

Competition question

‘Revolutions succeed mainly because governments lose control, rather than because revolutionaries gain popular support.’ Discuss.

Student exemplary essay: 1000 words, 2 hours

Revolutions are often remembered through their leaders, slogans and crowds. This can make it seem that they succeed because revolutionaries persuade enough people to support them. However, popular support alone is rarely enough to overthrow a state. Governments possess armies, money and legal authority. A revolution becomes possible when these advantages begin to break down. The French Revolution of 1789, the Russian revolutions of 1917 and the German Revolution of 1918 suggest that government weakness was the main condition for success. Even so, revolutionaries still had to use that weakness effectively.

The French monarchy lost control before any single revolutionary movement was strong enough to replace it. By 1789, the crown faced a financial crisis caused partly by war spending, including support for the American War of Independence. Attempts to make the privileged estates pay more tax had failed. Louis XVI therefore called the Estates-General, the first meeting since 1614. This was meant to solve the financial problem, but instead exposed the weakness of royal authority. The Third Estate declared itself the National Assembly and took the Tennis Court Oath, promising not to separate until France had a constitution. Louis hesitated between compromise and force. His indecision allowed the Assembly to survive and made the monarchy appear uncertain.

Popular action was still important. The storming of the Bastille on 14 July prevented the king from easily using troops against Paris and gave the Revolution a powerful symbol. In the countryside, the Great Fear helped force the National Assembly to abolish feudal privileges in August. The October Days also brought the royal family from Versailles to Paris, where they were more exposed to pressure from the crowd. Yet these actions succeeded because the government could not respond decisively. Some soldiers were unreliable, the treasury was close to collapse, and the king repeatedly changed direction. The people of Paris did not defeat a confident monarchy; they pushed against a state which had already lost much of its authority.

A similar pattern can be seen in Russia in February 1917. Years of war had damaged the economy and discredited Nicholas II. Food shortages affected the cities, inflation reduced wages and military defeats weakened confidence in the regime. The Tsar also made the damaging decision to take personal command of the army in 1915, making him more directly responsible for failure. Meanwhile, the government in Petrograd was associated with the unpopular Tsarina and Rasputin. By early 1917, even conservative politicians were losing faith in the monarchy.

The February Revolution began with strikes and demonstrations, including protests on International Women's Day. However, unrest had occurred before without bringing down the regime. The decisive moment was the refusal of soldiers in Petrograd to fire on the crowds. Many mutinied and joined the demonstrators instead. Once the government could no longer rely on armed force, Nicholas had few options and abdicated. There was no organised revolutionary party directing the entire uprising. The Bolsheviks were taken by surprise, and Lenin was still in exile. This strongly supports the view that the revolution succeeded because the government lost control of the capital and the army.

The October Revolution was different because revolutionary organisation mattered more. The

Provisional Government inherited many of the old regime's problems and created new ones. It continued the war, delayed elections to the Constituent Assembly and failed to solve the land question. Its authority was also limited by "dual power", since the Petrograd Soviet had influence over workers and soldiers. Order Number One showed that the government could not command the army in the capital without the Soviet's cooperation. The failed June Offensive further damaged its reputation, while the Kornilov Affair made Kerensky appear weak and allowed the Bolsheviks to present themselves as defenders of the revolution.

Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks did more than wait for collapse. Lenin's April Theses offered clear demands: "Peace, Bread and Land" and "All Power to the Soviets". These slogans matched the concerns of soldiers, workers and peasants, even if many supporters did not fully understand Bolshevik ideology. Trotsky's leadership of the Military Revolutionary Committee helped the party prepare the seizure of key points in Petrograd. The Provisional Government was weak, but weakness alone did not guarantee a Bolshevik victory. Other socialist groups also had support. The Bolsheviks succeeded because they combined a simple message with organisation when state authority was weakest.

Germany in 1918 provides further evidence that military and political collapse mattered more than a long-prepared revolutionary campaign. By the autumn, Germany was exhausted by the First World War. The Spring Offensive had failed, the Allied blockade had caused shortages, and military leaders knew defeat was approaching. The sailors' mutiny at Kiel spread into wider unrest, with workers' and soldiers' councils appearing across the country. Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated on 9 November. As in Russia, the government's loss of control over sections of the armed forces was crucial.

The German case also shows the limits of popular revolutionary support. Germany did not experience a Bolshevik-style seizure of power. Friedrich Ebert and the moderate Social Democrats gained authority because many workers wanted political change but not necessarily communist revolution. Ebert reached an agreement with the army leadership and used the Freikorps against the Spartacist uprising in January 1919. Revolutionary crowds could remove a government without agreeing on what should replace it. The collapse of the old order created an opportunity, but organisation and alliances shaped the final result.

Overall, governments losing control was the most important reason why revolutions succeeded. In France, Russia and Germany, rulers faced financial crisis, war, division and the breakdown of military obedience. Popular anger existed before these moments, but it became revolutionary only when the state could no longer contain it. Nevertheless, leadership mattered after authority had begun to collapse. The Bolsheviks in October 1917 showed how an organised party could turn government weakness into a successful seizure of power. Government failure explains why revolution became possible, while revolutionary support and organisation explain what kind of revolution followed.