

# Modern World History

## Russian Revolution 1905

PRINCIPAL COMBATANTS: Russian peasants, workers and others vs. the czarist government

PRINCIPAL THEATER(S): Russia, especially St. Petersburg and Moscow

DECLARATION: No formal declaration

MAJOR ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES: Various groups had different objectives; the major objective was to liberalize the Russian government.

OUTCOME: The czar promised reform but delivered repression.

APPROXIMATE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF MEN UNDER ARMS: Unknown

CASUALTIES: By 1906, 3,611 government officials had been killed, along with about 1,500 soldiers; 15,000 rebels died, and 20,000 were wounded.

TREATIES: None

By the late 19th century, Russia seethed with discontent among many classes, including the rising industrial proletariat and the rural peasantry but also among the nobility and ethnic peoples in the border regions. This discontent intensified during the Russo Japanese War (1904–05), in which Russia suffered a costly and humiliating defeat that dramatically illustrated the ineptitude and corruption of the old czarist regime.

On January 22, 1905, an Orthodox priest, Father Georgi Gapon (ca. 1870–1906), led workers in a march on the czar's Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to present Nicholas II (1868–1918) with a petition of grievances. Unknown to the marchers, the czar was absent at the time, but government troops fired on the unarmed petitioners, killing 70 and wounding perhaps 300 in what became the infamous "Bloody Sunday."

Rage swept Russia, touching off a rash of workers' strikes. When Nicholas's minister of the interior, Vyacheslav Plehve (1846–1904) proposed placating the people with a new moderate constitution, leftists were emboldened to take more extreme action. Plehve, a much-hated reactionary and architect of turn-of-the-century pogroms, was assassinated by a bomb blast on July 28, 1904. Next, during October 20–30, 1905, a general strike gripped all of Russia. During this period of intense ferment, a radical Soviet (council) of Workers' Deputies formed under the leadership of Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), and a more moderate Constitutional Democratic Party was also created. In the meantime, in rural districts, peasants occupied or vandalized the property of their landlords, while the urban proletariat demanded civil rights reforms and general pardons.

Yielding to the advice of his prime minister, Count Sergei Witte (1849–1915), Czar Nicholas II allowed the promulgation of the October Manifesto (on October 30, 1905), which granted broad civil liberties, promised a new constitution, and created an elected Duma, or national parliament.

On the surface, the relatively bloodless revolution seemed to have succeeded. However, the czar had bargained in bad faith and openly supported the "Black Hundreds," right-wing terrorists who assaulted radicals, workers, and other suspected revolutionaries. On December 16, 1905, the czar approved the roundup of some 200 members of the St. Petersburg Soviet. Their arrest and imprisonment effectively crushed the organization but incited the Moscow Soviet to organize a violent insurrection that government troops brutally suppressed after five days of street combat. As for the Duma, it was dissolved in 1906 after elections produced an anti-czarist majority, even though the government had engineered a narrow franchise to eliminate radical elements.

## Further Information

Andrei Bely, *Petersburg* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Richard E. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday: Father Gapon and the Petersburg Massacre of 1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); Andrew M. Verner, *The Crisis of Russian Autocracy: Nicholas II and the 1905 Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990); Felicitas Fischer von Weikersthal et al., *The Russian Revolution of 1905 in Transcultural Perspective: Identities, Peripheries, and the Flow of Ideas* (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2013).

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