

# Russia 1917-1924

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This document was written by and is therefore copyright Stephen Tonge. Stephen Tonge was thirty-seven in 2008 and head of history at Catholic University School in Dublin. He is a past pupil of the school and had taught there for 14 years. He attended University College Dublin and received his MA in 1990. As well as history, he teaches business and economics. He also coaches both rugby and cricket and is the school's fixtures secretary. He is a co-author of a GCSE standard textbook *Living History*, published by the Educational Company of Ireland.

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## The October Revolution

**The Provisional government continued the war and postponed land reform.** These decisions were two serious mistakes and were to be exploited by Lenin and his followers, the Bolsheviks.

- March:** The Tsar's abdication had left confusion as to who exercised the real power with the Provisional government and the Petrograd Soviet existing side by side. The Soviet had control over communications and the loyalty of troops in Petrograd.
- April:** Lenin returned from exile in Switzerland with German help. The Germans hoped that he would disrupt the Russian war effort and they helped to finance his activities. He published his "**April Theses**" in **Pravda in which he argued for an immediate communist takeover**. He advocated a policy of non co-operation with the Provisional government. Lenin policies were summed up in two slogans "**Peace, Bread, Land**" and "**All power to the Soviets**".
- Lenin set about reorganising the Bolshevik party and it grew from 26,000 members to 200,000 members. At the same time, Alexander **Kerensky** (Minister for War) launched an offensive against Germany and Austria. This was defeated; morale collapsed and mutinies in the army spread.
- July** Soldiers in Petrograd and the sailors at the **Kronstadt** naval base led demonstrations against the Provisional government. This event became known as the "**July Days**."
- The government feared a Bolshevik revolution and crushed the revolt. Many leading Bolsheviks, including **Trotsky** and **Kamenev**, were arrested. Lenin escaped to Finland.
- During **July and August** the situation worsened for the Provisional government and there were mass desertions from the army. This was coupled with economic problems such as massive inflation **Kerensky** (Prime Minister since July 23) dismissed **General Kornilov** as commander-in-chief of the Russian army. **Kornilov** attempted to overthrow the provisional government. The Red Guards (under Bolshevik control) helped to defeat **Kornilov**, who was arrested on the 2 September.
- September - October** **Trotsky** was elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet. The Petrograd and Moscow Soviets were now under Bolshevik control. This gave the Bolsheviks effective control over Russia's two largest cities. Lenin returned secretly from exile and a meeting of the Bolshevik central committee decided to stage a revolution by a 10 to 2 majority. **Zinoviev** and **Kamenev** opposed the decision.

A **Military Revolutionary Committee** was set up by the Bolshevik dominated Petrograd Soviet apparently to defend the city against the Germans. But in reality this was a cover to organise a revolution and to gain control of the military in the capital. Trotsky persuaded the garrison of the **Peter and Paul** fortress to change sides and 100,000 rifles fell into Bolshevik hands

## **Revolution**

Kerensky now tried to act against the Bolsheviks. The cruiser "**Aurora**" suspected of supporting the Bolsheviks was ordered to put to sea and Bolshevik newspapers were closed down. Trotsky was able to have these orders countermanded.

That evening Trotsky issued orders for a **coup**. At 9.00pm the firing of the "Aurora's" guns signalled the start of the revolution. Most of the main buildings in Petrograd were seized e.g. Winter Palace, railway stations, telephone exchanges etc. The next day the **All-Russian Congress of Soviets** opened with a large Bolshevik majority Trotsky informed the congress that the Bolsheviks had seized power. The Bolsheviks were in full control of the capital. Kerensky's attempts to regain control failed. By early November Petrograd, Moscow and most of the larger cities had recognised the new government.