1917 and Lenin's rise to power: the October Revolution

Key dates and events in 1917:

- March
  2 Provisional government formed (Tsar abdicates)
- June
  16 June offensive
- July
  3-4 July days
- August
  26-30 Kornilov affair
- October
  25-26 Bolshevik seizure of power

Analysing the factors that caused the October Revolution and which explain how Lenin was able to seize power

1) NOTE: for LONG and MID-TERM causes - Social, Political, Economic

- Review the causes of February Revolution, as these issues which caused the abdication of the Tsar are still present in October 1917 and form the foundation for the ongoing crisis in Russia which Lenin and the Bolsheviks are able to exploit.
- Middle classes: Small number but growing number of merchants, bankers and industrialists as the industry developed. The intelligentsia sought more participation in politics!
- Land and agriculture: Methods were inefficient and backwards - still used wooden ploughs and very few animals and tools. Not enough land to go around, vast expansion of peasant population in the latter half of the 19th century led to overcrowding and competition for land. Peasants wanted social change!
- Urban workers and industry: Around 58% were literate, twice the national average which meant that they could articulate their grievances and were receptive to revolutionary ideas. Wages were generally low and high number of deaths from accidents and work related health issues. The industry production was very low in the start of the 19th century but increased fast and by 1914, Russia was the fourth largest producer of iron, steel and coal. Instability in cities and the misery of the workers led to social + political instability in the towns.
- Inflation: From 1914-1917 inflation increased by 400 percent
- Crisis in cities: Overcrowded + poor housing + poor living and working conditions (created by economic problems in Russia) led to social tension in Cities.
2) Continued impact of WW1 (social and economic problems):

The war caused acute distress in the cities, especially Petrograd and Moscow. The war meant that food, goods and raw materials were in short supply and hundreds of factories closed and thousands of workers put out of work. Led to inflation and lack of fuel meant that most were cold as well as hungry—urban workers became were hostile towards the PG. In the countryside, peasants became increasingly angry about the conscription of all young men who seldom returned from the Front.

3) Weaknesses and failures of the Provisional Government (political problems, interrelated with social and economic problems):

The political failures of the government undermined their power and authority, which created the circumstances for Lenin's revolution:

- Nature of PG helped Lenin to power. PG was not elected by the people; it saw itself as a temporary body, which could not make any binding long-term decisions for Russia.
- Divisions in PG helped Lenin to power. In PG there were divisions between socialists + liberals who often blocked each other’s decisions. This internal weakness of the PG crippled their ability to enforce control over the country.
- Nature of PG helped Lenin to power. The PG had only power over government affairs, real power lay in the hands of the soviets (worker's unions). Soviets had all the practical power in Petrograd such as the control over factories and railways.
- Government passes legislation that allowed freedom of speech, press as well as the dismantling of the secret police. Now political parties could mobilize publically and attract members more easily. The opposition to the PG got it a lot easier to rebel, and the PG had dismantled the secret police, so they couldn’t stop the uprisings.

The four above factors made Lenin's revolution possible, as they made the PG a weak political body, which could not resist any opposition. The Provisional Government also committed several blunders during the months leading up to the October revolution, which benefitted the Bolsheviks directly.

- June offensive:
  In June the PG launched an all-out offensive on Germany to put the country in a better position in the war (WW1). The offensive (called June offensive) ended in disaster and PG was deeply discredited. As a result, the Bolsheviks and other political parties got increased support.

- July days:
  In July a spontaneous uprising occurred, which consisted of 500 000 soldiers, workers and sailors rebelled in Kronstadt. They later marched to Petrograd to demand overthrow of PG. However, the rebellion was dismantled as PG still retained control of some loyal Russian troops. Even though this affair hurt the reputation of the PG, it also damaged the Bolshevik reputation as the PG blamed them for the whole incident.
Fitzpatrick argues that "the whole affair damaged Bolshevik morale and Lenin's credibility as a revolutionary leader"

- **Kornilov affair:**
  In August 1917, general Kornilov took his army and marched to Petrograd to overthrow PG. He was discontent with the way PG handled politics and WW1. Alexander Kerensky, leader of PG, panicked and since he was unable to put up an adequate defense by using loyal forces, he armed the Bolsheviks so they could help him. However, Kornilov's army did not reach Petrograd as some of his soldiers mutinied and railway workers sabotaged the railways. Now the PG reputation was shattered and the government started to disintegrate. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks got more support because they were perceived as the defenders of Petrograd, and they were also armed now compared to other political parties.

4) **Ideological appeal of Lenin and Bolshevism, and role of Lenin (appeal of radical alternative, charismatic and dynamic leader, taking advantage of crisis situation in Russia in 1917 with all the problems listed above)**

- Lenin's political ideas attracted widespread support among the Russian people. On 16th of April 1917, Lenin held a speech called the April Theses. The speech called for a 1) Worldwide socialist revolution 2) Land reform to peasants 3) immediate end to WW1 3) immediate end to cooperation with PG 4) Urged Soviets to take power.
- The ideas in the speech were made into simple but effective and radical slogans such as "all power to the soviets" or "bread, peace and Land". These slogans attracted a lot of support for the Bolsheviks, as they appealed to the workers. They provided the workers with a radical solution to the problems in Russia.
- The speech also made the Bolshevik party unique, since their standpoint about the war issue was unique. No other political party wanted an immediate end to the war. The uniqueness of the Bolshevik party attracted them a lot of support among the workers.
- In the April Theses Lenin also revised Karl Marx ideas, which claimed that Russia was not ready for a revolution. Lenin however proclaimed that Russia was in fact ready, and revolution had to happen now because the PG was so weak at this point in time! Lenin succeeded to persuade the party, and in the end of April the revolution was being planned. Without Lenin and his speech, the Bolshevik revolution would never have taken place.
- Lenin's leadership also inspired the masses to join the party + revolution. Lenin held many speeches during 1917, and his rhetorical skills attracted enormous amounts of public support. Lenin was also a practical leader and could adapt his policies to the wants and needs of the workers. Thus he gained even more support.

5) **Role of Trotsky in executing the revolution (ruthlessly efficient organiser)**

- Trotsky was elected Chairman of Petrograd Soviets in 1917, which gave him immense practical power over the city (control of bridges, railways etc.), which was a valuable asset to Bolsheviks. Trotsky also used his position as Chairman to claim that the Bolsheviks were seizing power in the
name of the Soviets, and hence workers accepted that Bolsheviks conducted the revolution. It was not until Lenin closed down the new parliament that workers realized that they had been fooled.

- Trotsky also played a key role in setting up and organizing the red army, as well as the actual takeover of power. Trotsky persuaded Lenin to wait until October to conduct the revolution, when Bolsheviks had firmly established their power in the Soviets.
- Trotsky was also an excellent orator and helped to inspire the masses.

**Historiography of the October Revolution and Lenin's RTP - minority coup d'état vs popular revolution?**

Communist view Party's view of October revolution:
- Inevitable result of class struggle
- Lenin's leadership was vital
- Popular revolution, inspired + organized by Bolsheviks and in particular Lenin

Liberal view of October revolution (e.g. Robert Conquest, Richard Pipes)
- Coup d'etat, Bolshevik used the weaknesses of the PG to seize power
- Bolsheviks had only limited popular support
- Bolsheviks were successful because of the leadership of Trotsky + Lenin

Revisionist view of October revolution (e.g. Orlando Figes)
- Emphasizes impotence of revolution from below (i.e. popular revolution)
- However, Bolsheviks "hijacked" popular revolution and ruthlessly betrayed the people by imposing a single-party dictatorship, suppressing the Soviets