

Optimised Study Guide — The Revolutions of 1917 (February & October)

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for the causes and events of the February and October Revolutions of 1917 (Unit 3, Elective 2, Component C03-U3E2). Grounded in the 2020–2025 SCSA exams and marking keys, especially the 2021 Q6 essay on why the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government and the recurring February-causes essay. Leads with exam priorities and marking-key warnings (keep February and October distinct), then detailed causes/events of both revolutions, Dual Power, the Provisional Government's failures, Lenin and the Bolsheviks, perspectives and recurring question patterns.

1917 gives the elective its two best-loved essay questions: *why did the Tsar fall in February?* and *why did the Bolsheviks win in October?* The single most important exam skill here is keeping the two revolutions distinct — they had different causes, different actors and different character. Treat them as two separate arguments that happen to share a year.

The marking-key trap to avoid. The 2021 essay — *"Analyse the reasons why the Bolsheviks were able to overthrow the Provisional Government in October 1917"* — carried an explicit instruction: *"Candidates are to focus on the October Revolution and not that of February. Discussion of autocracy under Tsar Nicholas II is not required."* Many students lose marks by retelling February when asked about October. Know which causes belong to which revolution.

How this content is examined

- **Essays.** Expect either a February-causes question (often framed around the Tsar's autocracy — see the WWI guide) or an October-causes question on why the Provisional Government fell / why the Bolsheviks succeeded.
- **Source analysis.** 1917 sources (e.g. Lenin's April 1917 speeches appear in the 2023 source booklet) demand precise knowledge of Dual Power, the April Theses and the Provisional Government's weaknesses to explain context and purpose.

Answer the verb. Analyse = identify the reasons and show how they relate and combine. A high October answer ranks and connects factors (Provisional Government weakness + Bolshevik strength + opportunity), rather than narrating events.

1. The February Revolution — causes

- **Social and economic discontent:** wartime bread and fuel shortages, inflation, falling living conditions, mounting strikes and demonstrations in Petrograd.
- **Military losses and defections:** catastrophic casualties and collapsing morale; crucially, the garrison's refusal to fire on protesters.
- **Failure of political reform and rising repression:** the Tsar's refusal to share power (see the WWI/Tsar guide for the autocracy dimension).

2. The February Revolution — events (Old Style dates)

- **23 Feb:** International Women's Day marches merge with strikes into a mass movement.
- **27 Feb:** the Petrograd garrison mutinies; the [Petrograd Soviet](#) forms and issues **Order No. 1** (soldiers to obey the Soviet, not officers, on political matters).
- **2 Mar:** Nicholas II abdicates. Power is shared uneasily between the bourgeois **Provisional Government** and the Petrograd Soviet — [Dual Power](#).

3. Dual Power and the Provisional Government's failures

This is the engine of the October question — *why the new government lost legitimacy*:

- **Continuing the war.** The decision to fight on (and the failed June Offensive) was deeply unpopular and tied the government to the same misery that toppled the Tsar.
- **The land question.** Refusing to authorise land redistribution before a Constituent Assembly alienated the peasantry, who were seizing land anyway.
- **Economic failure.** Inflation and shortages continued; the government could not deliver bread.
- **Its own nature.** Predominantly bourgeois and unelected, it lacked deep legitimacy. Ironically, the **new freedoms** it granted (press, speech, amnesty) allowed its opponents — above all the Bolsheviks — to organise and attack it openly.

4. The October Revolution — Bolshevik causes of success

The marking key rewards a balance of *government weakness*, *Bolshevik strength* and *opportunity*:

- **Lenin's return and the April Theses.** Back from exile (April), Lenin rejected cooperation with the Provisional Government and offered the irresistible slogan "**Peace, Land, Bread**" and "All Power to the Soviets." He forced his reluctant party toward the goal of immediate revolution.
- **A disciplined party.** Lenin built a unified, committed Bolshevik party and, with Trotsky, the **Red Guard** — a decisive organisational advantage.
- **The July Days (setback) and recovery.** A premature rising failed and Lenin fled, but the party survived.
- **The Kornilov Revolt (Aug) — the turning point.** When General Kornilov marched on Petrograd, the Provisional Government armed the Bolsheviks to defend the capital. The

coup collapsed, discrediting Kerensky and leaving the Bolsheviks armed, popular and vindicated.

- **The seizure (25 Oct).** Trotsky's **Military Revolutionary Committee (MILREVCOM)** and the Red Guard took Petrograd's key points; the Winter Palace fell; the Bolsheviks proclaimed the **Sovnarkom** government.

5. Historical perspectives

- **"October as coup" (Liberal):** a small, disciplined minority seized power in a near-bloodless putsch, not a mass revolution.
- **"October as popular revolution" (Soviet/some revisionist):** the Bolsheviks rode genuine mass support for soviet power, peace and land.
- **Role of the individual:** how far was Lenin (and Trotsky) *personally* decisive versus the structural collapse of the Provisional Government? A strong essay weighs both.

6. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

- **"Analyse the reasons the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government."** High answers: weigh the government's failures against Bolshevik organisation and the Kornilov opportunity; rank the factors; stay firmly in the March–October window.
- **"To what extent was Lenin responsible for the October Revolution?"** High answers: balance Lenin's leadership against impersonal causes (war, economic collapse, government weakness).
- **February-causes essays:** see the WWI/Tsar guide — keep the autocracy and war material there, not in October answers.

Recall self-test. Can you:

- List the three causes of the February Revolution and distinguish them from the causes of October?
- Explain Dual Power and why it was inherently unstable?
- State the four key failures of the Provisional Government?
- Explain why the new freedoms it granted backfired?
- Explain precisely why the Kornilov Revolt was the turning point that armed and legitimised the Bolsheviks?
- Sequence the October seizure (MILREVCOM → Winter Palace → Sovnarkom)?
- Argue October as both a "coup" and a "popular revolution"?