

A Russian Revolution



Introduction

Does a revolution have to be successful to count? How long do you wait to assess whether it has worked? By 1906, it seemed that the Revolution of 1905 had succeeded in bringing the government of Russia a long way towards the model of constitutional democracy that was gaining strength across Europe. Within another year or so, however, much of the gains seem to have evaporated. Ten years after that, another revolution (or set of revolutions, depending on how you count them) brought the Communists to power. After playing a major global role across the 20th century, that revolution's regime collapsed in 1989-91.

But, wait; we're getting ahead of ourselves... Let's stay focused on 1905 and *its* revolution. How did it start? And how did it evolve? As we will see, the Russian Revolution of 1905 was the product of the nature of Russian political culture, Russia's geographic position straddling Europe and Asia, economic *and* military factors. It was also the product of both long- *and* short-term causes and driven by large-scale events *and* individual personalities; trends *and* quirks.

A RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN
REVOLUTION

BLOODY SUNDAY AND THE
OCTOBER MANIFESTO

THE FIRST, SECOND, THIRD, AND
FOURTH DUMAS

CONCLUSION

By the end of the 19th century, Russia remained the largest country in Europe in terms of both population and geography, with territory spreading all the way from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean and expanding southward into the Caucasus and Central Asia. Since Peter the Great in the early 18th century, Russia viewed itself as a part of the European Great Powers. Its government imported advisors, culture, and ideas from countries to its west, and saw itself primarily in competition with them.

By the turn of the century, Russia had already undergone a number of significant changes and was in the midst of grappling with the forces of modernity. Governance in the empire was highly centered in the monarchy, which, as we learned in our last lesson, was eager to assert itself on the global imperial stage. Internally, the government had also initiated a program of aggressive top-down industrialization. Though the vast majority of the empire remained agriculturally based, serfdom had been abolished in the mid-19th century and urban centers like Moscow and St. Petersburg saw an influx of workers, laboring in mills and factories. From 1880 to the end of the century, heavy industrial production increased fourfold and the number of workers doubled. The Trans-Siberian Railway opened in 1904, just 13 years after construction began, and in Baku the discovery of oil in the early 19th century gradually turned the region into a center of global production.

Key Terms:

Russian Revolution
of 1905

Russian Empire

Romanovs

Tsar Nicholas II

Georgy Gapon

Bloody Sunday

General Strike

Sergei Witte

October Manifesto

Duma



Topographic Map of the Russian Empire

Russian peasant woman with loom in Kostroma province, c. 1900

Urban growth and industrial change in Russia brought about familiar challenges. While the old elites remained, workers struggled under the demands and conditions of industrial labor. A nascent urban middle-class was eager to assert itself, too. Meanwhile, at least 70% of people resided in the countryside and villages as peasants, living much as previous generations had. While historians debate regional variations and the exact conditions of peasant life at the end of the century, most were illiterate and many frustrated by the distribution of land and degree of economic progress they were experiencing.



At the top of all of this was the Romanov family, which had ruled over the Russian Empire for centuries. The current tsar, Nicholas II, had been on the throne since 1894. Even had he been more interested in the affairs of governance, he would have had trouble mastering the challenges that Russia faced as it sought to keep up with the changes brought out by industrialization, urbanization, calls for more inclusive governmental systems, and calls to address widespread economic inequalities that seemed to wash over the country. While many European monarchies were making the transition to a representative constitutional structure, Nicholas continued to see himself as an absolute ruler.

Under the direction of the tsar, the government sought to either directly control, or suppress many of the forces of change facing the world in 1905. This was an impossible task in a country of 150 million people with increasingly divergent views and interests. But while it might seem easy to see the coming revolution as a struggle between forces of progress and conservatism, the situation was more complicated...



Among the many challenges faced by Nicholas II and Russia were:

- Landless (but increasingly literate) peasants who sought land reform as the key to their economic security.
- A small but growing industrial workforce who felt exploited by capitalists at work and in their urban living conditions.
- An emerging middle class who sought political rights to match their growing economic status.
- Entrenched landed elites and nobility who feared the changes many others demanded.
- An expansive bureaucracy at times hampered by imperial interference and indecision.
- A military establishment that was outdated and mismanaged by aristocratic leaders.
- A burgeoning intelligentsia, principally in Moscow and St. Petersburg, eager to advance ideas associated with liberalism, socialism, and democracy.

Portrait of Tsar Nicholas II, c. 1900

Bloody Sunday and the October Manifesto

By the early 20th century, these issues and the disruptions caused by them grew increasingly intense. In late 1904, a wave of public meetings advanced a variety of demands for reform. The tsar appeared to be moved and offered a set of incremental reforms on several fronts. However, at the same time, the government's internal security forces launched new repressive measures. The resulting confusion spurred even more protests and a major procession to petition the tsar at his palace in St. Petersburg was planned for January 9, 1905. At the head of the protests was a Russian Orthodox priest named Georgy Gapon. The peaceful march seemed to go smoothly until the military guard, apparently in confusion as to how to handle the many thousands of marchers, opened fire and killed 130 people, and wounded another 300. As it turned out, the tsar was not even there.



Crowd led by Father Gapon on Bloody Sunday, 1905

The events of what became known as “Bloody Sunday” marked a turning point in affairs. Protest strikes involving hundreds of thousands of workers spread to dozens of major cities across Russia. While reform measures were being debated among the tsar’s ministers, local governors were suppressing protests. These mixed messages mirrored the conflicts within the tsar himself, as he continued to call for renewed support for the throne while simultaneously opening the door for discussion of democratic reforms. Nicholas’s flip-flopping continued through the summer of 1905 while public debates ensued on the nature of exactly what reforms should be introduced. By late spring, domestic order appeared to collapse. This was especially true in the provinces dominated by ethnic minorities (e.g., Poland, the Baltics, and the Caucasus) and even extended to the peasantry.

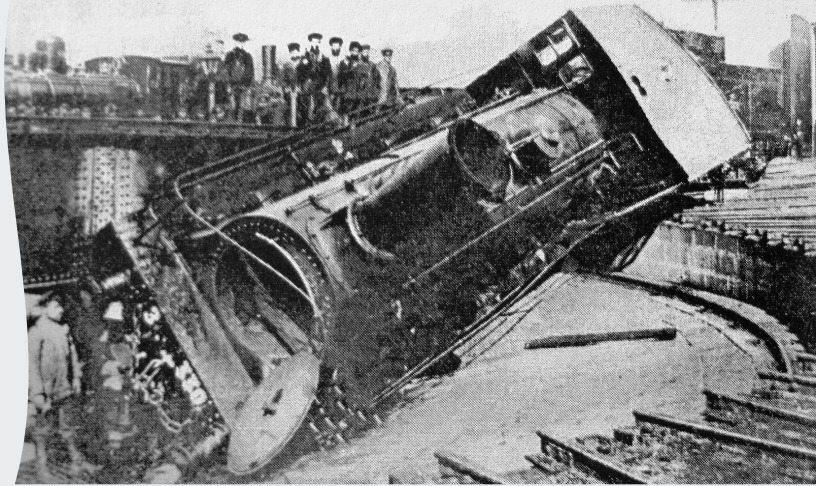
No group had been as supportive (and as politically crucial) for the tsar as the military. But here, the added stresses of the Russo-Japanese War pushed things over the edge.

Compared with the effects of most wars on their participants (e.g. invasion and deprivation), the impact of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 was largely indirect. Fighting took place far from the major population centers of Russia and did not involve great masses of Russian troops or materials. As we learned in Reading 2, the geo-political jockeying that led to the war had little to do with the domestic issues noted above. Russia had entered the war with great confidence. However, the stunning defeat of the Imperial Russian Navy in May 1905, on top of the unrest accelerated by Bloody Sunday, undermined both public support for the war effort and morale. In June, a mutiny broke out on the battleship *Potemkin*, which spread across its home port in Odessa. This uprising also turned into yet another massacre after the army was called in to suppress the unrest.

Afanasi Matushenko, revolutionary socialist of peasant background and leader of the 1905 Potemkin mutiny in white



The government's inability to resolve this crisis led to a "General Strike" that October, during which over two million people across the empire stopped working on their jobs. The strike spread from Moscow and quickly encompassed the railway system, disrupting trade across the country. This action highlighted the growing power of workers, and their organizing committees, which were called 'soviets.' It also inspired the tsar to further unleash the military to forcibly restore order in the cities. Rebellion spread to the countryside as well, where peasants organized rent strikes in an effort to gain higher wages, took agricultural goods and other property from estates, and at times burned manors.



Train overturned by rail workers in Tiflis, 1905



The October Manifesto, issued by Nicholas II

By this time, most of the tsar's leading advisors had become convinced of the need for broad political reform. Sergei Witte, a former Minister of Finance and then chairman of the Committee of Ministers, advanced a plan for government reorganization. Nicholas II had been pleased with Witte's performance in the peace negotiations with Japan in June, and, despite his resistance, finally agree to reform. Shortly after, he issued the October Manifesto of 1905, a document that served as a precursor to Russia's first constitution, and promised greater civil rights and to vest legislative power in an elected assembly called the Duma. Though some were heartened by the promises of new rights and a representative government, others, in particular socialists and Marxists, worried that these were only small, hollow concessions. For the time being, how the principles of the October Manifesto would be implemented remained to be seen...

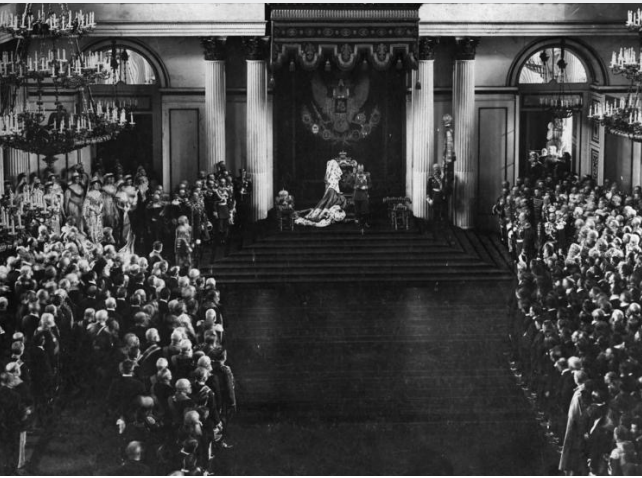
In November, Witte became President of the Committee of Ministers (in effect, Russia's first Prime Minister), but he faced huge challenges beyond designing and implementing a constitutional monarchy on behalf of a reluctant and indecisive tsar. Domestic disorder, repression, and military mutinies continued. Though the October Manifesto had dampened the extremes of the General Strike, the economic damage was severe and a wave of political assassinations swept the country. Peasant uprisings also persisted well into the following year. Because many soldiers were themselves of peasant backgrounds, they resisted orders to suppress them. Mutinies wracked the army through the winter of 1905-1906. Other conservative ministers urged the tsar to reverse himself and restore the old order. Under the strains, Witte didn't last in office past Spring, 1906.



Sergei Witte, c. 1880-1886

The First, Second, Third, and Fourth Dumas

Despite the unrest, and though often overshadowed by the events of 1917, it is hard to overstate how significant the tsar's announcement that a Duma would be created was. This would be Russia's first nationally elected body, and it would be charged with a range of tasks - from adopting a new constitution, to land reform, and managing domestic order. Despite deep inequalities in voting the rules and the fact that the votes of the wealthy counted more than those of workers or peasants, the election dramatically expanded the number of people with voting rights to most male citizens over 25 years of age. When the election was held in April 1906, 30-40% of eligible voters participated.



Nicholas II delivering an opening speech at State Duma, Winter Palace, 1906

The liberal Kadets, which appealed mostly to moderate urban voters, won the largest share of seats and outstripped any other single group. Thinking that they were in a strong position, they tried to lead ongoing reforms - including demands for a constituent assembly and land reforms. If they had been successful, the revolution of 1905 might have gone down in history as a complex but reasonably productive revolution. However, building a democracy is always hard, especially when starting from 'scratch.' The issues the Duma faced were complex, and most of its members had little experience legislating. Moreover, the tsar's government was still reluctant to share power and continued to resist the idea of popular representation as well as the redistribution of land.

On July 9, 1906, after just 73 days and forty mostly unproductive meetings, the frustrated tsar sent government troops to surround the palace where the First Duma had been meeting and dissolved it. When Duma deputies, most of them Kadets, met in the Finnish town of Viborg shortly after, they denounced the government and called the Russian public to engage in civil disobedience. The participants were arrested and barred from holding office again, and state forces shut down their offices and newspapers.

In January 1907, elections for a Second Duma produced a strikingly more polarized group of deputies. Left membership, including Social Democrats and the Socialist Revolutionaries expanded significantly. The new Duma found itself almost immediately at an impasse. Just three months in, the Social Democrats were accused of preparing an armed uprising but the Duma refused to remove them from office. In June, this Duma was dissolved too, and the tsar promulgated a new election law under which the Third Duma would be chosen. Non-Russian ethnic groups, workers, and peasants all saw the value of their votes and their representation sharply reduced; Russian landowners and elites would control almost half of the seats. The Third Duma was comprised primarily of delegates who supported the tsar and his government, and though some reforms were passed, both the Third and Fourth Duma (elected in 1912) would largely carry out the government's legislative program until the outbreak of World War I.



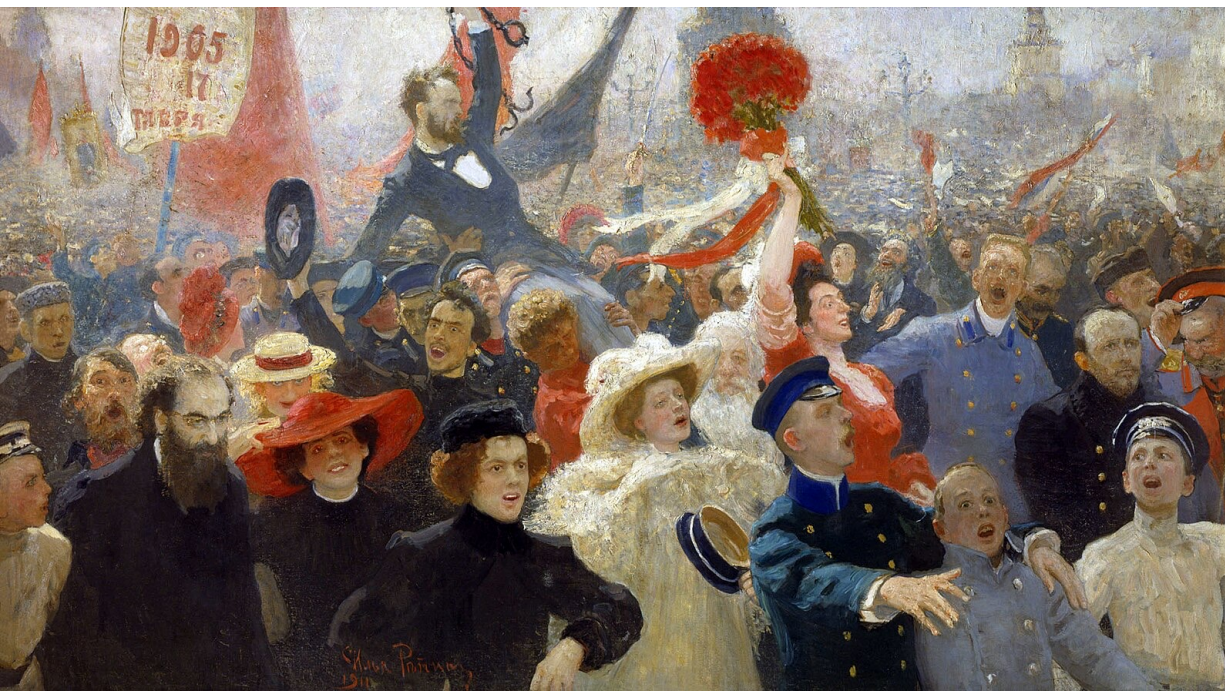
Duma meeting in Tauride Palace, 1912

Conclusion

1905 and its aftermath were not the last words in the story of revolutionary Russia or, indeed, the use of revolution to push for change and accommodate (or as some viewed it, accelerate) modernity. Tsar Nicholas II's efforts to reassert the old order did little to solve the underlying challenges facing Russia in the early 20th century. Industrialization and urbanization increased, injecting more social and economic change into the system, and there remained pushes for reform and popular politics. The reconstituted Duma was a shadow of the vital constitutional organ which modernizers had sought. But the middle classes, intellectuals, and civil servants continued to seek forums through which they could observe or participate in discussions about the issues of the day.

So, although the failure of 1905 had let some steam out of the system, the underlying pressures remained and gradually intensified. The onset of World War I compounded these strains: expanding industrial production, war-time deprivations, and military mobilization all shifted the balance of power within Russia once again. Wartime losses, mass displacement, and disappointment with the tsar's leadership grew to a scale far beyond 1905. By 1917, political order collapsed, as frustrations led once again to popular strikes, protests, mutinies, and agitation. A renewed push for constitutional monarchy emerged again, and failed again, as Nicholas lost control and abdicated in February. His brother declined to take his place. As subsequent efforts to form a new government unfolded, revolutionary socialist Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik Party seized power in the October Revolution of 1917. The Bolshevik Party later crystalized into the Communist Party, which dominated the new "Soviet Union" for over seventy years until it too collapsed in 1991.

But in 1905, few could have predicted all this. At that time, the revolution appeared to be more a culmination of trends and events, rather than just their beginning. In this way, the Russian Revolution of 1905 illustrates a key principle of the study of history: to observers, the significance of events will look quite different depending on when people are reflecting on those events. In this case, the view from 1905 will look dramatically different than it might two years later in 1907, after the October Revolution in 1917, at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, or today.



**Demonstration on
October 17, 1905, by
Ilya Repin, 1907**

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