

Scott Jones
Soviet Russia

The last half of the twentieth century was dominated by the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Essentially, the conflict, or Cold War, was a battle over the economic theories of capitalism and the economic theories of socialism. In addition to this economic conflict, politically the battle was between the political theories of American democracy and the political theories of Soviet Communism. However, the story does not begin in the last half of the twentieth century. Soviet communism received its beginning in October 1917. During that month the minority Bolshevik Party seized control of the government of Russia and began the process of implementing its government throughout the Russian empire. The key word in the previous sentence was minority. The Bolsheviks never had majority support of the people of Russia and often had only a very small percentage of the people supporting. In *Red October: The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917*, Robert Daniels estimated the Bolsheviks had only 20 percent of the Russian people, most of whom were peasants, supporting the October Revolution. How, then, did this party gain control of the Russian government, which would play such an integral role in the history of the twentieth century? A short study of the events at the beginning of the century revealed one continuing theme in the rise of the Bolsheviks, which was the work of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

Lenin was the key factor in the rise of the Bolsheviks to power. It is a reasonable certainty that without Lenin, the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 would not have taken place when it did, and may have never taken place at all. Lenin influenced Russia in three ways at the beginning of the century: First, Lenin had experience in participating in mass

protests; Second, Lenin developed a keen understanding of the Russian people; and finally, Lenin provided the decisive leadership needed for the Bolsheviks as the Provisional Government of 1917 faltered.

Lenin's first experience in mass protests against government came during the Russian Revolution of 1905. In January 1905, workers in St. Petersburg went on strike to protest the working and living conditions in the city during the Russo-Japanese War. As the war continued and conditions worsened, other cities' workers began to join the St. Petersburg workers in their strike. During this time period, the Social Democrats began to emerge as the leaders of the movements in the various cities. The SD Party was made up of two factions, the Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Lenin, and the Mensheviks. According to Sidney Harcave in *First Blood: The Russian Revolution of 1905*, these two socialist groups began to differ on the means of carrying out a socialist revolution. The Mensheviks saw the 1905 revolution as the beginnings of a bourgeois revolution that needed to take place in Russia before the socialist revolution. However, the Bolsheviks, under Lenin, began to advocate the removal of the Tsarist government. These two factions competed for control as various soviets were beginning to form throughout the Russian landscape. While the Tsar eventually conceded many rights to the people of Russia, both rural and urban, Lenin and the Bolsheviks, according to Harcave, believed the Revolution of 1905 failed. However, Lenin learned a great deal about Russian society during the year, which would benefit him and his cause in the years to come.

The second reason Lenin was such a crucial factor during 1917 was his understanding of the Russian political landscape. His first lesson was during the 1905 revolution. In *Lenin and the Problem of Marxist Peasant Revolution*, Esther Kingston-

Mann argued that Lenin viewed the split between the urban and rural worker as the reason for the failure of the socialist movement in 1905, Esther Kingston-Mann argued that Lenin viewed the split between the urban and rural worker as the reason for the failure of the socialist movement in 1905. As the Russian monarchy moved away from its 1905 promises, Lenin began arguing for an urban-rural alliance. During this time period, Kingston-Mann argued that the beginnings of an alliance between the St. Petersburg Soviet and the various rural soviets began to emerge. In fact, according to this author, the St. Petersburg Soviet was emerging as the single most dominant political force in the country. However, for Lenin, the St. Petersburg Soviet was dominated by the Mensheviks, who still believed the dialectic should be allowed to work and not be forced.

As World War I began to destroy the economy of both the rural and urban sectors of Russia by 1917 the people were again ready to revolt. In fact, the strikes of February 1917 led to the removal of the monarchy. At this time, however, according to Kingston-Mann, the Bolshevik Central Committee could not agree on how to proceed. However, the author argued that Lenin did not want to participate in any government that would not bring an immediate end to the war. As the new provisional government escalated Russia's involvement in the war against Germany, the workers and peasants grew increasingly agitated with the government and began to cheer Lenin and the Bolsheviks. It was this knowledge of the Russian people that allowed Lenin and his party to gain tremendous popularity during the summer months of 1917. Without this popularity it would be next to impossible to ever achieve a goal of seizing power in Russia.

The final aspect of Lenin that allowed the Bolsheviks to seize power in 1917 was his ability to make the decisions needed to be successful. According to Daniels, Lenin

began to move the Bolshevik Party away from the provisional government. Lenin called for an immediate end to the war with Germany so that the Russian economy could be recovered and the workers, both urban and rural, begin their path to prosperity. This came at a time when no one was sure where the Russian government was headed. However, Lenin emerged as the leader of the people of Russia. This huge upswing in popularity of Lenin and his party led many of the members of the Meshevik Party to join Lenin, notably Leon Trotsky. In addition, this leadership allowed the Bolsheviks to gain increasing influence with the St. Petersburg Soviet and increasing support among the peasantry of Russia.

As the summer months continued, so did World War I in Russia. However, another war was breaking out between the government and the Bolsheviks. Lenin had been accused of being allied with the Germans. This blow almost devastated the Bolshevik Party. Lenin left the country and many of the leaders were jailed. However, Lenin continually wrote letters to anyone who would read them arguing his cause. Lenin's next step was to return to St. Petersburg and make accusations of his own. According to Daniels, Lenin fought fire with fire by accusing the provisional government was willing to turn St. Petersburg over to the Germans. The Russian people, both urban and rural, were now ready to end the war at all costs and, according to Daniels, if that meant destroying the provisional government, then so be it.

During October, Lenin's decision making was decisive at a time when no one else could decide what to do next. Lenin made final arrangements with the St. Petersburg Soviet, which controlled the army in Russia, to support the Bolshevik cause. All Lenin needed was a reason to rally the troops. On October 20, the provisional government cut

the bread rations in St. Petersburg by one-third in a city where most people were going to be hungry every night. Lenin urged the Bolshevik Central Committee to vote to act now. However, the committee decided to wait until after the newly elected Constituent Assembly met on the 25th. The Committee reasoned that if the assembly met and failed to make any achievements, it would completely discredit the government and the Bolsheviks could seize power without a fight. Lenin followed, according to Daniels, with his most decisive move. Fearing the assembly would be able to destroy the Bolsheviks, Lenin went directly to the military leaders and ordered a siege of the provisional government. By the 30th, the fighting was over and Lenin and his Bolshevik Party was in charge of St. Petersburg and Russia most influential soviet.

Without Lenin, the Bolshevik's would not have been able to seize power in 1917. No one in Russia had the ability to read to the Russian people and make decisions during that fateful year, except for Vladimir Lenin. In Lenin, both the urban and rural workers saw Lenin as the hope of Russia's future. While everyone within these groups would continue their support of Lenin, they did so in 1917. No one else in Russian politics at the time had the ability to achieve this, even no one in the Bolshevik Party. Without Lenin, the party may have been unable to survive at various times in 1917. However, Lenin kept the party together and then rose the party to power.