**The October Manifesto and the promise of reform, 1905–06**

**The October Manifesto**

With the Russian Empire near to total collapse, the tsar agreed to sign a decree on October 17th promising constitutional reform. Even then, he took some persuading. Sergei Witte, the Chairman of the tsar’s Council of Ministers, warned that the country was on the verge of a revolution that would ‘sweep away a thousand years of History’, while even ‘Trepov declared the need for some moderate reform and the Grand Duke Nicholas, the tsar’s uncle, repeatedly threatened to shoot himself unless reforms were instituted. The tsar’s ‘October Manifesto’ promised:

- To grant the population the unshakeable foundations of civic freedom based on the principles of personal rights, freedom of conscience, speech, assembly and union.
- To admit to participation in the Duma those classes of the population which at present are altogether deprived of the franchise.
- To establish as an unbreakable rule that no law can become effective without the approval of the State Duma and that the representatives of the people should be guaranteed the supervision of the legality of the actions of authorities appointed by Us.

There were celebrations on the streets of St Petersburg, as crowds gathered to wave red flags and sing the French revolutionary anthem, the Marseillaise. The General Strike was called off and there was talk of the birth of a new Russia. However, the real radicals, like Tselekov and Lenin were far from convinced and tried desperately to get the workers to fight on. Lenin’s Bolsheviks wrote in their workers’ bulletin: ‘We have been granted a constitution, yet autonomy remains. We have been granted everything, and yet we have been granted nothing’. In some ways their view accorded with that of the tsar himself. Nicholas had no intention of becoming a ‘constitutional monarch’ and few of his ministers had a real commitment to the manifesto promises.

On October 19th, Nicholas was to write to his mother, the Empress Maria:

> You can’t imagine what I went through before that moment. From all over Russia they cried for it, they begged for it, and around me many, very many, held the same views. There was no other way out than to cross oneself and give what everyone was asking for.

**Questions**

1. In what ways did the October Manifesto go beyond the promises made by Bulygin in July?
2. Which promise ended Nicholas’s autocratic powers?

**Reactions to the October Manifesto**

The initial reaction to the manifesto was a wild rejoicing on the streets and a new mood of public optimism which saw many workers return to their factories. The Manifesto had, it appeared, achieved its purpose, even though Witte, one of its architects might say of it, ‘I have a constitution in my head, but as to my heart, I spit on it.’

The more moderate liberals from the zemstvo tradition, accepted the promises and sought to work with the tsar to make the new Dumas a success. This group became known as the ‘Octobrists’ and under Alexander Guchkov they created a new party with its own newspaper – Krasnye Molodyoz [The Voice of Moscow].

However, the left wing liberals were less convinced. They became the Constitutional Democrats, or Kadets, under Pavel Milyukov and, while they accepted the tsar’s concessions as a first step, they continued to demand the setting up of a constituent assembly to draw up a fresh Russian constitution. Nevertheless, they supported the government’s actions in bringing the radical revolution to an end. Indeed, Pyotr Stroeva [who moved from the Marxists to join the Kadets] said, ‘Thank God for the Tsar who has saved us from the people’.
Not all workers and peasants were appeased by the October and
November manifestos however and the radical revolutionaries denounced
the promise of elections and called for an armed rising to bring
Trotsky publicly declared the tsar’s promises worthless and, on
November 9th, Lenin returned to St Petersburg in the hope of winning
more support for a revolution. Having grown more politicised during
the troubles of 1905, some of the industrial workers, encouraged by
revolutionary activists, kept up their strike activity over the following
months. November saw a second General Strike in St Petersburg,
although the Soviet proved unable to sustain it, and in December there
was a Bolshevik-led uprising in Moscow.

In the countryside, some peasants saw the promises as an opportunity
to seize land which they believed to be rightfully theirs, and there was
actually an increase in peasant risings, after the Manifestos, peaking in
November/December. From November 6th – 12th, a second Congress of
Peasants’ Unions was held, which demanded the nationalisation of land.
There were also continuing troubles in the army and navy. After October,
the number of mutinies also increased and at Kronstadt on October 25th
and 27th, 26 men were killed and 107 injured when a sailors’
rebellion was crushed. A similar rising in Sebastopol led by a retired naval
Lieutenant, Pyotr Schmidt, was only suppressed after fierce fighting.

In the East, the Trans-Baikal railway fell into the hands of strikers
committees and demobilised soldiers returning from the Japanese war,
and the tsar had to send a special detachment of loyal troops via the
Trans-Siberian railway to restore order. However, the government was not
always able to rely on the armed forces and frequently had to turn to the
Cossacks and Black Hundreds to restore order.

By November, 10 out of 19 of the largest cities in the Empire were
out of control and outbreaks of mutiny continued through the month of
December.

Repression and the recovery of tsarist authority

Despite the October Manifesto promise of ‘full civil rights’, repression
was extensively used to bring about the recovery of tsarist authority.
In St Petersburg, Troepov ordered troops to ‘fire no blank and spare no
bullets’ in forcing striking workers back to their factories. The Black
Hundreds rounded up and lynched peasants, attacked revolutionaries,
students and nationalist groups such as the Poles, and in the final
months of 1905, in particular, persecuted the Jews, whom the right-wing
associated with ‘socialists and revolutionaries’, in terrible pogroms.

On December 3rd, the headquarters of the St Petersburg Soviet, was
surrounded and all 300 members, including Trotsky, arrested. Trotsky
was subsequently exiled to Siberia which weakened the revolutionary
movement in the capital and helped the authorities to regain control.

The final spasm of revolution was played out in Moscow where the
Moscow Soviet assumed the leadership of the revolutionary movement
and staged an armed uprising in December. This attempt to mount a
General Strike was entirely misjudged. The autocracy was in a position
to reassert its authority and heavy artillery and troops from St Petersburg
were sent in to restore order. There was bitter street-fighting and
the working class Presnaya district suffered an intense bombardment
which reduced workers’ homes to rubble. Only when a thousand workers
had been killed and parts of the city were in ruins, did the militant,
Bolshevik-inspired workers give in. Although there were sporadic
outbreaks of trouble in the countryside for a further two years, the
1905 revolution had been suppressed and the autocracy had survived.

The major events of October–December 1905 are as detailed below:

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Activity

Group activity

By the end of 1905 the tsarist regime was still intact. Can you
suggest reasons why the 1905 revolution failed to topple the tsar?
Consider the opposition’s aims, methods and support. Make a list of
the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition forces and the
autocratic order in order to arrive at a conclusion.

Thinking point

Does the 1905 Revolution deserve the name ‘Revolution’?
To answer this you will need to think about what a revolution is.

Learning outcomes

In this section you have seen how the war with Japan brought festering
political and social tensions to a head and forced through an incomplete
revolution in 1905. You have studied the events of Bloody Sunday and
their repercussions throughout Russia as the liberals, revolutionaries and
nationalists sought to take advantage of the disturbances to advance their
own causes. You have also looked at the tsar’s October Manifesto, which,
among other promises, agreed to a State Duma and will be aware of the
great weight of expectation attached to this document. You will also have
noticed that Nicholas II had already recovered some of his authority by the end
of 1905 and in the next section you will discover how sincere his promises of
can change actually were.