917, knew the problems that a hostile press could cause them.

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.

On 7 December, Lenin set up the main instrument of terror - the Cheka, or Extrmity Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage. This force of dedicated Bolshevik supporters provided dependable security, bringing units of the Red Guard and military units under its control. It soon proved itself an effective mechanism for dealing with any opposition (see pages 97-98).

Lenin actively encouraged class warfare as a means of intimidating the middle classes and terrorising them into submission. It started with attacks on the bourgeoisie, as leaders of the bourgeois counter-revolution, but not yet widened. The legal system was abolished and replaced by revolutionary justice, which was arbitrary and violent in character. Anyone accused of being a "bourgeois" (bourgeois) was liable to be arrested, and any well-dressed person found on the streets (including Bolshevik leaders until they could prove who they were) was at risk of being labelled a "bourgeois". Even if not arrested, "bourgeois" could be beaten and robbed.

Lenin’s use of class warfare played well in Russia. Workers, soldiers and peasants supported the end of privilege and the moves to a more egalitarian society. The abolition of titles and the use of "kommun" as the new form of address gave power and dignity to the once downtrodden. Workers and soldiers became more cocky and assertive, rule to their "social letters". The socialist press encouraged the perception of the bourgeoisie as the "enemies of the people". They were condemned as "parasites" and "bloodsuckers". The state licensed and encouraged the people to plunder the houses of the middle classes, "loot the buttoners". There were elements in Russian society that did not need much encouragement to do this.

How did Lenin deal with the threat posed to his government by other socialists?

There was enormous pressure on the Bolsheviks to form a democratic government representing all the socialist parties. Hundreds of resolutions and petitions from committees, army units, and provincial towns, demanding that there be co-operation between the parties to avoid factional strife and civil war. A petition from the 55th army division made this clear: "Among the soldiers there are no Bolsheviks, Mensheviks or Socialist Revolutionaries, only Democrats." People did not want to lose the gains of the revolution because the socialist parties were fighting amongst each other. They were in favour of Soviet power, not one-party rule.

The railwaymen’s union, backed by the post and telegraph union, threatened to cut off communications if the Bolsheviks did not hold talks with other parties. They could paralyse food supplies to Petrograd as well as contact with other cities. This pressure forced Lenin, unwillingly, to send representatives to talks with other parties about a power-sharing government. It also persuaded Lenin, again unwillingly, to allow the planned elections to the Constituent Assembly to go ahead at the end of November. The Bolsheviks knew that there would be an unstoppable backlash if they did not go ahead with the elections, particularly as before October they had attacked Kerensky for postponing them.

Quite a few leading Bolsheviks, including Kamenev and Zinoviev, were in favour of a socialist coalition government. They believed that an isolated Bolshevik Party would have to maintain itself by terror and would almost certainly be destroyed in the bourgeois counter-revolution. People were happy to be involved in talks with other parties. It seems likely that they were duped by Lenin into thinking he was serious about a coalition, and they temporarily resigned when they found out he was not.

Lenin had always intended the Bolsheviks to rule alone and he engineered the collapse of the talks. He did, however, make an alliance with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and brought them as junior partners into the Sovnarkom. He saw this as useful, because with them in government, he could claim to represent a large section of the peasantry. The Left Socialist Revolutionaries had, for some time, been closest to the Bolsheviks, particularly on the land issue; indeed they claimed, with justification, that Lenin had stolen this policy from them.
In the cities, Cheka arrests had a terrifyingly random character (see Source 6.18). People were arrested for being near scenes of “bourgeois provocation” or because they were acquaintances of suspects. Many were denounced as counter-revolutionaries following arguments or as a result of vendettas. In the provinces it was possibly worse, since local Cheka bosses controlled their own patch and acted as petty tyrants with no court of appeal. Some were very dubious characters who used their position to pursue long-term vendettas against sections of the local community. There was little central control.

The Cheka was particularly active in the countryside, helping requisitioning brigades to collect grain from the peasants. Quotas were filled even if this left peasants starving. It was better than theft and some of the brigades were little more than bands, taking much more than food. The peasants resisted in a wave of uprisings and attacked the collectors. Bolshevik party officials were murdered. One Cheka man was found with his stomach slit open and stuffed with grain as a lesson to others. In another village, the twelve members of a brigade were decapitated and their heads were put on poles.

The Cheka and Red Army units gave no quarter. They were supported by Lenin: in a telegram to Bolshevik leaders in Penza he wrote, ‘Hang no fewer than a hundred well-known kulaks [rich peasants], rich-bags and blood-suckers and make sure the hanging takes place in full view of the people.’ He tried to encourage the poorer peasants to attack the kulaks but he failed to ignite class warfare in the villages. Thousands of peasants were arrested. In retaliation, the peasants hid their grain and stopped planting for the next season. Wheat harvests went into serious decline. It would not be unfair to say that the Bolsheviks were at war with the peasants.

To house all these dissident workers, troublesome peasants and bourgeois saboteurs, the Bolsheviks set up concentration and labour camps. The machinery of terror and the police state were created under Lenin, not Stalin. It is almost certain that hundreds of thousands perished, although no accurate figures are available from a time when there was so much dislocation and disorder, and proper records were not kept or were lost.