

The 1905 Revolution

B.Armstrong

www.historyrevision.wordpress.com

How did the 1905 Revolution start?

At the beginning of the 20th century the Russian industrial employee worked on average an 11 hour day (10 hours on Saturday). Conditions in the factories were extremely harsh and little concern was shown for the workers' health and safety. Attempts by workers to form trade unions were resisted by the factory owners, as trade unions would make it easier for workers to demand rights and conditions which would reduce profits. In 1903, a priest, Father Georgi Gapon, formed the Assembly of Russian Workers. Within a year it had over 9,000 members.

1904 was a particularly bad year for Russian workers. Prices of essential goods rose so quickly that real wages declined by 20 per cent. When four members of the Assembly of Russian Workers were dismissed at the Putilov Iron Works, Gapon called for industrial action. Over the next few days over 110,000 workers in St. Petersburg went out on strike. In addition, reports of the disastrous Russo-Japanese War had started to make it back to the cities, and this exaggerated the feelings of dissatisfaction.

In an attempt to settle the dispute, Father Gapon decided to make a personal appeal to Nicholas II. He drew up a petition outlining the workers' sufferings and demands. This included calling for a reduction in the working day to eight hours, an increase in wages, an improvement in working conditions and an end to the Russo-Japanese War. The petition was written in respectful language, and it is clear that the aim of the march was not to lead to a revolution, but to persuade the Tsar to take care of the needs of his people.

The petition started with the words:

"Oh Sire, we working men and inhabitants of St. Petersburg, our wives, our children and our parents, helpless and aged women and men, have come to You our ruler, in search of justice and protection. We are beggars...The moment has come for us when death would be better than the prolongation of our intolerable sufferings.

Do not refuse to help Your people. Destroy the wall between Yourself and Your people."

150,000 workers set off with Father Gapon to deliver the petition on the 22nd January. When the procession of workers reached the Winter Palace in St Petersburg it was attacked by the police and the Cossacks. The Cossacks were dragoons (heavily armed cavalry with pistols and swords) and infantry with rifles. Over 100 workers were killed and some 300 wounded. However rumours spread that the numbers were higher, perhaps even 2,000 dead and wounded, but that soldiers had secretly hidden the bodies in the night. The incident, known as Bloody Sunday, started a series of events that became known as the 1905 Revolution.

Question 1

What three main issues/events led to the Bloody Sunday march?

Question 2

How do we know that the Bloody Sunday march was intended to be a peaceful event?

"The present ruler has lost absolutely the affection of the Russian people, and whatever the future may have in store for the dynasty, the present tsar will never again be safe in the midst of his people."

The American consul in Odessa

Question 3

In what way could the American consul say that the Tsar had "lost absolutely the affection of the Russian people"?

What were the key events of the 1905 Revolution?

News of what happened quickly spread throughout Russia. Strikes occurred throughout the country involving about 400,000 people; peasants attacked the homes of their landlords; the Grand Duke Sergei, the Tsar's uncle, was assassinated in February. What had started as a demand for simple improvements in living conditions became a far more serious issue of political power.

The universities closed down when the whole student body complained about the lack of civil liberties by staging a walkout. Lawyers, doctor, engineers, and other middle-class workers established the Union of Unions and demanded a constituent assembly. A constituent assembly is a large committee that meets to decide how to improve the constitution of the country, or the rules by which the government is run. They wanted the constituent assembly to reduce the power of the nobility and to increase the amount of democracy in Russia. The Finns and Poles also demanded their right to national independence.

In June, 1905, sailors on the *Potemkin* battleship, protested against the serving of rotten meat. When the ship's doctor said that the maggots in the meat were only flies' eggs and safe to eat, the crew protested to the captain. The captain ordered that the ringleaders to be shot. The firing-squad refused to carry out the order and joined with the rest of the crew in throwing the officers overboard. The sailors sailed into Odessa harbour, where they were met by a large crowd of Russian civilians who queued down the Odessa Steps. After a day of feasting and listening to revolutionary speeches, where much vodka was drunk, things turned ugly and several warehouses nearby were vandalised. Police and Cossacks turned up and attacked the crowd. As many



A revolutionary poster from the 1905 Revolution. It shows the *Potemkin* and the caption reads "Glory to the people's heroes of the *Potemkin*".

as 2,000 were killed and 3,000 injured. Once it became clear that they would not have an amnesty from the government, and worried that the *Potemkin* would be attacked by other ships of the Russian fleet, the mutineers decided to leave Odessa. The crew sailed the *Potemkin* to Romania where they surrendered to the local authorities. The *Potemkin* Mutiny spread to other units in the army and navy. The

Question 4

How did the aims of the people change after Bloody Sunday?

Question 5

How many reasons can you think of to explain why the Battleship *Potemkin* mutiny was an important event in the 1905 Revolution? Make a list.

Potemkin had been a brand new, high powered battleship. In addition, they were from a base very close to the capital, which was a concern to the Tsar.

Industrial workers all over Russia went on strike and in October, 1905, the railwaymen went on strike which paralyzed the whole Russian railway network. Later that month, Leon Trotsky and other Mensheviks established the St. Petersburg Soviet. Over the next few weeks over 50 of these soviets were formed all over Russia. The Soviets were large groups of left-wing radicals who started to organise the strikes and protests in the factories. The largest groups in the soviets were the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries. The St. Petersburg Soviet was the largest and sent orders to the smaller soviets in other towns and cities.

Although most of the revolution occurred in the major towns, where conditions were worst and the left-wing ideas most common, there were also jacqueries and revolts in rural areas. These were smaller than in the cities but still caused a lot of damage and unrest.

How did the 1905 Revolution end?

Sergei Witte, the new Chief Minister, advised Nicholas II to make concessions. He eventually agreed and published the October Manifesto. This granted freedom of conscience, speech, meeting and association. He also promised that in future people would not be imprisoned without trial. Finally he announced that no law would become operative without the approval of a new organization called the Duma. The Duma was to be a Parliament that was elected by the people of Russia. They would be able to propose and debate laws that they wanted to pass. However, it was not a *legislative* body like the British Parliament – a legislative body can pass laws. The Duma was only a *consultative* body, which meant that it could only recommend laws and make suggestions. Many Russians felt that this reform did not go far enough. Leon Trotsky and other revolutionaries in the St. Petersburg Soviet denounced the plan.

However, the Tsar had not really meant anything in the October Manifesto. He had simply promised it in order to restore peace and end the strikes. In December of 1905, soldiers returned from the Russo-Japanese War, and the Tsar used them brutally to put down any last resistance. Trotsky and the entire St. Petersburg Soviet were arrested, as were any workers still on strike, and then soldiers were sent into the countryside to restore order there. If anyone in Russia was still unsure about how little the Tsar cared for the common people after Bloody Sunday, they were in no doubt after December 1905.

Duma

The Tsar's oppressive actions in December 1905 did little to fix the situation, and it soon became clear that unless action was taken soon, revolution would begin again. Perhaps this time the Tsar would be unable to restore order. Witte persuaded Nicholas II to follow through on the promises in the October Manifesto by actually providing a Duma for the people.

The first meeting of the Duma took place in May 1906. Several changes in the composition of the Duma had been changed since the publication of the October Manifesto. Tsar Nicholas II had also created a State Council, an upper chamber, of which he would nominate half its members. Any laws proposed by

Question 6

What was the St. Petersburg Soviet?

Question 7

How was the October Manifesto supposed to pacify the revolutionaries and striking workers?

Question 8

How did the Tsar's actions in December 1905 make matters worse?

the Duma had to be agreed by the State Council, and since he controlled who was in it, the Duma would find it difficult to pass laws that he did not want. He also retained for himself the right to declare war, to control the Orthodox Church and to dissolve the Duma. The Tsar also had the power to appoint and dismiss ministers.

At their first meeting, members of the Duma put forward a series of demands including the release of political prisoners, trade union rights and land reform. Nicholas II rejected all these proposals and dissolved the Duma.

In April, 1906, Nicholas II forced Sergei Witte to resign and replaced him with the more conservative Peter Stolypin. Stolypin attempt to provide a balance between the introduction of much needed land reforms and the suppression of the radicals. The next Duma convened in February, 1907. This time it lasted three months before the Tsar closed it down.