

1905 Russian Revolution

Russia had been ruled by the Romanovs for nearly 300 years as an autocracy. When, in 1894, Tsar Alexander III died from kidney failure at 49, his son Nicholas 2nd succeeded him. He was inexperienced and not prepared for the task of governing the extensive Russian Empire, Nicholas said at the time of his coronation: 'I am not prepared to be a Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling.' Europe had been modernizing and Russia was the last true autocracy left. There were no political institutions apart from the Tsar himself. Nicholas II became Tsar in 1884 and believed he was the absolute ruler anointed by God. This picture shows that Russian social order at the start of the 1900s where the peasants, although the majority of the population were treated as second class citizens. The Tsar and the upper class had no need to pay attention to the plight of the poor and farmers who were exploited as a result of poor governance.

The effects of industrialization on a backward attitude Russia would be a power keg waiting to detonate. In 1861, the emancipation of serfs allowed many peasants to explore the new found freedoms. Along with the urbanization of Russian society, arose many social issues such as standard of living and working conditions. Unemployment and crime was high, wages and rural agriculture production was low. The economy was weak as Russia's industries were young and not at its full potential, influences from Western Europe and Japan put pressure on Russian trade. The vast majority of workers concentrated in St. Petersburg and Moscow resulted in decrease in traditional agricultural production in the farms. Russian society at the beginning of the twentieth century was rapidly becoming 'more educated, more urban and more complex' Literacy rates were improving, even in the countryside. This created a large and vocal working class discontented with Russia's social and political structure. Land ownership was still mainly controlled by the landlords and the industrialization of Russia was built on the strained backbone of the peasant population

The new century had started badly for the autocracy. A poor harvest in 1902 intensified the poverty of the peasants. They seized land from the landowners and destroyed property. Disorder spread to the cities and by the middle of 1903 a wave of strikes in the oil industry, engineering works and the railways threatened to paralyse the economy. The working classes' discontent with Russian government resulted in strikes in other parts of the city raised the number of strikers to over 80,000. 1905 began with a strike at the Putilov steelworks in St Petersburg in January, resulting from the sacking of workers from the Assembly of Russian Workers. The union had been founded, with police assistance and approval, by Father George Gapon, a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church. Father Gapon although doubted by some worked an activist for the poor in calling for better living and working conditions. For many of the Bloody Sunday marchers, and to others of the poorer classes throughout Russia, Nicholas was a father figure whom they thought had their interests at mind. This was a fatal and mistaken understanding as the Tsar's troops opened fired at the demonstrators. Bloody Sunday was an event with grave consequences for the Tsarist regime, as the disregard for ordinary people shown by the massacre undermined support for the state.

Nicholas would not willingly grant any concessions to those who wanted reforms and because of his resistance this created the seeds of destruction, both for Russia as a monarchy and for himself. Orlando Figes said that 'It was their tragedy that just as Russia was entering the twentieth century; they were trying to return it to the seventeenth.'

Peasant revolts began intensified as the year went on. Landowners had their land seized by peasants. Socialism being popular as revolutionaries spread a message of Russia being a 'land for the peasants'. By February, nearly half a million workers were on strike in the cities, and unions for all classes blossomed—doctors, lawyers and teachers formed organisations alongside waiters and engineers. In May the Union of Unions was formed demanding civil liberties and the formation of a legislative assembly elected by universal suffrage. In factories, councils of elected delegates were formed to negotiate with the factory owners for better pay and conditions. Bad news from the east worsened the situation. The Russian Japanese was supposed to be an image of strength of Nicholas but proved to be an embarrassing defeat. In February 1905 the Russian army was defeated by the Japanese at Mukden, and on 27 May the Russian fleet was destroyed in the Straits of Tsushima. The Russians had also lost most of their combat supplies as well as most of their artillery and heavy machine guns. With morale in the armed forces low, the sailors aboard the battleship Potemkin in the Black Sea mutinied in June. In the Soviet poster portraying the 1905 revolution, the caption reads "Glory to the People's Heroes of the Potemkin!" Populism was increasing at the weakness of the Tsarist autocracy highlighted by the Japan's victory which was the first Asian country to defeat a Western power.

On 17 February Grand Duke Sergei, Nicholas's uncle and governor-general of Moscow, was killed by a bomb thrown by a socialist revolutionary. By August the increasing discontent as Nicholas' appeasements attempts failed, the Tsar promised to create a representative parliament called a Duma. Nicholas would seek its opinion when he chose, but it would have no authority to make laws against his wishes. The promise of a Duma on such limited terms failed to satisfy the opponents of the regime. Strikes and protest meetings intensified. The State Duma of the Russian Empire was a legislative assembly in the late Russian Empire, which met in the Taurida Palace in St. Petersburg. It was convened four times between 1906 and the collapse of the Empire in 1917. The first two tries were too radical. 1906 The third duma was elected by the richest people in Russia in 1907. While the Dumas met, the Tsar's prime minister, Peter Stolypin (1906–11), carried out a policy to repress the revolutionary elements, and offer limited land

concessions to the peasants in a two-pronged approach designed to consolidate the position of the Tsar by removing his opponents and winning the loyalty and gratitude of the peasants. On 21 October a railway strike was declared in Moscow and spread across the nation. The strikes crippled the Russian railway network; populism was on the increase. Later that month, Leon Trotsky and other Mensheviks established the St. Petersburg Soviet, which had significant influence in many major cities.

The restrictions placed on the Duma only angered opponents of the Tsar. Strikes and protest meetings intensified. Prime Minister Witte (1905 – 1906) for advice and was told Nicholas that the regime could only be saved by granting the people a constitution. This document, the October Manifesto, drew a line of division in the events of 1905, but failed to resolve fundamental issues and drew criticism from many groups. There were different responses to the October Manifesto from the different factions of society. The far-right where Tsar Nicholas tended to associate himself with, led demonstrations in support of the new Manifesto. After the publication, the Black Hundred, a pro-Romanov group launched a wave of attacks against traditional Russian scapegoats, the Jews, many of whom suffered loss of life or property. The Octobrists, which were moderate Rightists claimed as a successful revolution. However the centre factional groups such as the Constitutional Democrats, although favoured reform wanted to faster action on addressing issues such as land reform. The soviets, with their concerns for working conditions such as the eight-hour day, condemned the Manifesto as it did little to address the everyday needs of the working people. Nicholas disliked the Manifesto. He had hoped to buy peace with concessions and felt betrayed when the strikes and protests continued. Ultimately Nicholas used exploited the promises of a constitutional monarchy to return to the methods of an autocrat. It was granted during the Russian Revolution of 1905, in a last-ditch effort by the imperial government to preserve its own existence and keep the nation from sliding into all-out anarchy. The Fundamental Laws limited the power of the Duma and the Tsar used the Duma to restrict his opponents.

Revolution parties involved with the 1905 Russian Revolution can be classed as either left wing radicals or the moderate right wing revolutionaries. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party which was based on Marxist principles was officially formed in 1893 and remained outlawed by the Tsarist regime until 1917. In 1903 the Social Democrats split into the far left Bolsheviks and the leftist Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks were headed by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky with policies such as alliance between working class and peasants and the rapid overthrow of the Tsar and the middle class to accomplish socialism. The Mensheviks' cooperated with the middle class in attempts to introduce socialism by overthrowing the Tsar. Alexander Kerensky, the face of the centre faction socialist revolutionaries called for land reforms to benefit the peasants. To the right side, the Cadets generally supported the Tsar and accepted his attempts at reform. The cadets wanted Russia to follow in the steps of English and implement a constitutional monarchy, whilst the far right Octobrists backed the October Manifesto and a Duma with the Tsar retaining most power. The St Petersburg Soviet and other leftist groups comprising members of the Social Revolutionary, Bolshevik, and Menshevik parties which were founded shortly before the October Manifesto were not satisfied with the comprises made by Tsar Nicholas 2nd. Afterwards, the leaders of this Soviet, including Leon Trotsky made plans for new strikes which they hoped would expand into an armed rebellion. They found, however, that their alliance with the more liberal middle-class elements of society was fading as many were willing to settle for the political concessions offered. The St. Petersburg Soviet's calls for strike action in November were ignored and by the end of 1905 the Tsarist government intervened and arrested the leaders. In Moscow the left-wing Soviet of Workers' Deputies attempted an armed uprising in December, but the Tsar with loyal government troops drew enough support to put it down.

The Revolution of 1905 was over. The tsarist monarchy had survived. Nicholas II was shaken, but he now began to restore his traditional autocratic rule at the expense of the promises he had made in the October Manifesto. It had been a troubled year for Nicholas; however, he managed to hang on with the support of the increasingly power Okhrana secret police, a loyal army, and an internally stable Tsarist government. The acceptance of his concessions by the middle classes along with the defeat of the Soviets kept the regime standing. Trotsky said, 'Although with a few broken ribs, Tsarism came out of the experience of 1905 alive and strong enough.' The uprisings in 1905 failed to replace the tsarist autocracy with a democratic republic or even to create a functional national assembly, and majority of the revolutionary leaders arrested. However, the attempted revolution forced the Tsarist regime to institute extensive reforms much to the dislike of Nicholas 2nd. The Fundamental Laws of 1906, which functioned as a constitution on paper, and the formation of the Duma, which fostered the development of legal political activity and parties, giving way to events of 1917.

The Revolution of 1905 was a foreword to the Revolution of 1917. In a way the Russian Revolution of 1905 cannot be counted as a revolution at all since the Tsar Nicholas remained on his throne. Changes promised in the October Manifesto were not enacted in reality as the throne remained autocratic, and most of the army remained loyal. However in 1917 the Tsar fell, as his troops mostly betrayed the regime and supported the revolutionaries. In 1905, the Tsar was able to eventually appease and convince radicals and the reformists to back down. The left wing groups based on Marxist principles used the next 12 years to develop and grow their support in campaign for the overthrow of the Tsar. But in 1917, Tsarism collapsed in a revolution that was similar in some respects. Both began when Russia

© www.roydonng.com

was severely weakened by military disasters in unsuccessful wars; and both the Russo-Japanese War and World War I brought up longstanding political, social, and economic issues which would not and could not be dealt with under the Tsarist regime. Both revolutions took place partly because of poor leadership which out of touch with the ordinary Russian people.