

“A small, unpopular party whose success was due solely to the determination of the leader to seize power”

Examine this assessment of the Bolshevik party’s success in the USSR 1917-1924.

This assessment of the party is based around one of many views on how the Bolsheviks gained power and consolidated their rule. This particular assessment focuses on the “brutalisation” of the party and Lenin’s constant concessions in the face of danger despite contending his ideology.

The Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, after the capture of the Winter Palace; the consolidation of their rule included the calling of a constituent assembly, signing of the Brest-litovsk and the introduction of the NEP after War Communism. What I now have to analyse, is the validity of each point in the above assessment, was the party small? Or unpopular? And if so why?

Firstly the size of the party has to be considered, before the February revolution the party’s size in comparison with other parties was relatively little. The largest parties were those who directly contended the Tsarist regime in towns and villages, one party in particular was the Social Democratic party, as written by Susan Hasler (1989) “Nevertheless, Marxist theories did spread quite widely in Russia, especially through The Social Democratic Party,”

This shows how the Marxist ideology spread to the common people of Russia, not through the actions of the Bolsheviks but through the more aggressive Social Party. Another factor to consider is the split that occurred at the turn of the century between the more patient Mensheviks and the forceful Bolsheviks, supporters tended to side with the idea that “biding time” was better than forcing a revolution, one person in particular was Trotsky, who before 1917, was a member of the Menshevik Party. A final consideration looks at Kamonev’s and Zinoviev’s reaction to Lenin’s revolution consideration in 1917 in which, both members of the Party doubted the size and strength of the party to pull off the revolution, so much so that they reported the plans to a Russian newspaper. Other members were reluctant yet finally agreed.

The popularity of the party is a different matter; size and popularity do not always come hand in hand. The Bolshevik party, before February 1917 held less popularity than other leading parties, in particular the Social Democratic Party. However popularity still resided in the Tsarist regime as well particularly within noble circles pre-revolution as written by A Moorhead (1960)

“Busier than ever, and the theatres were open every night including Sunday”
After the February revolution, popularity of the Bolsheviks became hard to distinguish from the Provisional Government because of the alliance they formed. Lenin, during this period returned to contend the alliance, saying the February event was not a revolution. During the Konstradt revolt the Bolsheviks lost popularity “July Days” saw the popularity of the Mensheviks raise as they countered the revolutionary mobs from the Konstradt naval base. However during the Kornilov coup Bolshevik intervention protected Kerensky from an “overthrow” regaining their popularity. By October the Provisional Government had lost so much support that a drunken takeover of the Winter Palace could not even be constrained. The Bolsheviks, during their reign were not the most popular party, in the Constituent Assembly, with Social Democrats gaining twice as many votes as the Bolsheviks. As written by Eugene Frazer (1984)

“The bread queues grow longer every day and often, after standing for hours on end there is nothing left”

Popularity, especially in the urban areas, was declining. This unpopularity, links to Lenin’s success, he began to make concessions for the people, increasing his power and maintaining hold on power. He made himself more popular by ending the war, giving peasants the land they needed and giving the people a Constituent Assembly. By 1924 Lenin alone was extremely popular, as shown in the Daily Herald
“For ‘Ilyitch’ was loved of his own Russian people-whom he understood and loved so well”

Seemingly the popularity of the party grew and decline in relation to its participation in political affairs.

The Bolshevik party’s “success” is based on the fact they managed to, by 1924, gain control of basically the whole of Russia. To take control of the country they had to gain the support of the people, and fight of the threat from the “whites.” If we look at the basic course of history, the Bolshevik legacy carries on with the rise of Stalin, and Lenin gained control of Russia before his death.

However there are ways in which he can be viewed as a failure. Millions died at the hands of the secret police and the famine caused by War communism. The “world revolution” that Lenin used to justify his release of national minorities and land losses due to the Brest-Litovsk, never happened. Most importantly Lenin left behind is political ideology, introducing capitalist systems to warm the peasants to his rule.

Christopher Hill (1947)

“...it [NEP] was a large scale retreat, another breathing space, a Brest-Litovsk on the economic front,”

Thought I believe, the use of “brutalisation” was not an act of failure, but a useful part of the Bolshevik success, I don’t doubt the statement “success” in the above assessment, by all means the winning of the Civil War along with many reforms and advances Lenin made in Russia consolidated his power.

Finally the reason **why** he succeeded can also be discussed. The statement bases the “success” on Lenin’s determination to gain power. We can support this view with a particular source from Michael Lynch

“...objectives...to defend the Red army’s internal lines of communication, to deny Whites the opportunity to concentrate large forces in any one location,”

This shows the determination of Lenin, to defeat opposition and maintain power, if we link this to the Constituent Assembly, we could say some sides in the “Whites” were better suited to govern the country, in particular the Social Democratic Party.

Other views are also considerable, the Soviet view sees the events of October as a popular rising, which contends the view of unpopularity, and also contends the need to “seize power” as, in this view, many supported Lenin’s right for power.

I conclude that the assessment is false, although parts do correspond to the state of the party, at certain times; it is not generalisable of the events from 1917-1924, I agree the Bolshevik party was small, yet it grew as it’s power became established, I agree that, at times the party was unpopular, but when it counted the people supported the “Reds” and as for their success, it cannot be based solely on Lenin’s determination, but many other factors such as the weakness of opposition, conditions within Russia, and attitudes of the people.

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