How did the Bolshevik Party consolidate power after the 1917 Revolution?

- Winning the Civil War
- War Communism and the Red Terror, then NEP
- Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to end WW1
- Bolshevik Decrees
- Opening the Constituent Assembly, then closing it down
- Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to end WW1
Key topic – How did the Bolshevik Government consolidate their hold on the government after the October Revolution of 1917?

These notes are a summary, not complete topic notes. To support these notes you will need to use the more detailed notes you have elsewhere on individual topics such as War Communism and NEP.

After the Bolshevik government took power, they were in a shaky position. Do not be fooled into thinking of them as a government ready to take power and run a huge and struggling country; in reality, they were a mixture of intellectuals, dreamers and professional revolutionaries with big ideas, not an experienced group of ministers and politicians. They had a large number of ideas on how a country should be run, but no real experience in creating policy. Not only this, the Party histories may have later recorded that the Bolshevik government came to power as a result of a wave of popular protest, but in reality the storming of the Winter Palace and assumption of power was a hijacking of the general protests that were aimed at the failing Provisional Government, not an effort by the people to put Lenin in power. In fact the majority of the Russian population supported the Socialist Revolutionaries over the Bolsheviks due to their pro-peasantry policies.

So, for your revision, you need to be really clear on how the Bolsheviks kept power. Use the summary above and the brief notes below to check you have understood this key issue properly.

Exam questions on this could include:

- How did the Bolsheviks keep hold of power between 1917 (or 1918) and 1921 (or 1924)? Remember to check the dates in the question to use the right examples.
- To what extent was victory in the Civil War the main reason that Lenin was able to maintain his grip on power between 1918 and 1924?
- To what extent was the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk key in the consolidation of Communist power, 1918-21?

Method of Consolidation 1 – Winning the Civil War

The Civil War broke out not long after the Communist takeover; conventionally it is dated 1918-21, though the exact start and end are a bit vague. The Civil War was the main way that opponents faced the Bolsheviks, hence why the Whites consisted of such a mixed group (Tsarist officers, Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, etc.)

Red victory was therefore a key means of maintaining Communist power in Russia. Make sure you revise this, and remember that a related question which is hugely popular consists of justifying WHY the Reds won, not the Whites (this was the list of factors such as Trotsky’s leadership, communication, unclear White leadership, foreign intervention, etc.).

Method of Consolidation 2 – War Communism and Red Terror, then NEP

Economic control was a crucial factor in maintaining Bolshevik control. First of all, War Communism allowed the Communists to nationalise businesses and take control of the banks and industry. This gave them a
financial hold on the country. Linked to this, the Red Terror was where Cheka units went into the countryside to seize grain for the cities. Whilst a mixed success, it did play a part in consolidating power.

Once War Communism failed in 1921 (remember this was due to raging black market sales, starvation, unrest and the Kronstadt Mutiny), Lenin introduced NEP, or the New Economic Policy. This is often forgotten by students answering essays on consolidation of power, but if the question runs to 1924, rather than 1921, it should be a crucial part of the answer. NEP was a more capitalist policy which allowed kulak farmers and NEPmen to flourish, angering many hardline Communists but giving Lenin’s government the breathing space to consolidate power by easing the growing unrest in the cities and countryside.

**Method of Consolidation 3 – Constituent Assembly**

One of the most frequently forgotten factors, the Constituent Assembly should feature in any consolidation question. In essence, Lenin had no choice but to allow a democratic election; after all, he had spent 1917 criticising the Provisional Government of, amongst other things, being unelected since they appointed themselves from members of the earlier 4th Duma. Therefore forming the Constituent Assembly was an action of consolidation by meeting popular expectations. But when the Socialist Revolutionaries, supported by the peasant masses, won the election, Lenin sent soldiers to close the Assembly down on the 5th January 1918, the same day that it opened. This is also a means of consolidation, because it prevented opposing parties from acting against him.

**Method of Consolidation 4 – Bolshevik Decrees**

Once they were in power, Lenin initiated a series of decrees, or laws, which were intended to please the masses and introduce Communist society. The key decrees to remember are:

- Land Decree – Stated that private ownership of land was abolished and legalised peasants claiming property from the land owners. Given to appease the peasants and fulfil Lenin’s promise of “Land”.
- Peace Decree – Put pressure for all governments in WW1 to seek peace and promised that Russia would strive for an end to her role in the War. Given to fulfil Lenin’s promise of “Peace”.
- Workers’ Decree – Declared a limit of 8 hours as a working day, and granted ownership of factories to committees of workers (this was soon abolished in War Communism).
- Council of Peoples’ Commissars (Sovnarkom) – Created a Bolshevik council to rule the country and make decisions. Lenin was in charge, Trotsky was Commissar for foreign affairs and Stalin was Commissar for national affairs.
- Decree of Self-Determination – Promised to all national groups in Russia the right of self-determination, in other words the choice of independence or rulership by Russia. This was mainly to prevent uprisings during the Civil War, and had little or no real value.
- Army Decree – Abolished rank titles and badges (everyone was comrade), restricted saluting and other signs of obedience to on-duty soldiers, and allowed soldiers to vote for their leaders. Much of this was soon abolished by Trotsky for practical reasons in keeping the Red Army disciplined.
Method of Consolidation 5 – Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

Although Lenin had passed the Peace Decree and signed an armistice with Germany in December of 1917, he delayed actually making peace with Germany as he believed what Marx had believed, that Russia was simply the “weak link” in the capitalist chain, and that with the difficult economic conditions in Germany during WW2, the revolution would soon spread to Germany and then the rest of Europe. But by early 1918, it was quite clear that this would not happen, so Lenin sent Trotsky to sign a peace treaty. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was brutal, and Trotsky initially refused to sign it. It cost Russia:

- 25% of the population of the Russian Empire (though mainly non-Russian speakers);
- 25% of industry;
- 90% of coalmines.

Incidentally, not long after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Germany surrendered to the allies, and one of the terms was that land gained from Brest-Litovsk was liberated. Instead of being returned to Russia, it became the sovereign countries of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Poland. Remember that the allies were fighting the Reds in the Civil War, so they would not return the land to them. These states were what Stalin recaptured during WW2 and they became Soviet satellite states, a protective barrier for the USSR during the Cold War.