

“By the end of 1917 it was already clear the Bolshevik state would be oppressive and authoritarian.” Assess the validity of this view.

When the Bolsheviks came to power following the October 1917 revolution, they were faced with the immediate need to establish the government, make radical reform and distance themselves from the Provisional Government. In order for the government created by the Bolsheviks to be oppressive and authoritarian it must have endeavoured to control every aspect of society, removed all opposition and ignored the will of the people. For this reason, the Bolshevik state cannot be seen to have entirely authoritarian as the Bolsheviks did not completely ignore the will of the people.

One example of the oppressive nature of the Bolshevik state was the creation of the CHEKA. On 7th December 1917, the CHEKA was created and headed by Felix Dzerzhinsky – within 24 days they had exercised the power of unlimited arrest and killed over 8,500 opponents of the regime. This demonstrates the oppressive and authoritarian nature of the new government as the CHEKA actively sought to remove not just opposition but also those that had the potential to become opponents of the regime through the loose definition of a ‘counter-revolutionary’ threat. This allowed the Bolsheviks to deter anyone who could have potentially opposed them by creating a culture of fear that surrounded the regime. This furthers the idea that the Bolshevik state was oppressive and authoritarian as the CHEKA was used to remove all opposition – a key characteristic of authoritarian regimes.

Whilst the CHEKA were used to covertly suppress opposition, decrees were used to openly censor the press. On October 27th 1917, Lenin issued the Decree on Press. This banned all opposition press that had the potential to incite resistance to the government or had the potential to “through demonstrably slanderous facts”. This decree not only removed the ideas of opposition groups from the public eye, but also ideas that had the potential to contradict the official Bolshevik narrative of the revolution. This demonstrates the Bolshevik commitment to the systematic removal of opposition as the Bolsheviks would censor views that did not align with their own and attempt to control their image through censorship. This desire for control and removal of opposition are both characteristic of authoritarian and oppressive regimes. Therefore, this adds to the view that the Bolshevik regime was clearly oppressive by the end of 1917.

The authoritarian and oppressive nature of the Bolshevik state is further seen through the creation of the VESHENKA in December 1917. The VESHENKA was the Council for Control of the Economy and was created following the November 1917 Decree on Banks. This decree nationalised all banks and placed them under the control of the state whilst the VESHENKA was created specifically to increase the amount of control the Bolsheviks had over society as it controlled all nationalised industry. This demonstrates the authoritative nature of the Bolshevik state as it further shows how they endeavoured to control every aspect of the state – a key aspect of authoritarian regimes.

The authoritarian nature of the Bolshevik regime can further be seen through the decrees on the Church passed in December 1917. These decrees nationalised Church land and removed both marriage and divorce from church control. This further demonstrates the authoritarian nature of the Bolshevik state as the decrees removed power from an institution with a large following that had the potential to oppose the state. The desire for control over every aspect of society in order to suppress