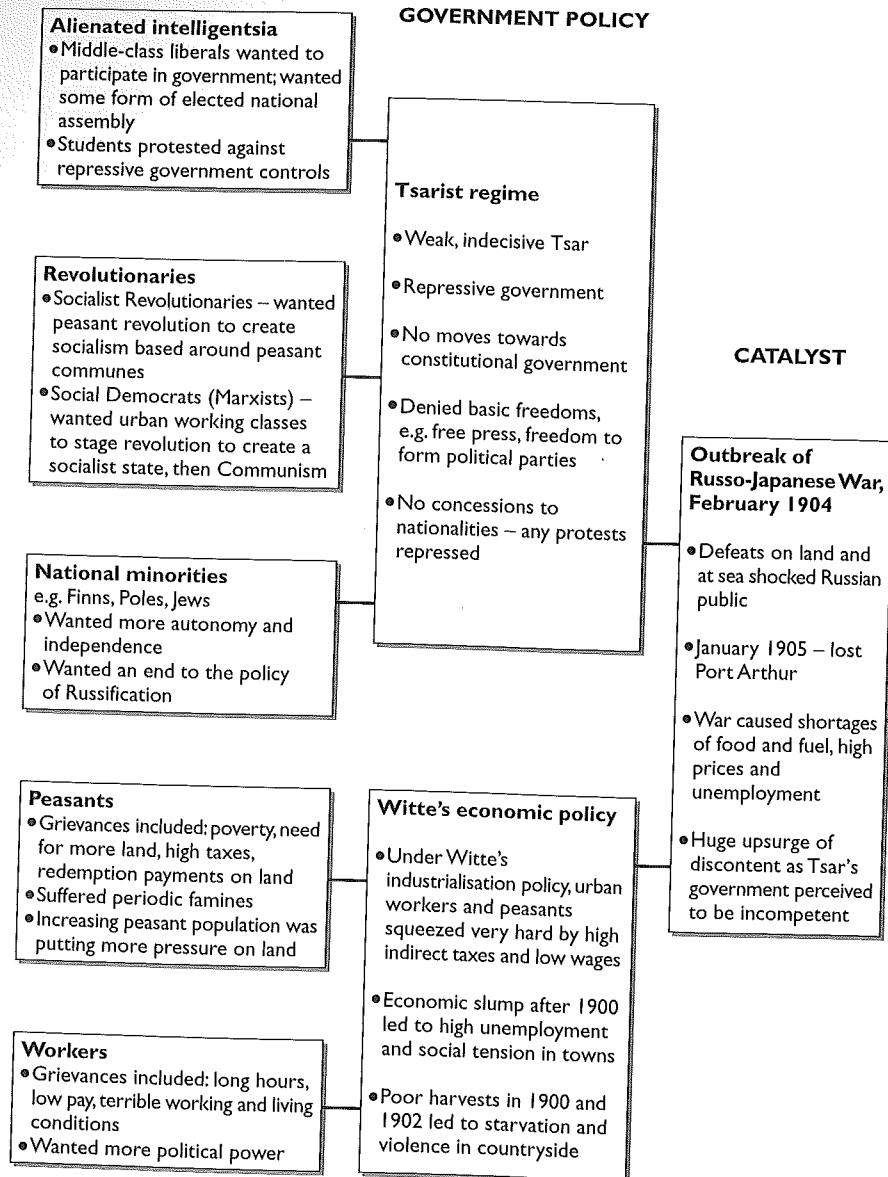


2B The main causes of the 1905 revolution

LONG-TERM DISCONTENT



B The 1905 revolution

Some historians maintain that the 1905 revolution really started at the end of 1904. In the summer of 1904, Plehve, the Minister of the Interior, was assassinated by the Socialist Revolutionaries. Deeply unpopular, he was not much mourned by the public or even, it seems, by his colleagues. The assassination seemed to be a turning point and released a flood of criticism against the government. This was largely to do with the disastrous conduct of the war but it also reflected disenchantment with the regime. Activity by opposition groups increased dramatically in the last four months of 1904 and the autocracy started to look fragile.

When, in early November, the liberals decided to hold a national zemstvo congress, the government allowed it to go ahead. Over 5000 telegrams poured in urging the delegates to press for fundamental changes – and they did. They called for civil liberties, the rule of law, an extension of voting rights, and a representative body that would participate in the running of the country.

This was accompanied by a series of 'banquets' around the theme of reform organised by the Union of Liberation. The banquets could be passed off as 'private' events but really they were political meetings in which the liberal intelligentsia discussed their ideas for changing the tsarist regime. That the government let them go ahead unchallenged shows its weakness. The press, uncensored, reported the meetings and was becoming increasingly hostile towards the government.

The Russo-Japanese War had been a disaster for the economy, which had been emerging from depression. Trade to the East was curtailed as the use of the Trans-Siberian Railway for military purposes meant that other goods could not be carried on it. Industries such as silk, cotton and chemicals were hit hard and factories, short of raw materials, closed. Large numbers of young peasants were mobilised into the army and so agricultural work and production suffered. The overall result was a rise in food prices and high levels of unemployment. In the winter of 1904–5, there was growing discontent.

1905

In the capital, St Petersburg, a charismatic priest named Gapon took on a leading role. Father Gapon ran the Assembly of Russian Factory Workers, an offshoot of a Zubatov union. The police allowed this because they considered him loyal and indeed he was a monarchist who believed in the bond between the Tsar and his people. However, despite his police links he was becoming more radical and his association was becoming dominated by skilled workers, some of whom were ex-Social Democrats. A strike at the giant Putilov engineering works on 7 January, sparked by the sacking of four members of Gapon's association, led to a strike of over 100,000 workers. It was an economic strike with demands for minimum wages and a limited working day. Other large industrial enterprises joined in and tens of thousands were involved. The situation in the city was becoming tense.

Beryl Williams has argued that Gapon 'had a real conviction of his destiny to improve the lot of the Russian working class... but he had no political strategy other than a reliance on the Tsar to help him'. Gapon decided to do just that – ask the Tsar for help. This was to have a dramatic impact and kick start the events of 1905.

1905 was a tumultuous year and events pushed the regime to the edge of the abyss. You can see the course of the revolution through 1905 in Chart 2C on page 37. Four events, which were particularly significant, are described in more detail below. These are Bloody Sunday, the mutiny of the Battleship *Potemkin*, the formation of the St Petersburg Soviet and the October Manifesto.

1 Bloody Sunday

Gapon, urged on by the more radical workers in his union, organised a petition to the Tsar and a march to the Winter Palace. The petition is a moving document (see Source 2.3, page 34). It called for an eight-hour day, minimum wages and more dignified treatment. More radically, it also called for freedom of speech and assembly, the right to form trade unions and an elected parliament. Although it contained radical demands, it was not aggressive in tone and did not attack the Tsar.

The march set off peacefully on the morning of 9 January, a Sunday. The crowd, estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000, included women and children and everybody was in their best clothes. They were carrying icons and pictures of the Tsar. In fact, the Tsar was not even in St Petersburg. It seems that the authorities, who were well informed about the march, assumed that it would disperse before it got to the Winter Palace. The troops guarding the Palace had orders to stop the marchers reaching it. As the crowd approached they were charged by cavalry and the troops opened fire. It is difficult to know how many were killed and wounded. Ascher puts it at 130 killed and 300 seriously wounded although Soviet sources put deaths at up to 200 and the wounded up to 500.

WHAT HAPPENED TO FATHER GAPON?

When the firing started, Gapon was thrown over a fence by his bodyguards and then was hidden in different locations, including the apartment of Maxim Gorky. Shocked by the violence, he is reported to have shouted: 'There is no God! There is no Tsar!'

Gapon later fled abroad where he declared himself a Socialist Revolutionary. He returned to St Petersburg in the autumn of 1905 and attempted to resurrect his workers' organisation. This was unsuccessful and he seems to have become caught up in a conspiracy to betray the SRs to the secret police, the Okhrana. This resulted in his murder in March 1906. The strange thing is that the leader of the SR combat organisation, Evno Azef, who probably ordered his murder, was in fact an Okhrana agent. (For more on Evno Azef, see page 58.)

The response to this event was dramatic. Strikes broke out in St Petersburg and quickly spread to other cities and towns. By the end of January, over 400,000 people were out on strike. Order broke down and Russia descended into chaos – the 1905 revolution was under way. For the rest of the year the government had little control of events. Strikes, demonstrations, petitions, terrorist acts and peasant uprisings were commonplace – the Tsar was 'at war with his own people'.

The importance of Bloody Sunday cannot be overestimated. It not only sparked the uprisings of 1905, it also broke the bond between the Tsar and his people. The people had gone to the 'Little Father' for help and they had got bullets in return. They would never trust him in the same way again (see Source 2.5).

SOURCE 2.3 Extracts from the workers' petition to the Tsar

*Sire,
We, the workers and inhabitants of St Petersburg, of various estates, our wives, our children, and our aged, helpless parents, come to You, Sire to seek justice and protection. We are impoverished; we are oppressed, overburdened with excessive toil, contemptuously treated . . . O Sire we have no strength left and our endurance is at an end. We have reached that frightful moment when death is better than the prolongation of our unbearable sufferings . . . We ask but little: to reduce the working day to eight hours, to provide a minimum wage of a rouble a day . . .*

Officials have brought the country to complete ruin and involved it in a shameful war. We working men have no voice in how the enormous amounts raised from us in taxes are spent . . . We are seeking here our last salvation. Do not refuse to help Your people.

ACTIVITY

- 1 What message do you think the artist intended to convey in Source 2.4?
- 2 What does Source 2.5 tell us about changing attitudes towards the Tsar and the impact of Bloody Sunday?



SOURCE 2.4 A painting of the Bloody Sunday massacre, Makovsky (1846–1920)

SOURCE 2.5 O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891–1924*, 1997, pp. 177–78

'I observed the faces around me,' recalled a Bolshevik in the crowd, 'and I detected neither fear nor panic. No, the reverend and almost prayerful expressions were replaced by hostility and even hatred and vengeance on literally every face – old, young, men and women. The revolution had been truly born, and it had been born in the very core, in the very bowels of the people.' In the one vital moment the popular myth of a Good Tsar which had sustained the regime through the centuries was suddenly destroyed. Only moments after the shooting had ceased an old man turned to a boy of fourteen and said to him, with his voice full of anger: 'Remember, son, remember and swear to repay the Tsar. You saw how much blood he spilled, did you see? Then swear son, swear!'

2 Mutiny on the Battleship Potemkin

In the final analysis, the Tsar's fate depended on the loyalty of the armed forces. If they went over to the side of the peasants and workers, the regime would fall. On 14 June, the Tsar and his regime got a huge shock – the crew of the Battleship *Potemkin* mutinied. Conditions in the Russian navy were harsh and morale was low following the recent naval disasters. When the crew of the *Potemkin* found that they were being given rotten meat to eat, they complained. An officer shot one of the complainers whereupon he was thrown overboard. The crew killed several officers and seized control of the ship. They sailed to Odessa, which was in a state of turmoil with strikes and demonstrations taking place daily. The arrival of the ship was warmly received and radicals were invited on board. The police and troops had to withdraw when the *Potemkin* threatened to open fire on them. Crowds gathered and this degenerated into looting and arson with large parts of the harbour set on fire.

The Tsar ordered troops to go in and they opened fire indiscriminately, killing perhaps as many as 2000 citizens. Odessa was brought under control. Meanwhile the *Potemkin* escaped hoping to stir up mutiny on other ships. But failing to find support, the sailors surrendered the ship in a Romanian port in exchange for safe refuge. The episode was an embarrassment for the government and a matter of grave concern.

3 The St Petersburg Soviet

On 17 October 1905, prompted by Mensheviks, the Soviet of Workers' Deputies met to co-ordinate the activities of workers in the general strike, which had started in September. It was mainly made up of representatives elected from a variety of factories. It tried to be neutral and non-partisan. The St Petersburg Soviet, as it became known, not only directed the general strike, informing workers what was going on through its newspaper *Izvestia*, but it also sorted out food supplies and other essential tasks. The most famous revolutionary leader involved was Leon Trotsky who became deputy chairman.

Soviets, which had sprung up elsewhere even before October, spread to a number of cities and into the countryside – there were around 80 in operation by the end of November. The creation of the soviet was a strong indication of the power of the urban workers to develop an effective form of organisation and run their own affairs.

SOVIET

The word 'soviet' in Russian simply means 'council'. Factories sent representatives to the council to look after their interests and put their point of view to the wider community. In principle any deputy could be recalled at any time if he failed to satisfy his constituents and he could be replaced by someone else.

At the time, the word 'soviet' did not have the political connotation that it later assumed under the Bolshevik regime. It provided a model of working class organisation for the revolution of 1917.



SOURCE 2.6 A painting of a barricade in a Moscow street, 1905, artist unknown

SOURCE 2.7 O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891–1924*, 1997, p. 191

Nicholas remained unconvinced and asked his uncle, the Grand Duke Nikolai, to assume the role of dictator. But the Grand Duke, an excitable and outspoken man, took out a revolver and threatened to shoot himself there and then if the Tsar refused to endorse Witte's memorandum... The Grand Duke was the one man capable of playing the role of dictator and it was only when he took the side of reform that it finally dawned on the Tsar that repression was no longer an option and he agreed to sign the manifesto.

4 The October Manifesto

The general strike put the Tsar and the regime under an enormous amount of pressure. Nicholas' first reaction was to suppress it but the people defiantly occupied the streets. Witte, recently returned from successful peace negotiations following the war, now presented Nicholas with a choice – to put down the uprising in bloodshed or introduce reforms. Nicholas was not against the former, preferring a military dictatorship to constitutional government. But his main advisors agreed with Witte and Nicholas was dragged, very reluctantly, as Source 2.7 shows, to make concessions in what came to be known as the October Manifesto. This conceded:

- freedom of speech and conscience
- freedom of association and unwarranted arrest
- an elected *duma* (parliament) which could block laws coming into force although it could not enact laws.

It seemed that the principle of autocracy had been abandoned. The liberals hailed it as the first step towards constitutional government and for them the main aim of the campaign had been achieved. The St Petersburg Soviet also voted to end the general strike since most workers were suffering severe hardship. The revolutionary groups and some left-wing liberals dismissed the Manifesto as a trick. Witte had achieved what he had set out to do – isolate the radicals by accommodating the liberals.

2C The course of the 1905 Revolution

January, February

- 9 January – Bloody Sunday: a wave of strikes soon spread to other cities and towns.
- Censorship collapsed and newspapers became increasingly hostile towards the government.
- 4 February – The assassination of the Tsar's uncle, the Grand Duke Sergei, shocked the government. The Tsar invited petitions containing suggestions for reform. Thousands poured in over the following months from all sectors of society.
- Workers started forming factory committees to represent them. Their demands were mainly economic rather than political.
- Right-wing groups and hooligans known as the Black Hundreds, supporting the Tsar, attacked people deemed to be anti-government.

March, April, May

- The police were becoming increasingly ineffective. Citizens formed militias or vigilante groups to protect themselves from roving bands of criminals.
- 10 March – The Russian army was defeated at Mukden.
- April – At the Second Zemstvo Congress there was a growing demand for civil freedoms and a legislative assembly elected by universal adult suffrage.
- May – The Union of Unions was formed – a non-party organisation that acted as an umbrella group for a range of trade and professional organisations. All sections of society were united against the government – liberals, workers, students, lawyers and professional groups – to force reform.
- 14 May – The Russian Baltic fleet was wiped out at Tsushima.

June, July, August

- In the countryside, peasant disturbances started rising significantly in June and July (there had not been much activity in the spring). They fell in August at harvest time. Incidents included: peasants seizing land, grain and animals; burning landlord's houses; illegal cutting of timber; and refusal to pay rents and taxes. Their general demands were land, the end of redemption payments and a reduction in rents. There was no co-ordinated peasant movement. It was largely spontaneous and a response, in part, to economic distress, including food shortages in the summer of 1905.
- 14 June – The mutiny of the Battleship *Potemkin*.
- 31 July – The All-Russian Peasants Union met secretly near Moscow – the voice of the peasants was taking shape demanding the handover of land and a constitutional assembly.
- 27 August – Universities and institutes were given autonomy to control education within their institution and

run their own affairs. They became focal points for political meetings.

- 29 August – The Treaty of Portsmouth was signed between Russia and Japan. This released Russian troops who could be returned to European Russia to re-establish control.

September, October

- Labour unrest reached a new level of intensity in the autumn, putting a lot of pressure on the government. In September, a strike in Moscow called by railway workers caused chaos since Moscow was a railway hub. The strike spread to other areas of Russia as other railway workers joined it. This then turned into a general strike attracting support from industrial and utility workers, shop assistants, bank employees and staff from government offices – up to two million from almost every area of employment. The strike caused real hardship in cities and towns: food and medical supplies ran short and unburied bodies piled up.
- All opposition groups – workers, students, liberals and revolutionaries – united in demanding radical change. The middle classes, even some industrialists, supported the strikers and gave money. The regime did not dare use violence as the strike was supported by so many different social groups.
- 12–18 October – The Kadet Party (liberal) was formed.
- 13 October – The St Petersburg Soviet was formed. The urban workers had emerged as an organised and dynamic force confronting the autocracy.
- 17 October – The Tsar was persuaded that concessions were necessary and agreed to the October Manifesto, granting civil liberties and an elected assembly. Liberals and the middle classes felt they had achieved their main aims.
- There was a short period of freedom in which opposition groups and anti-government newspapers flourished. Political meetings and celebrations were held in the streets. New political parties were formed.
- At the end of October there was an explosion of violence. Much of this was initiated by supporters of the Tsar angry that the liberals and left had won the Manifesto. There was fighting between right and left on the streets. It seems that the police, and possibly elements in the government, were involved in organising violent revenge attacks.

November, December

- Throughout November tension was building as the soviets, particularly the St Petersburg Soviet, became more militant. It had an armed militia of over 6000.
- 3 December – Leaders of the St Petersburg Soviet were arrested.
- Armed uprisings were common, particularly in Moscow, where the Bolsheviks took the lead. The army moved into cities and towns to re-establish control.