

Why did the revolution of 1905 fail to topple the Tsar from power?

By mid-October 1905 Russia was in the throes of a general strike. Here was a truly revolutionary situation. Liberals and workers had come together and had paralysed the autocracy. The fate of the Tsarist regime hung in the balance. But by the end of 1906 Nicholas II was once again in firm control. He had achieved this recovery by a combination of concessions and by force.

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The October Manifesto split the revolutionaries..

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The revolutionaries played a small part in the revolution.

(3)

The army remained basically loyal and crushed the revolt.

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The Government introduced land reforms to conciliate the peasants and end agrarian unrest.

Conclusion

Factor One – The Granting of the October Manifesto

- After Bloody Sunday the prestige of the monarchy fell to its lowest point.
- Over the next few weeks and months the number of disturbances rose steadily. In the provinces, among the subject nationalities, in the villages and in the armed forces a wave of strikes, riots, mutinies and miniature revolutions swept the Empire.
- In early October the most serious crisis of the year occurred. There was an extensive national rail strike that, apart from its economic effects, seriously hampered the movement of troops around the country.
- A general strike was called in St. Petersburg and a council (soviet) of workers' representatives was set up to coordinate it and articulate workers' protests.
- The autocracy was faced with a challenge it barely survived.
- Two options were open to it. Military repression or concession.
- Nicholas's advisers eliminated repression because, they argued, it would have one of two possible outcomes. First, the troops might conduct the operation as ordered but the cost in human

lives and lost monarchical prestige would be so great that the political ground lost might never be recovered. Secondly, the troops might disobey and the power of the autocracy would be at an end. In either event, so the advisers said, repression might well be suicidal for the monarchy. There was no option, they argued, but concession.

- Nicholas, however, remaining loyal to the principle instilled in him by Pobedonostsev of preserving intact the powers of the autocracy, wanted to choose repression. It was only a threat by his uncle, the Grand Duke Nicholas, to shoot himself if the tsar did not agree, that finally persuaded him to heed the almost unanimous advice of his military, police and political chiefs. A document, known as the October Manifesto, was issued that made unspecified promises of democratic reform.
- Vague though it was, the document did its job. It split the opposition and provided a rallying point for the less radical elements in the opposition.
- “The first saviour of the monarchy was Sergei Witte, who was the architect of the October Manifesto”.

Christopher Read.

The October Manifesto

- In October 1905 a general strike was in place that crippled the capital. Both the middle classes and the workers participated. Railways came to a halt and all the factories were shut down.
- The tsar's ministers, led by S. Witte, informed him that further concessions were necessary and in October the tsar abjectly issued a Manifesto by which the government agreed to both a Constitution and an elected assembly with legal powers (the Duma).

A Council of Ministers was formed with Witte as the chief (prime) minister.

- Nicholas II's nature was strongly against such concessions. The very essence of his rule was to conserve his autocratic powers as he had inherited them from his father. He was forced to take such a "backward" step because he was isolated in his own capital.
- The concessions did not satisfy all parties but they were effective in dividing the revolutionaries. A substantial group of moderate liberals professed themselves satisfied by the tsar's moves, and formed a new party, the Octobrists, the goal of which was to ensure that the tsar lived up to the promises he had made on 30 October 1905. A significant portion of the workers were also satiated and returned to their jobs. By the end of the year the revolution had petered out.

Why the 1905 Revolution Failed.

Factor Two – The revolutionaries played a small part in the revolution.

- In general, committed revolutionaries played a small part in the 1905 revolution. Hardly any of them were in St. Petersburg or Moscow when it began. Lenin, for example, did not return until December 1905.
- The revolution was not planned and lacked effective leadership. No clear or capable leader emerged to co-ordinate activities, apart from Trotsky who emerged as leader of the St. Petersburg Soviet.
- The Socialist Revolutionaries were more interested in the countryside, while the Social Democrats in exile were too busy with their own feuds to pay full attention to what was happening in Russia. Many of them also felt that there was no hope of the socialists taking power at this stage.
- Nicholas II also benefited from the inherent disunity of the opposition. The educated elite, the illiterate peasants and workers had different aims for taking action in 1905 and were united only by a common cause against the Tsar.
- The various opposition movements- the urban public and the workers, the peasant revolution, the mutinies in the armed services, and the national independence movements-had all followed their own separate rhythms and failed to combine politically.

Divisions among the Revolutionaries.

The Social Revolutionary Party

In 1901 Victor Chernov became the leader of a new political party called the Social revolutionary Party. Chernov believed that the Social Revolutionaries should adopt a positive approach to solving the most immediate problems of the poor. He proposed that Social Revolutionaries should be working to achieve tangible benefits for the peasants and for the industrial workers, such as land rights for the peasants, and better wages and conditions in factories for the workers. However, other Social Revolutionaries wanted to continue the kind of terrorism begun by the "People's Will". This terrorist group gained most attention in the early years of Social Revolutionary activity because of the huge scale of their campaign. Between 1901 and 1905 they carried out over 2000 political assassinations. Divisions appeared in the ranks of the Social Revolutionaries because of these different approaches.

The Social Democratic Party

Among the Russian Marxists divisions of opinion also appeared. Differences developed about how the revolution should be carried through in Russia. The split happened in 1903 and two groups were formed: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

The Mensheviks believed that ultimately the working class must win control over Russia, and establish socialism. But they thought the workers were too weak to have their own revolution; first they must co-operate with the factory owners, bankers, lawyers and professional people (the bourgeoisie) in overthrowing Tsarism. The Mensheviks argued that the Social Democratic Party should be a broad-based party, open to all, with free discussions, elections to the leadership, and links to other opposition groups to the Tsar.

The Bolsheviks also believed that the working class must set up socialism in Russia. But they thought the bourgeoisie was too weak to destroy the powers of the Tsar and the landowners. They argued that the city workers in alliance with the peasant masses should overthrow the landowners, factory owners and bankers together, and begin working towards a socialist Russia immediately. They believed in a small, tightly controlled, elite party of professional revolutionaries whose task was to foment revolution and overthrow the Tsar. They were opposed to any deals with other political parties.

Why the 1905 Revolution Failed.

Factor Three – The army remained basically loyal and crushed the revolt.

- It took nearly a full year, but eventually, the Tsarist government managed to suppress all revolutionary activity through the use of the army.
- Mutinies within sections of the army were brutally suppressed by Cossack troops loyal to Nicholas II. Following this, the army was used to hunt down and hang hundreds and thousands of rebels and other suspects.
- Loyal units that had been stationed in Manchuria returned to deal first with the St. Petersburg Soviet, whose headquarters was stormed followed by the arrest of its leaders in the next few days. Even more violence was used against the Moscow Soviet to end the strike it had called on the 10th of December. A considerable number of strikers were killed in the fighting and in the summary executions, which followed while thousands more were rounded up and sent to Siberia. Workers' children were rounded up in barracks and beaten by police to "teach them a lesson". The prisons filled up, militant workers lost their jobs, and the socialist parties were forced underground. Slowly, through terror, order was restored.
- In the areas of peasant revolt whole villages were destroyed by the army and thousands of peasants were imprisoned. When there was no more in the county jails, orders were given to shoot the guilty peasants instead. The Cossacks committed terrible atrocities against the peasant population. Women and girls were raped in front of their menfolk. Hundreds of peasants were hanged without any pretence of a trial.
- In all it has been estimated that the tsarist regime executed 15,000 people shot or wounded at least 20,000 and deported or exiled 45,000, between mid-October and the opening of the first State Duma in April 1906.

- In addition to the army and the police, the regime made use of frightened right-wing forces who came forward after the October Manifesto to defend the monarchy. They organised themselves into gang, known as the Black Hundreds, and during the course of November and December attacked revolutionaries, students and nationalist Poles, and Finns but most of all Jews. The Jews had been a prominent group amongst the revolutionaries and this provoked a resurgence of the anti-Semitic feeling that had always been present in Russian society. The worst excesses took place in Odessa where over 500 Jews were killed and property destroyed. In many cases the police and army remained aloof and made no attempt to intervene to protect civil liberties.

“The lesson of 1905 was that as long as the Tsarist government kept its nerve and the army remained basically loyal, the forces of opposition would not be strong enough to mount a serious challenge”.

Michael Lynch

“The monarchy had survived the revolution of 1905 by a mixture of concessions and repression”.

Beryl Williams

“The key to the regime’s survival of course, was its use of repression and ultimately the loyalty of the army”.

Graham Darby

Factor Four – The government introduced land reforms to conciliate the peasants and end agrarian unrest.

In November, to conciliate the peasants, the government issued the Peasants' Manifesto. The Tsar authorised laws which gave the peasants genuine land reform. The main effects of the laws were to;

- cancel from 1st January 1907 all redemption payments.
- outlaw corporal punishment.
- cancel all pre-existing tax debts.
- remove all restrictions on peasant movement, including the power of communes to refuse members permission to leave.
- permit peasants to sell their plots or to request consolidation of the strips into individual holdings which then became the private property of the head of the peasant household.
- permit the Peasant Land Bank to issue loans thus enabling individual peasants to purchase more land. Crown and State lands were made available for this purchase and, as a result, peasant holidays increased.

These laws largely returned the support of the peasants to the Tsar, at least temporarily.