

Liberalism

As used in Russia, the term 'liberal' described those who wanted political or social change, but who believed that it could be achieved by reforming rather than destroying the tsarist system.

The land reforms of Alexander II, which had led to the spread of the *zemstva*, had helped to create a progressive middle class in the countryside. This had been matched in the urban areas. The economic boom of the 1890s saw the rapid development of a small but ambitious class of industrialists, lawyers and financiers. It was among such social groups that liberal ideas for the modernising of Russia began to take hold. There was also often a strong national element in Russian liberalism. The national minorities viewed the liberal movement as a means of expressing their wish to be independent of Russian imperial control. Two principal liberal parties came to prominence in the pre-1914 period – the Octobrists and the Kadets.

a) The Octobrists

This group dated from the issuing of the tsar's manifesto of October 1905, which established the *duma*. The Octobrists were moderates who were basically loyal to the tsar and his government. They believed in the maintenance of the Russian Empire and regarded the manifesto and the establishment of the *duma* as major constitutional advances. The Octobrists were mainly drawn from the larger commercial, industrial and landowning interests. Their leading members were Alexander Guchkov, a factory owner, and Mikhail Rodzianko, a large landowner, both of whom were later to play a leading part in the Provisional Government of 1917 (see page 85). How relatively limited the Octobrists were in their aims can be gauged from their programme, issued in November 1905, which called for:

- 1 unity amongst those who sincerely want the peaceful renewal of Russia and the triumph of law and order in the country, who reject both stagnation and revolution and who recognise the need for the establishment of a strong and authoritative regime, which, together with the
- 5 representatives of the people, could bring peace to the country through constructive legislative work.

The limited objectives of the Octobrists led to their being dismissed by revolutionaries as bourgeois reactionaries. This is far from accurate. In the *dumas*, the Octobrists frequently voiced serious criticisms of the short-sightedness or incompetence of the tsarist government.

b) The Constitutional Democrats (Kadets)

The Constitutional Democrats (known alternatively as the Party of the

People's Freedom) also came into being as a party at the time of the 1905 Revolution. The Kadets, the largest of the liberal parties, wanted Russia to develop as a constitutional monarchy, in which the powers of the tsar would be restricted by a democratically-elected constituent (national) assembly. They believed that such a representative body would be able to settle Russia's outstanding social, political and economic problems. Lenin dismissed this as bourgeois political naivety, but there is no doubt that the dream of a constituent assembly remained a source of excitement and inspiration to Russian reformers in the period before the 1917 Revolution.

The Kadet Programme

- an All-Russian Constituent Assembly
- full equality and civil rights for all citizens
- the ending of censorship
- the abolition of redemption payments on land
- the recognition of trade unions and the right to strike
- the introduction of universal, free education.

The Kadets were the party of the liberal *intelligentsia*, containing progressive landlords, the smaller industrial entrepreneurs, and members of the professions. Academics were prominent in the party, as typified by the Kadet leader, Paul Milyukov, who was a professor of history. The Kadets became the major opposition voice in the first *duma* and were instrumental in forming the Provisional Government following the February Revolution in 1917.

6 The 1905 Revolution

KEY ISSUES What grievances gave rise to the 1905 Revolution? How revolutionary was the 1905 Revolution? Did the 1905 Revolution leave the tsarist system weaker or stronger?

a) Background

The situation created by the government's policy of political repression after 1881 was graphically described by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), the great Russian novelist and social reformer:

- 1 Russia lives under emergency legislation, and that means without any lawful guarantees. The armies of the secret police are continuously growing in numbers. The prisons and penal colonies are overcrowded with thousands of convicts and political prisoners, among whom the

5 industrial workers are now included. The censorship issues the most meaningless interdictions [bans]. At no previous time have the religious persecutions been so frequent and so cruel as they are today. In all the cities and industrial centres soldiers are employed and equipped with live ammunition to be sent out against the people. Yet this strenuous
10 and terrible activity of the government results only in the growing impoverishment of the rural population, of those 100 million souls on whom the power of Russia is founded, and who, in spite of ever increasing budgets, are faced with famine which has become a normal condition. A similar normal condition is the general dissatisfaction of all
15 classes with the government and their open hostility against it. Autocracy is a superannuated [hopelessly outdated] form of government that may suit the needs of a Central African tribe, but not those of the Russian people, who are increasingly assimilating the culture of the rest of the world. That is why it is impossible to maintain this form
20 of government except by violence.

(From Nicolai Tolstoy's 'Open address to Nicholas II', 1902)

The bleak picture that Tolstoy painted did not necessarily mean that confrontation, still less revolution, had to come. After all, if oppression is applied firmly enough it prevents effective challenges to government. What weakened the tsarist regime in the period before 1917 was not its tyranny but its incompetence. It is certainly true that the crisis which occurred in Russia in 1905 was in large measure due to the mishandling of the situation by the tsar and his government. This was to be shown by the speed with which the government reasserted its authority once it had recovered its nerve.

1905 marked the first time the tsarist government had been faced by a combination of the three main opposition classes in Russia – the industrial workers, the peasantry, and the reformist middle class. This was the broad-based revolt that most revolutionaries had been awaiting. Yet when it came it was accidental rather than planned. Despite the efforts of the various revolutionary parties to politicise events, the strikes and demonstrations in the pre-1905 period had been the result of economic rather than political factors. They had been a reaction to industrial recession and bad harvests. It was the tsarist regime's ill-judged policies that turned the disturbances of 1905 into a direct challenge to its own authority.

b) The Course of Events

The 1905 Revolution began with what has become known as Bloody Sunday. On 22 January, Father Gapon, an Orthodox priest and *Okhrana* double-agent, attempted to lead a peaceful march of workers and their families to the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. (The *Okhrana* were the state secret police whose special task was to hunt down subversives who challenged the tsarist regime.) The marchers'

intention was to present a loyal petition to the tsar, begging him to use his royal authority to alleviate their desperate conditions. However, the march induced panic in the police authorities in the capital. The marchers were fired on and charged by cavalry. There are no precise figures of those killed, but the casualties seem to have amounted to hundreds. The killings were depicted by opponents of the tsarist regime as a deliberate massacre of unarmed petitioners. Although Nicholas II was in fact absent from St Petersburg when these events took place, they gravely damaged the traditional image of the tsar as the 'Little Father', the guardian of the Russian people.

The immediate reaction to Bloody Sunday was a nationwide outbreak of disorder, which increased as the year went on. Strikes occurred in all the major cities and towns. Terrorism against government officials and landlords, much of it organised by the SRs, spread to the countryside. The situation was made worse by Russia's humiliation in the war against Japan (see page 28). The government was blamed for Russia's defeat, which led to further outrages, including the assassination of Plehve by SR terrorists. One newspaper reported that:

1 Hundreds of buildings, worth several millions of roubles, have been destroyed. All the buildings have been razed to the ground on some enormous estates. Many houses have been burnt down without reference to the relations which had existed between the peasants and the
5 landowners or the latter's political views.

An important factor in the dissatisfaction of the peasants was their fear that the government was about to seize the property of those families who had failed to pay off the mortgages taken out in the post-emancipation years (see page 24). The unrest and the government's difficulties in containing it encouraged the national minorities to assert themselves. Georgia declared itself an independent state. Witte remarked:

1 [Non-Russians], seeing this great upheaval, lifted their heads and decided that the time was ripe for the realisation of their dreams and desires. The Poles wanted autonomy, the Jews wanted equal rights, and so on. All of them longed for the destruction of the system of deliberate
5 oppression which embittered their lives. And on top of everything, the army was in an ugly mood.

In May, the Kadets, led by Milyukov, persuaded the majority of the liberal groups to join them in forming a 'Union of Unions', with the aim of organising a broad-based alliance that would include the peasants and the factory workers. A 'Union of Unions' declaration was issued:

1 All means are admissible in the face of the terrible menace contained in the very fact of the continued existence of the present government: and every means must be tried. We appeal to all groups, to all parties, all

organised unions, all private groups, and we say with all our strength, with all the means at our disposal, you must hasten the removal of the gang of robbers that is now in power, and put in its place a constituent assembly.

The summer of 1905 brought the still more disturbing news for the tsarist authorities of mutinies in the army and navy. In June, the crew of the battleship *Prince Potemkin* murdered their officers and deserted their squadron by sailing out of Russian waters. The end of the Russo-Japanese War in August did little to ease the situation. Indeed, Witte feared that the returning troops would join the revolution. If this happened, he said, 'then everything would collapse'. By the autumn, the industrial unrest had grown into a general strike. It was in this atmosphere that a development of particular moment occurred. In a number of cities, most notably in St Petersburg and Moscow, workers formed themselves into an elected soviet (Russian for council). The soviets began as organisations to represent the workers' demands for better conditions, but their potential as bases for political agitation was immediately recognised by revolutionaries. The Menshevik, Lev Trotsky, became chairman of the St Petersburg soviet and organiser of the general strike in the capital.

By October the tsar was faced by the most united opposition in Romanov history. But at this critical juncture the regime began to show the sense of purpose that it had so far lacked. Concession was unavoidable, but by giving ground the government intended to divide the opposition forces which confronted it. The liberals were the first to be placated by the granting of a *duma*. On Witte's advice, the tsar issued the October Manifesto in which he accepted the creation of a legislative (law-making) *duma*. Since the manifesto also contained a promise to introduce a range of civil rights, including freedom of speech, assembly and worship, and the legalising of trade unions, the liberals could claim a remarkable success. Their appetite for reform was satisfied, at least temporarily.

The peasants were the next to be bought off by an announcement in November that the mortgage repayments which had so troubled them were to be progressively reduced and then abolished altogether. The response was an immediate drop in the number of land-seizures by the peasants and a decline in the general lawlessness in the countryside.

Having won over the liberals and peasants, the government was now seriously opposed by only one major group – the industrial workers. Here the policy was one not of concession but of suppression. The government felt strong enough to attempt to crush the soviets. Despite the mutinies earlier in the year, the troops who returned from the Far East at the end of the war proved loyal enough to be used against the strikers. After a five-day siege, the headquarters of the St Petersburg soviet were stormed and the ringleaders, including Trotsky, were arrested. The suppression of the Moscow soviet was

even more violent. Lenin, who had been slow to take advantage of the 1905 Revolution, arrived in Moscow in December, only in time to witness the flames of the gutted soviet buildings.

c) Significance

A notable feature of the 1905 Revolution was how minor a part was played by the revolutionaries. Hardly any of them were in St Petersburg or Moscow when it began. Revolution occurred in spite, rather than because, of them. With the exception of Trotsky, none of the SDs made an impact on the course of events. This throws doubt on the notion of 1905 as a revolution. There is the further fact that in a number of important respects tsardom emerged from the disturbances stronger rather than weaker. Despite its disastrous failure to win the war against Japan, which produced protest throughout Russia and united the classes in opposition, the tsarist regime survived 1905 remarkably unscathed. The mutinies in the armed services did not spread and did not continue after the war. Loyal troops returned to destroy the soviets. The readiness with which the liberals and the peasants accepted the government's political and economic bribes indicated that neither of those groups was genuinely ready for revolution. It is true that the tsar appeared to grant significant concessions in the October Manifesto, but these were expedients rather than real reforms. The *duma* was not intended to be, nor did it become, a limitation on the tsar's autocratic powers. This was evident from the Fundamental Laws, which Nicholas II promulgated in 1906:

The Sovereign Emperor possesses the initiative in all legislative matters. The Fundamental Laws may be subject to revision in the State Council and the State Duma only on His initiative. The Sovereign Emperor ratifies the laws. No law can come into force without his approval.

The lesson of 1905 was that as long as the tsarist government kept its nerve and the army remained loyal, the forces of protest would find it very difficult to mount a serious challenge. The events of 1905 also raised questions about the extent to which the liberals wanted change in Russia. Few of them enjoyed their experience of mixing with the workers during the Revolution. They found proletarian coarseness unattractive and were frightened by the primitive forces they had helped to unleash. One middle-class proprietor, who had thrown his house open to the strikers, remarked on the difficulty of sustaining his belief in the goodness of people who abused his hospitality by molesting his daughters and spitting on his carpet. Peter Struve, who had been a Marxist before joining the Kadets in 1905, spoke for all frightened liberals when he said 'Thank God for the tsar, who has saved us from the people'.

Trotsky's later reflections on the character of the 1905 Revolution provides an apt summary of its essential characteristics:

1 The events of 1905 were a prologue to the two revolutions of 1917.
 The Russo-Japanese War had made tsarism totter. Against the back-
 ground of a mass movement the liberal bourgeoisie had frightened the
 monarchy with its opposition. The workers had organised independ-
 5 ently of the bourgeoisie in soviets. Peasant uprisings to seize the land
 occurred throughout the country. Not only the peasants, but also the
 revolutionary parts of the army tended towards the soviets. However,
 all the revolutionary forces were then going into action for the first
 time, lacking experience and confidence. The liberals backed away from
 10 the revolution exactly at the moment when it became clear that to
 shake tsardom would not be enough, it must be overthrown. This sharp
 break of the bourgeoisie with the people, in which the bourgeoisie
 carried with it considerable circles of the democratic intelligentsia,
 made it easier for the monarchy to differentiate within the army, sepa-
 15 rating out the loyal units, and to make a bloody settlement with the
 workers and peasants. Although with a few broken ribs, tsarism came
 out of the experience of 1905 alive and strong enough.²

7 The Dumas 1906–14

KEY ISSUES Were the dumas ever anything more than a talking shop?
 Did they represent an opportunity for tsarism to modernise itself?

There were four dumas in the years between the 1905 Revolution and the February Revolution of 1917. The four elections produced the following results:

party or group	1st Duma 1906	2nd Duma 1907	3rd Duma 1907–12	4th Duma 1912–17
SDs (Mensheviks)	18	47	–	–
SDs (Bolsheviks)	–	–	19	15
SRs	–	37	–	–
Labourists *	136	104	13	10
Kadets	182	91	54	53
Octobrists	17	42	154	95
Progressists**	27	28	28	41
Rightists***	8	10	147	154
National parties	60	93	26	22
others	–	50	–	42
total	448	502	441	432

*The SRs as a party officially boycotted the elections to the first duma, but stood as Labourists.

**The Progressists were a party of businessmen who favoured moderate reform.

***The Rightists were not a single party; they represented a range of conservative views from right of centre to extreme reaction.

a) The First Duma, April–June 1906

The high hopes of the liberals that the granting of the duma marked a real constitutional advance were dimmed even before it first met. Having survived the challenge of 1905, the tsarist regime quickly recovered its confidence. Early in 1906, it successfully negotiated a substantial loan from France. This lessened the likelihood of the duma being able to exercise a financial hold over the government. A greater limitation on the duma's influence was the tsar's promulgation of the Fundamental Laws, which was timed to coincide with the opening of the duma. In addition to declaring that 'Supreme Autocratic Power' belonged to the tsar, the Laws announced that the duma would be composed of two chambers; one would be the elected duma, the other would be a state council, the majority of whose members would be appointed by the tsar. The existence of a second chamber with the power of veto deprived the elected duma of any genuine legislative control. Taken together with the declaration that no law could come into being without the tsar's approval, these restrictions made it clear that the tsarist regime had no intention of allowing the concessions it had made in 1905 to diminish its absolute authority.

The result was that the duma met in a mood of bitterness. The elections had returned a duma that was dominated by the liberal and reformist parties. They immediately voiced their anger at what they regarded as the government's reneging on its promises. They demanded that the rights and powers of the duma be increased. Goremykin, the chief minister, told them that their demands were 'inadmissible' and Nicholas II was reported as saying, 'Curse the duma. It is all Witte's doing'. After two months of acrimonious wrangling, the tsar ordered the duma to be dissolved. In frustration, 200 Kadet and Labourist deputies reassembled at Vyborg in Finland where they drew up an 'Appeal', urging the people of Russia to defy their government by non-payment of taxes and refusal to obey conscription orders.

The Vyborg Appeal was an ill-considered move. The response from the population was not national passive disobedience but scattered violence. This provided the government with a ready excuse for retaliation. The tsar appointed Stolypin as chief minister to act as his strong man. The Vyborg group were arrested and debarred from reelection to the duma. This was the prelude to Stolypin's introduction of a policy of fierce repression, which he sustained until his assassination in 1911. Martial law was proclaimed and a network of courts-martial, with wide-reaching powers, was used to quell disturbances. There were so many executions (over 2,500 between 1906 and 1911) that the hangman's noose became known throughout Russia as 'Stolypin's necktie'.