

POLICIES OF THE EARLY BOLSHEVIK REGIME AFTER OCTOBER 1917

The “early Bolshevik regime” was not rule by a one-party dictatorship, since the 1917 revolution that the Bolsheviks led was explicitly designed to give “all power to the Soviets.”

These *soviets* were **councils** of laboring people in workplaces and neighborhoods throughout the Russian Empire. The councils were to be democratically elected, and it was initially assumed that they would be multi-party bodies. Between periodic gatherings of “All-Russia” Congresses of delegates from the various councils, there were two institutions that would ensure continuity: (1) an All-Russia Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), elected by the Congress, and the more compact executive body elected by the VTsIK – (2) a Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom).

British historian Lara Douds documents in her study *Inside Lenin’s Government* (2018) that “the Soviet leaders believed that they were constructing a novel and superior democratic system,” although they wrestled with questions of exactly how to combine “supreme executive and legislative power, responsible to the hierarchy of Soviets from local to national level.” She concludes that “the history of the first years of Lenin’s government illustrates that the monolithic, authoritarian party-state was not the immediate nor conscious outcome of Bolshevik ideology and intentional policy, but instead the result of ad hoc improvisation and incremental decisions shaped by both the complex, fluid ideological inheritance and the practical exigencies on the ground,” amid catastrophic realities of 1917 to 1924 (pp. 2-4).

This is consistent with the initial policies of the early Soviet regime, outlined in Roy Medvedev’s study *October Revolution* (1985). Examining “the first hundred days after the October revolution” – especially through the work of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets – he specifies a number of decisions, reflected in the following list:

- * withdrawal from World War I;
- * transferring land to peasants;
- * nationalizing banks, railways, foreign trade;
- * abolishing inequality by sex, nationality and religion;
- * self-determination for oppressed peoples, to dismantle Imperial Russia’s “prison-house of nations”;
- * separation of church and state;
- * instituting education, setting up network of schools that would be free, secular, obligatory and universal;
- * establishing social security at cost to employers for all wage earners, rural and urban poor, the ill and disabled, the elderly, women experiencing childbirth, the unemployed, widows and orphans;
- * abolishing all ranks in the military;
- * abolishing all aristocratic titles;
- * ending all capital punishment;
- * establishing workers’ control of production and distribution.

Identifying the decisions to withdraw from the war and to give land to the peasants as “primary decisions of the Second Congress of Soviets [that] were quite timely,” Medvedev noted that this also held for the issue of self-determination for oppressed nations. None of this would have been possible without the October revolution – although the same can be said of for the other “long overdue” items on the list, even though “there was nothing socialist per se in any of these reforms.” They were, in fact, “an extremely radical way of carrying out the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution.” Only the introduction of workers’ control could be said to have what Medvedev termed “a plainly socialist tinge.” (p. 94).

As Lenin emphasized in his 1917 statement “To the Population,” the victory of socialism could only be brought about “gradually” – with consent and approval from the majority of the peasants, in keeping with the practical experience of Russia’s workers, and dependent on the revolutionary action of workers in the more industrially advanced countries.