

# The Russian Revolution, 1917

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# 1 The coming of the revolution

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The Russian Revolution suddenly broke out in February 1917. It was not unexpected. Russians had long discussed revolution and by late 1916 a sense existed across the entire political and social spectrum that some kind of upheaval could happen at any time. The crisis in Russia was obvious even abroad. “In December, 1916 and still more markedly in January, 1917, there were signs that something important and significant was going on . . . [in Russia that] required exploration, and the rapidly growing rumors of coming political changes called for more accurate knowledge and fuller interpretation.”<sup>1</sup> Thus wrote Nicholas Murray Butler of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the United States of the decision to send the Norwegian, Christian Lange, on a fact-finding mission to Russia at the beginning of 1917. Still, when the new year dawned no one inside or outside Russia expected that within two months not only would the old regime be overthrown, but that this would set in swift motion the most radical revolution the world had yet seen. This fast-moving and far-reaching revolution grew out of a complex web of long- and short-term causes which also helped shape its direction and outcome. The latter in turn profoundly affected the global history of the century to follow.

## **The autocracy**

The Russian Revolution was, first, a political revolution that overthrew the monarchy of Nicholas II and made the construction of a new governmental system a central problem of the revolution. At the beginning of the twentieth century Russia was the last major power of Europe in which the monarch was an autocrat, his power unlimited by laws or institutions. Since at least the early nineteenth century the Russian tsars had fought the increasing demands for political change. Then, in 1894, the strong-willed Alexander III died unexpectedly, leaving an ill-prepared Nicholas II as Emperor and Tsar of all the Russias.

Nicholas came to the throne at a time when a rapidly changing world

demanded vigorous and imaginative leadership to steer Russia through turbulent times. Nicholas and those he chose to administer his government were unable to provide that. Part of the problem was the very structure of government. The ministers and other high officials were each appointed individually by Nicholas and each reported directly and individually to him. A “government” in the sense of a group of people organized into a unified body of policy makers and executors did not exist. Therefore the emperor had to provide coherence and overall direction. This even more capable men such as his father and grandfather found difficult. For Nicholas, mild-mannered, of limited ability, disliking governance and drawn more to the trivia of administration than to major policy issues, it was impossible. Yet Nicholas clung stubbornly to his autocratic rights, supported vigorously in this by his wife, Alexandra. Alexandra constantly exhorted him to “Never forget that you are and must remain autocratic [sic] emperor,” to “show more power and decision,” and shortly before the revolution, to “Be Peter the Great, John [Ivan] the Terrible, Emperor Paul – crush them all under you.”<sup>2</sup> All her exhortations, however, could not make Nicholas a decisive, much less effective, ruler. They could only reinforce his resistance to needed reforms. Government drifted, problems remained unsolved, and Russia suffered two unsuccessful wars and two revolutions during Nicholas’ two decades of rule. A personally kind man and loving husband and father, he became known to his subjects as “Nicholas the Bloody.”

Not only was Nicholas’ government poorly run, but it gave little in the way of civil or other rights to the population, who were subjects, not citizens. The government closely controlled the right to form organizations for any purpose, even the most innocuous. Censorship meant an almost complete absence of open political discourse, forcing it into illegal, often revolutionary channels. Alexander II, as part of the Great Reforms of the 1860s, had allowed the formation of zemstvos, noble-dominated local elected councils. These exercised limited rights of self-government at the local level, including working to improve roads, primary education, health and medical care, agricultural practices and other local affairs. However, the monarchs resolutely refused to share supreme political power with popular institutions and after 1881 restricted the zemstvos’ authority. Shortly after coming to the throne in 1894 Nicholas dismissed hopes for creation of a national zemstvo, a national elected assembly, as “senseless dreams.” Rather than create a more modern political system in which the populace became citizens instead of subjects, with at least a modest stake in political life and the future of the state, Nicholas clung to an outmoded autocratic view of God-given ruler and loyal subjects.

Nowhere was the outdated vision of Nicholas' government more apparent than in its treatment of the many non-Russian peoples of the empire. The Russian Empire was a vast multithnic state in which nationalist sentiments stirred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These initially focused on demands for cultural and civil rights and nationality-territorial autonomy. The government responded with repression and "Russification," a variety of policies limiting use of local languages, forcing use of Russian, discriminating on religious grounds, imposing changes in local administrative structures and in other ways attempting to "Russify" non-Russian populations. These measures temporarily hindered development of nationality-based movements while increasing resentments. When the means of repression were removed in 1917, nationalism burst forth as a significant part of the revolution.

### **The economy and social classes**

The Russian Revolution was also, and profoundly, a social revolution. One reason Russia so needed good leadership was that both the economic and social systems were in transition and placing tremendous stresses on the population. Shaken by defeat in the Crimean War of 1854–56, Alexander II launched Russia on a cautious path of reform and modernization known as the Great Reforms. The centerpiece of the reforms was the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Emancipation gave the peasants their personal freedom and a share of the land, which amounted to about half overall. The peasants, however, were dissatisfied with the emancipation settlement, believing that by right all the land should be theirs. Their claim on the rest of the land remained a source of rural discontent and drove peasant revolution in 1905 and 1917.<sup>a</sup>

In an effort to sustain stable relationships in the countryside and to prevent the peasants from losing control over their newly acquired land, the emancipation of 1861 vested peasant land ownership, in most cases, in the peasant commune rather than individual families. The reforms preserved the peasant village as a largely self-contained economic and administrative unit. The key decision-making body was the village assembly, composed of heads of households. The assembly elected the village elder and other officials, who dealt with the government and

<sup>a</sup> Extremely diverse rural systems existed in Russia: the landless agrarian laborers of the Baltic regions, the relatively prosperous emigrants of West Siberia and German farmers of the Volga, the nomadic herding cultures of Central Asia, the Cossack communities and others. Discussion in this work centers on the Russian and Ukrainian peasantry, who made up a majority of the rural population, upon whom both government and revolutionaries focused their attention, and who drove the peasant revolt of 1917.

outside world. Within the village the assembly settled disputes and dealt with all matters affecting the village as a whole. This included joint responsibility for taxes and, in the Russian heartland, the periodic redistribution of land among the village families. These traditional practices provided a certain equality and security among villagers, but also worked against initiative and improvements in agricultural productivity. They also perpetuated a tradition of collective action that then carried over into the later industrial work force and as the soldiers of the revolutionary era.

Emancipation did not bring the expected prosperity for either the peasants or the state. Rapid population growth – the population more than doubled between 1860 and 1914 – in the absence of increased productivity created new hardships. The condition of the rural peasantry varied, but overall little if any per capita economic gain was made. Moreover, the peasantry, over 80 percent of the population at the turn of the century, lived always at the edge of disaster. Families could be pushed over by illness, bad luck or local conditions, while great disasters periodically swept large regions: the famine of 1891–92 alone claimed 400,000 lives. Peasant poverty, the persistence of disparities in land, wealth and privileges between peasants and landowning nobles, and the peasant lust for the land still held by private landowners fueled peasant violence in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

By the 1880s many Russian leaders came to realize that Russia could not remain so overwhelmingly agrarian. Industrialization of the country was essential if Russia were to sustain great-power status in a world in which power and industry were increasingly linked. In the 1880s the government took steps to spur industrial development, augmenting efforts of private entrepreneurs through tariffs, fiscal policies and direct investment. Russia enjoyed phenomenal growth. During the 1890s Russian industrial growth rates averaged 7–8 percent annually, and for the period 1885–1914 industrial production increased by an average of 5.72 percent annually, exceeding the American, British and German rates for those years. Percentage growth rates, however, told only part of the story. While Russian iron smelting grew rapidly in percentage terms, total output was still far below those same three countries. Moreover, labor productivity grew only slowly and per capita income fell in the second half of the nineteenth century compared with West European countries.<sup>3</sup> Russia underwent an industrial revolution in the last three decades of imperial Russia, but the economic picture could be seen in either optimistic or pessimistic light, depending on how and against what one measured.

Industrialization brought with it enormous strains on the society.

Tariffs, higher prices and higher taxes held down the standard of living of an already poor population who had to wait for any future benefits it might bring them. Sergei Witte, minister of finance from 1892 to 1903 and chief architect of the system, acknowledged the stresses in a secret memorandum to Nicholas in 1899: while Russia was developing “an industry of enormous size” to which the entire economy’s future was tied, “Its services cost the country too dearly, and these excessive costs have a destructive influence over the welfare of the population, particularly in agriculture.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, with industrialization came a social transformation with enormous political implications. The old hierarchy of legally defined estates (*sosloviia*) – noble, clergy, merchant, peasant and other – lost much of its meaning and was being replaced by a newer social structure based on profession and economic function in the new industrial age. This emerging class structure created identities and aspirations that played a major role in the coming of the revolution and in its outcome.

A key part of the new social structure was the industrial work force. This critically important class did not even exist as a classification under the old estate system, which grouped them according to the estate from which they had come, usually as peasants or one of the categories that included urban lower classes such as artisans or day laborers. Despite such outdated classifications the industrial workers were a very identifiable new class and several important features made them a potent revolutionary force. One was the wretched condition in which they worked and lived. The social tensions inherent in adjusting to the new urban and factory conditions were great enough, but the terrible circumstances under which the working class labored and lived made them even worse. The factories offered long hours (twelve or more), low pay, unsafe conditions, a harsh and degrading system of industrial discipline and a total absence of employment security or care if ill or injured. Housing was overcrowded, unsanitary and lacked privacy. Many workers lived in barracks, some employing the “ever warm bed” system by which two workers shared the same bunk, moving between it and their twelve- to thirteen-hour shifts. Families often shared single rooms with other families or single workers. The conditions of industry not only left them poor, but also robbed them of personal dignity. Alcoholism was rampant, as was disease: cholera epidemics swept through St. Petersburg every few years. Their social-economic plight was reflected even in the differences between the middle- and upper-class districts of the city center with their paved streets, electric lights and water system, and the outlying workers’ districts where dirt (or mud) streets, kerosene lamps, and filth and disease prevailed.

Efforts by workers and their champions from among the educated classes to organize to improve their lives generally met repression by the government. Indeed, government industrialization policies depended on the economic advantages of cheap labor, of which there seemed an inexhaustible supply. It reflected also the mentality of a ruling class accustomed to thinking of poverty and hard labor as the natural condition of peasants (as most workers were or had recently been). The government failed to create an arena for labor organizing where workers could try to redress their grievances through legal means. This contributed to political radicalization. Because the regime mostly denied workers the right to organize and pursue economic interests legally, they were forced to resort to illegal actions and linkage with the revolutionary parties. The emerging working class was not merely a deeply aggrieved, growing segment of the population, but one that increasingly saw a connection between the political system and their own wretched condition.

An important feature of this new industrial working class was its concentration in a relatively small number of industrial centers, including St. Petersburg and Moscow. This enhanced workers' ability to have an impact politically if they were organized. Within the cities the factories provided a potent focus for organization and mobilization. This was reinforced by the fact that Russian factories tended to be much larger than their Western counterparts. The industrial system brought them together not only in the larger factory, but also in smaller workshops and foundries within it, giving them an inherent organizational structure. The factories thus functioned as natural organizing centers and as bases for revolutionary activity before and during 1917. Factory identity was strong and workers often characterized themselves and recognized others by factory: *Putilovtsy* (workers of the Putilov factory), *Obukhovtsy* (Obukhov factory workers), etc.

Many of the new industrial workers retained close ties to the peasantry, a connection reinforced by the steady flow of recruits from the villages. Some workers returned annually to participate in the harvest and general village life, while others worked in the city only a short time before returning permanently to the village, where their wives and children had often remained. Organized brotherhoods (*zemliachestva*) based on rural regions of origin played an important role in the lives of many urban workers. These ties helped keep alive among urban workers the peasant values of egalitarianism and collective action, as well as a shared hostility to the "masters," whether landowners or industrialists. This helped create the broad lower-class versus upper-classes mentality that played so important a role in 1917.

While peasant attitudes and ties continued to be important, equally or even more significant was the emergence of a specifically working-class identity and values. By the early twentieth century a layer of permanent, more highly skilled, better-educated workers emerged. They led the way in attaining literacy, forming study circles, organizing strikes and demonstrations, and even turning to politics by linking up with the revolutionary parties and by reading their political tracts. The revolutionaries explained the political world and its importance to them. These parties, through their reading circles and discussion groups, opened for some workers a window into a different, better world. Moreover, they explained how to achieve it. Marxism in particular gave an explanation of why factories had emerged, why they had become workers, why their condition was what it was, and told them why and how it must change. A working-class identity developed, not merely as a result of social-economic circumstances, central as those were, but also because of the efforts of revolutionary parties to cultivate a working-class identity among them. This reinforced the lessons of their labor experience for, while the state sometimes protected workers or mediated conflict, mostly it aided employers in suppressing strikes, outlawing unions and enforcing workplace subservience, and some workers drew the political implications of this. Out of these experiences came the worker-activists who provided leadership for their fellow workers and a linkage between the revolutionary parties and the mass of workers. A cadre of politically oriented worker-activists emerged, their class and political identities hardened by the police and employer persecution that followed activism. They played a central role in the revolution.

The industrial revolution also combined with social and economic forces at work since mid-century to produce a diverse and growing middle class – middle classes might be a better term – different from the traditional legally defined merchant and urban dweller categories. An important part of these new middle classes grew out of the professions, which blossomed in Russia in the second half of the century: teachers, doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, agronomists and others. Industrialization added a new and diverse middle class of engineers, bookkeepers, technicians, managers and small entrepreneurs. To these could be added the growing number of white-collar employees. These middle-class elements came from diverse social origins and not only suffered from a relatively weak sense of common identity and goals, but also lacked political movements devoted to developing a middle-class identity such as existed for the working class. An identity was growing, however, encouraged especially in the twentieth century by the growth of professional associations as well as of social, cultural, leisure and

sporting clubs that served the new middle classes – more than 600 were listed in Moscow in 1912.<sup>5</sup> These provided forums for exploring their common interests and discussing broader social and political issues. The education and the social-economic significance of this growing middle class gave it importance and provided the social basis for the emergence of a liberal political movement demanding political rights and constitutionalism. Indicative of the weak identity of the middle class, however, is the fact that the primary liberal political party and spokesman for these groups after 1905, the Constitutional Democrats, or Kadets, always insisted that it stood “above classes.”

Another way to look at the changing society is through the concept of “educated society,” which roughly corresponds to what the Russians called *obshchestvo*. “Educated society” encompassed both the new middle classes and large portions of the old nobility and even part of the government bureaucracy. It cut across the traditional legal castes and to some extent even the new economic classes, and its “sense of identity rested on a keen perception that the Russian ‘nation’ differed from the Russian ‘state’” and reflected the “presence of educated Russians determined to work for the common good, for ‘progress.’”<sup>6</sup> They led the way in demanding a voice in public affairs for themselves as spokesmen for society at large, and asserted that the old imperial regime could no longer properly manage the affairs of state, at least not as well as they could. The bungled handling of the famine of 1891–92 was especially important in energizing them and in confirming their view that the old regime was bankrupt, and later the Revolution of 1905 and handling of the war effort after 1914 reinforced that belief. Increasingly the spokesmen of the new educated class were referred to as “public men,” a reflection of a new self-image. Their view of themselves as new leaders of society against a corrupt regime was hampered, however, by the fact that for the lower classes the notion of “educated society” largely overlapped with that of “privileged Russia.” Educated Russians of the upper, middle and professional classes were, to the peasants and workers of the lower classes, “them.” This helped set the stage for the sharp social antagonisms of 1917 between “educated” or “privileged” society and “the masses” of workers, peasants, soldiers and even some of the urban lower middle class.

An important subset of educated society, and one reason for the middle class’s poor sense of identity, was the “intelligentsia.” This primarily intellectual element had evolved out of small circles of nobles in the middle of the nineteenth century discussing public issues to become the most politically involved part of educated society. The intelligentsia was generally characterized by opposition to the existing

order in Russia and a strong desire to change it. Out of its radical wing emerged the revolutionary parties, and from the more moderate wing came the political reformers and liberal parties. One of the fundamental beliefs of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia was hostility to “the bourgeoisie,” an idea growing out of both noble contempt and West European socialist thought. This mentality persisted, despite the fact that by the early twentieth century the intelligentsia came from all legal classes and were in fact primarily middle class in social-economic terms; mostly they were professionals and white-collar employees of all types. Nonetheless, the ongoing negative image of “bourgeoisie” hampered development of a clear and positive middle-class identity and political movement. Indeed, the term was used as a pejorative in 1917 by both the industrial workers and radical intelligentsia leaders of the socialist parties.

In addition to these social class developments, many other changes were sweeping through Russia of the early twentieth century, consciously or unconsciously challenging the old order and preparing grounds for revolution. A rapid expansion of education by the early twentieth century led to both increased basic literacy and a rapid growth in the number of graduates from university and higher technical institutes. Education, at all levels, opened access to a wide range of information and ideas that directly or indirectly challenged traditional beliefs and social structures, introducing a powerful force for instability in the Russian Empire. Rapid urbanization uprooted people of all classes from established patterns and relationships and created new ones. People saw their world increasingly defined by the jobs they held and by new kinds of social, economic, professional, cultural and other organizations to which they belonged. For the educated elites, major new directions in arts and literature not only confirmed a cultural flowering but spoke to the sense of rapidly changing times. The emergence of a feminist movement, a proliferation of art galleries and museums, impressive new shopping arcades and other features of a changing urban society reinforced that sense. Russia on the eve of war and revolution was a rapidly changing society, with all the attendant dislocations and anxieties. Little wonder that some writers described it as a rapidly modernizing country of immense potential, while others saw a society hurtling toward disaster.

### **The revolutionary movement**

The conjuncture of the development of the intelligentsia, the monarchy's refusal to share political power, and the social and economic

problems of Russia produced organized revolutionary movements of exceptional persistence and influence. The most important early revolutionary movement, Populism (*Narodnichestvo*), grew out of the conditions of the middle of the nineteenth century and called for the overthrow of the autocracy and a social revolution that would distribute the land among the peasants. The Populists' problem was how to find a way to mobilize and organize the scattered peasant masses to make a revolution. This led some revolutionaries, organized as "The People's Will," to turn to terrorism. In 1881 they assassinated Alexander II. The result, however, was that the revolutionary movement was temporarily crushed and the governments of Alexander III and then Nicholas II turned toward ever more reactionary policies and away from even the moderate reforms of Alexander II. The revolutionary intelligentsia in turn was forced to rethink revolutionary theory and practice. From this emerged the main revolutionary parties of twentieth-century Russia, the ones that played the key roles in 1917: the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and the Social Democrats (SDs), the latter soon dividing into two major parties, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

The SR Party organized in 1901 as party stressing a broad class struggle of all toilers (peasants and urban workers) against exploiters (landowners, factory owners, bureaucrats and middle-class elements). This helped them develop a following among urban industrial workers as well as among peasants. They gave special attention to the peasantry, however, with a demand for socialization of the land and its equal distribution among those who worked it. This guaranteed the SRs the support of the overwhelming mass of the population, the peasants (and thus of the soldiers in 1917). Beyond that they called for a variety of social, economic and political reforms, including the abolition of monarchy and its replacement by a democratic republic. Indeed, their program was often summarized in the slogan "Land and Liberty," a slogan that figured prominently on banners in 1917. Two major problems, however, made it difficult for the SRs to use their peasant support in a revolutionary situation such as 1917: the difficulty of effectively mobilizing widely dispersed peasants for political action, and the party's own loose organizational structure and disagreements on specifics of the general program. Indeed, in 1917 the party split into right, center and left wings.

The rethinking of revolutionary tactics after 1881 led some Russian radicals to Marxism and the Social Democratic movement. Looking at the beginning of industrialization in Russia, G. V. Plekhanov worked out a theory explaining that Russia was becoming capitalist and thus was ripe for the beginning of a socialist movement that focused on the new

industrial working class rather than the peasants. Vladimir Lenin carried this a step further in 1902 with *What Is To Be Done?*, in which he argued for forming a small party of professional revolutionaries from the intelligentsia that would both cultivate the necessary revolutionary consciousness among industrial workers and provide leadership in the revolution. Simultaneously several Marxist groups, divided by ideology and strategy, developed in the Russian Empire. In 1903 one group, including Plekhanov, Lenin and Iulii Martov, organized the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP or, more commonly, SDs). It opened in Belgium, but under police pressure moved on to London. There the organizers split. Lenin demanded a more restrictive party membership, while Martov argued for a broader (but still restricted) one. Lenin and what became the Bolshevik Party put a greater emphasis upon leadership, while Martov and the Mensheviks gave a greater role to the workers themselves.

In the years after 1903 the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks fought over many points of doctrine and became in fact separate parties, the two main Marxist parties, each claiming to be the true voice of the Social Democratic movement. Underlying the specific differences between the two parties were fundamentally different outlooks about party organization and relationship to the workers, which significantly affected behavior in 1917. Lenin proceeded to create a party emphasizing a higher degree of centralization and discipline and which exalted the importance of leadership and distrusted initiative from below. Martov, Plekhanov and others slowly developed Menshevism as a somewhat more diffuse, often divided, movement. By 1917 Menshevism emerged as more genuinely democratic in spirit and with a moderate wing willing to cooperate with other political groups for reform. Personal animosities from the years of partisan ideological squabbling among the Social Democratic intelligentsia, especially the emigres, would carry over into the actions in 1917. Indeed, in 1917 as in 1903 and after, Lenin's hard line and domineering personality would polarize political life.

Soon after the socialist parties took form, new issues emerged that divided them in the years before 1917. Two were especially significant for the history of the revolution. One set of issues involved the debate over whether to abandon underground revolutionary activity in favor of legal work and the closely related question of relations with the liberal parties and the middle classes they were assumed to represent. This became especially important with the legalization of political parties after the Revolution of 1905 and was a major source of division among Mensheviks and between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. The SRs were also torn by these issues, which produced several small splinter parties

as well as divisions within the SR Party. Lenin turned the Bolshevik Party resolutely against cooperation with liberals and toward the idea of moving swiftly through revolutionary stages to a “proletarian” revolution, while some Mensheviks and SRs accepted the importance of legal political work and even cooperation with liberals in the early stage of the revolutionary transformation. This dispute helped shape the image of the Mensheviks as the more moderate wing of social democracy and the Bolsheviks as the more radical and uncompromising. It also had important implications for the question of cooperation with liberals and of “coalition” governments in 1917.

The second major controversy to divide socialists was the appropriate response toward national defense in World War I. Most European socialists, but only a minority of Russian socialists, supported their countries’ war efforts and were dubbed “Defensists.” Russian Defensists stressed solidarity with the Western democracies and insisted that they supported only defense against German domination. Other socialists, including most Russian socialists, refused to support their national war efforts, repudiated the war as an imperialist venture and called for socialist unity to find a way to end it; they came to be called Internationalists. The Defensist versus Internationalist controversy split all the Russian revolutionary parties, the Mensheviks and the SRs especially but the Bolsheviks as well. Although often obscured by the continued use of party labels, this Defensist–Internationalist alignment was fundamental. It often was more important than party affiliations and carried into and became central to the politics of 1917.

Alongside the emergence of the revolutionary socialist parties, a liberal and reformist political movement developed in the early twentieth century. Drawing upon the ideas of West European liberalism and the emergence of a larger urban middle class, liberalism belatedly took hold in Russia. It emphasized constitutionalism, parliamentary government, rule of law and civil rights, within either a constitutional monarchy or a republic. It also stressed the importance of major social and economic reform programs, but rejected both socialism and the radical intelligentsia’s traditional call for sweeping revolution. Liberalism first took organized political form as the Union of Liberation, founded in 1903–04. Then during the Revolution of 1905 the Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets) emerged.<sup>b</sup> The Kadets developed as the major voice of political liberalism and for the aspirations of the growing

<sup>b</sup> Kadet (also spelled Cadet) was an acronym based on the first syllables of the party’s name; it should not be confused with military cadets (junkers), who played a role later in 1917. The party’s official name in February 1917 was Party of the People’s Freedom, although that name is rarely met in writings about them.

middle classes. In 1917 they would become the only important non-socialist party and their leader, Paul Miliukov, a history professor at Moscow University, one of the men responsible for the formation of the Provisional Government.

By the early 1900s Russia was undergoing rapid social-economic changes, suffered from old and new discontents, and witnessed the emergence of political movements devoted to transforming Russia. This combination set the stage for a revolutionary upheaval. That came in 1905 when, in the midst of an unpopular and unsuccessful war against Japan, a particular event provided the spark to ignite discontents into revolutionary turmoil. That spark was Bloody Sunday.

### **The Revolution of 1905 and the Duma era**

The Russian government, in an attempt to cope with worker discontents, experimented with allowing formation of workers' unions under police supervision and with a limited range of activities. One such was the Assembly of Russian Factory Workers, organized in St. Petersburg by a priest, Father Gapon. Under pressure from workers for more forceful action, Gapon and the assembly organized a great demonstration for Sunday, January 9, 1905. Workers would march to the Winter Palace, carrying religious icons and portraits of Nicholas, to present a petition asking for redress of grievances. The government decided to block the demonstration. Troops and police fired into the packed masses of men, women and children, killing and wounding hundreds.

"Bloody Sunday" shocked Russia. Riots and demonstrations broke out across the country, continuing through the spring and summer despite both repressive measures and minor concessions from the government. Workers struck and clashed with police. In the countryside the peasants attacked landlords and government officials. Students and middle-class elements demanded civil rights, constitutional government and social reform. Mutinies broke out in the armed forces, the most spectacular being the revolt on the cruiser *Potemkin* in June. A general strike in October immobilized the country. Workers' soviets (councils), which were combination strike committees and political forums, emerged in many cities in the summer and fall, including St. Petersburg and Moscow. Overall, however, the many revolts occurring simultaneously lacked unified leadership and direction.

Confronted by the seemingly endless waves of disorders, Nicholas' government wavered between compromising and attempting to suppress them by massive force. Finally Nicholas' advisors convinced him to make much more sweeping concessions than he wished. On October 17,

1905, Nicholas signed a manifesto promising expanded civil rights and the election of a legislature, the Duma. The "October Manifesto" divided the opposition. Some accepted it as a new beginning, but others vowed to fight on until the complete overthrow of the monarchy. Indeed, rural and industrial unrest grew after October, joined by demonstrations among non-Russian minorities demanding greater civil rights. The government, however, felt that it could now reassert control. In November it easily arrested the leaders of the St. Petersburg Soviet, but suppressed the revolution in Moscow and the Moscow Soviet in December only after bitter street fighting in which hundreds died. Army detachments subdued rebellious peasants across the countryside, with thousands killed and tens of thousands exiled. At the same time right-wing groups known as "Black Hundreds" attacked non-Russians and radicals and launched pogroms against Jews in many cities. In 1906 the government gradually reasserted control over the country.

The Revolution of 1905 produced mixed results. It forced major changes in the political system, including limited civil rights and an elected legislature with the right to approve all laws. The traditional autocracy was ended, though Nicholas retained very extensive power. On the other hand, the imperial government soon chipped away at the changes made in 1905, while demands for a full parliamentary democracy, distribution of land to peasants, basic improvements in the lives of industrial workers and other reforms remained unfulfilled. Nicholas ruled over a sullen populace of permanently politicized workers and of peasants who expressed their discontent through petty harassment of landlords and officials, and sometimes more violently. Moreover, the major ingredients of the revolt persisted after 1905. These included worker discontents, peasant unrest, middle-class aspirations for civil rights and a larger voice in governance, and the government's own determination to hold on to power. Thus if the other key ingredient of 1905, war and soldier discontent, was again added into the mix, all the elements of that revolution would again be present.

In many respects whatever chance Russia had of avoiding another revolution rested with the new legislative system. If it functioned well it could not only address the demands of the growing middle class for political participation, but also perhaps could produce a government sufficiently attuned to popular aspirations to be able to address some of the more pressing social and economic discontents of the lower classes. These were big ifs. They depended not only on the Duma, but first of all on the behavior of Nicholas II.

Nicholas and his closest advisors, once they survived the revolutionary turmoil, regretted the October Manifesto. Some wanted Nicholas to

repudiate it, but he refused to violate his solemn word – this was a point of honor. Therefore Nicholas provided for elections to the Duma and issued the Fundamental Laws outlining the structure of the new government. It provided for a sharing of power among Nicholas, his government ministers and the two houses of the legislature, the Duma and the State Council. The Duma was elected on a broad if not entirely representative franchise. The State Council was intended as a conservative check on the popularly elected Duma, with half the Council's members appointed by Nicholas and the other half elected mostly by the clergy or wealthy groups. The arrangement, which probably would have been greeted joyously a year earlier, was a sore disappointment to the liberals and their middle-class constituency after 1905. They saw its chief defect to be the absence of parliamentary responsibility, i.e., that the government, the Council of Ministers, be responsible to a majority in the legislature, in the British pattern. Instead the monarch appointed and dismissed the members of the Council of Ministers, issued emergency decrees, dismissed the Duma when it pleased him and generally still dominated the machinery of government, including the secret police. Nicholas retained the title “autocrat” and continued to think of himself as such rather than as a constitutional monarch. The Duma's main authority was that its approval was necessary for all new laws. It was, however, unable to enact new legislation that might address basic social or other problems, as all new laws required the approval of the conservative State Council and of Nicholas himself.

The first two Dumas contested political power with Nicholas. When the first Duma elections returned a liberal majority led by the Kadet Party, the latter determined to push for immediate reform of the government structure to include ministerial responsibility. When the Duma opened in April 1906 the Duma leaders clashed with Nicholas' government over a number of specific issues, especially land reform, but the underlying question was the balance of power. In July Nicholas exercised the monarch's right to dissolve the Duma and call new elections. Nicholas and his advisors hoped that the new elections, farther removed from the turmoil of 1905, would return a more conservative majority. The first Duma had only a weak conservative wing to match a similarly weak radical left wing (most socialist parties officially boycotted the elections). New elections for the second Duma did indeed alter its composition, but not in the way the government had hoped. The socialist parties entered the elections in force and made impressive gains at the expense of the liberals, while conservatives did not gain; the second Duma was politically well to the left of the first. When it opened on March 6, 1907, bitter conflict quickly proved that

there were no grounds for fruitful work between the radicalized Duma and the ever more resistant and ultraconservative government.

The government now took drastic steps under the energetic leadership of the newly appointed minister-president, Peter Stolypin. In June he had Nicholas again dissolve the Duma and call new elections. The government then took advantage of a provision in the Fundamental Laws under which the government could pass laws while the Duma was not in session, but which then required approval by the Duma at its next session. Using this Stolypin changed the electoral system to effectively disenfranchise most of the population through a complex system of indirect and unequal voting that gave large landowners and wealthy individuals vastly disproportionate strength. One percent of the population now elected a majority of the Duma. By this maneuver Stolypin produced a third Duma with a conservative majority which then sanctioned the changes and worked with the government. The Duma retained some authority, but the predominance of power clearly rested with Nicholas and his ministers.

The strike at the Duma had profound consequences for revolution in Russia. First, the prospects for meeting the political, social and economic aspirations of Russian society peacefully and through measured change waned, while the likelihood of a new revolution increased dramatically. Second, these actions underscored the extent to which Nicholas still saw himself as an autocrat rather than as a constitutional monarch, thus keeping alive a broad popular belief in the necessity of revolution. Third, the unrepresentative nature of the transformed Duma meant that, although the Duma leaders could play a significant role in the February Revolution, the Duma would be unsuitable as the country's government after the February Revolution, thus launching Russia on a more radical and uncertain political path than it might have had the Duma remained more representative.

While Nicholas' government successfully manipulated the Duma to avoid the immediate political threat to its authority, it was unsuccessful in reducing economic and social problems. The government did, to its credit, make an imaginative effort to deal with peasant discontent. Stolypin undertook to break up the traditional peasant communal landholding and strip-farming system and replace it with a system in which each peasant held his land in full ownership. This, he hoped, would introduce a much needed improvement in agricultural productivity and produce a class of prosperous, conservative small farmers who would one day provide a social-political base of support for the monarchy. Stolypin's death in 1911 and the outbreak of war in 1914 cut short the "Stolypin reforms" and left the peasant problem unresolved. Indeed,

whatever the government's efforts – and they were halting and their efficacy debatable – the underlying reality was that the years before 1914 were not peaceful ones in the Russian countryside. Peasant disturbances, suppressed by force after 1905, revived. The years 1910–14 saw 17,000 in European Russia alone.<sup>7</sup> While both government and political parties debated the nature of peasant distress and how to deal with it, for the peasants the answer remained simple: the redistribution of all land to themselves.

The government made even less effort to address the grievances and growing alienation of the industrial workers and the urban lower classes generally. About 1910 a new spurt of industrial growth began. This led to a rapid growth of the industrial work force and, from 1912, of industrial tensions. After the Lena Goldfield massacre of 1912, in which about 200 striking workers were killed, a much more assertive strike and labor protest movement emerged. The growing strike movement led finally to a great strike in July 1914 that was both violent and widespread. These strikes were a mixture of economic, social and political protests, tightly commingled. The regime's traditional support for employers in labor disputes had long ago taught the industrial workers the close connections between economic and political issues. By this time it was a common view that a change of the political regime, probably including the overthrow of the monarchy, was essential to attaining the general goals of bettering their condition. Indeed, the strike movement of 1912–14 appears to have led to a political radicalization of industrial workers and an orientation toward more radical wings of the revolutionary parties. Where the strike movement might have led – some saw a new revolution looming – is unknown, for it was suddenly choked off by the outbreak of war in August 1914.

### **World War I and its discontents**

The war was central both to the coming of the revolution and to its outcome. It put enormous strains on the population and dramatically increased popular discontent. It undermined the discipline of the Russian army, thereby reducing the government's ability to use force to suppress the increased discontent. Whether Russia, absent the war, might have avoided revolution is a question that is ultimately unanswerable. What is certain is that, even if a revolution was probable or inevitable, the war profoundly shaped the revolution that did occur.

Russia was poorly prepared for the war, militarily, industrially and politically. The first campaigns of 1914 revealed the Russian shortcomings in weaponry, especially the inadequate number of new

weapons such as machine-guns and the disastrous shortage of artillery shells. Russia's weak industrial base, compared to other combatants, had a difficult time overcoming these shortages. The 1914 campaign also revealed serious weaknesses in the command staff and culminated in shattering defeats by the Germans at the battles of Tannenburg and Masurian Lakes, although there were successes to the south against the Austro-Hungarian armies.

The battles of early 1915 only reinforced awareness of these shortcomings. A horrified British military attache, General Alfred Knox, observed that because of a shortage of rifles "Unarmed men had to be sent into the trenches to wait till their comrades were killed or wounded and their rifles became available."<sup>8</sup> German heavy artillery bombardments, to which the Russians lacked the guns and shells to reply, buried Russian units before they ever saw an enemy. The Russian armies were routed in a chaotic retreat. The minister of war, General A. A. Polivanov, reported to the Council of Ministers on July 16, 1915, that "The soldiers are without doubt exhausted by the continued defeats and retreats. Their confidence in final victory and in their leadership are undermined. Ever more threatening signs of impending demoralization are evident."<sup>9</sup> To add to the catalogue of problems, the military high command applied a scorched-earth policy as the Russian armies retreated, thus sending hordes of refugees eastward where they overtaxed communication lines and became a permanent source of problems and discontents in Russia's cities.

By the end of 1915 Russia had lost a large and rich slice of empire in the west: all of Poland and parts of Ukraine, Belorussia and the Baltic region. Even worse, Russia's armies in 1915 lost about two and half million men in addition to the million and a half already killed, wounded or taken prisoner in 1914. Although in 1916 the Russian army was better equipped than previously, the campaigns of that year failed to see any major Russian breakthrough and losses were heavy. By the end of 1916 Russia had lost about 5,700,000 men, 3,600,000 of them dead or seriously wounded, the rest prisoners of war.<sup>10</sup> Even the military high command, which had squandered lives recklessly, began to realize that Russia was approaching the end of what had earlier appeared to be an almost bottomless supply of manpower. The horrendous losses shattered the morale of the soldiers. The suffering inflicted on the soldiers, their families, refugees and other segments of the population are important to understanding the revolt of the soldiers in 1917 and the impatient demand for an end to the war that dominated politics during the revolution.

The outbreak of the war initially caused a political rallying to defense

of the country and an end of strike activities, but that very quickly changed.<sup>c</sup> Defeat and government mismanagement led to widespread discontent among all segments of society. Particularly important was the emergence of growing hostility to the government from within educated society, drawing on conservative as well as liberal political circles. They based their opposition to the government both on a patriotic demand for a more efficient prosecution of the war and on an attempt to use the war crisis to force fundamental changes in the political system (as had happened in 1905). This opposition expressed itself through both the Duma and a variety of organizations and societies where politically oriented members of educated society could gather, exchange opinions and work for change.

Among the many nongovernmental organizations that provided vehicles for educated society to voice its growing frustration with the government's handling of the war effort, the War Industries Committee and Zemgor were particularly important. The Central War Industries Committee (hereafter, the WIC) and its local branches were created by industrialists for the purpose of coordinating and increasing war production, and sanctioned by the government. In July 1915 Alexander Guchkov, leader of the moderate conservative Octobrist Party, became chairman and A. I. Konovalov, a leader of the liberal, business-oriented Progressist Party, vice-chairman. Zemgor, the joint effort of the All-Russia Union of Towns and the All-Russia Union of Zemstvos, headed by Prince G. E. Lvov, undertook to organize aid for the wounded, sick and displaced, as they had during the Russo-Japanese War a decade earlier. Because of the extended nature of the war and heavy casualties, both the WIC and Zemgor soon took on important public and political roles. They brought together a broad circle of politically active moderate conservatives and liberals from the industrial and business community, the academic world, the landowning nobility and city and local government. Their very existence was a rebuke to the government and an implied assertion that educated society could better manage Russia's affairs. Moreover, they represented a potential replacement government. Indeed, these men would make up an important part of the first Provisional Government in 1917. Lvov became its head, while two other members had been in Zemgor and four came from the leadership of the WIC, including Guchkov and Konovalov.

There were many other organizations in which men with a concern for public affairs and holding similar beliefs could come together to

<sup>c</sup> During this early patriotic surge the capital's name was changed from the Germanic sounding St. Petersburg to the Russian Petrograd, which remained its name for 1914–24 and will be used for the rest of this book.

discuss events. These were important in providing a mechanism, within the censorship of imperial Russia, for publicly active individuals to discuss ideas and broaden their circle of acquaintances. One of the most important and active was a revived Freemason movement. Masonic lodges in Moscow and Petrograd included prominent political figures and provided vehicles for discussion across party and nonparty lines. Membership even included politically active royalists such as Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich. Several members of the first Provisional Government were members, many of them also in the WIC, Zemgor or the State Duma.<sup>11</sup> Less overtly political but still important places where educated public could discuss the issues of the day were the many voluntary and professional associations such as the Free Economic Society, the Pirogov Medical Society, the Russian Technological Society, the Russian Society of Engineers and others, as well as social clubs and the universities and polytechnical institutes. All of these provided vehicles for members of educated society to meet each other, discuss issues and find the extent to which they shared broad values and outlooks on political matters.

The same social and political strata also pressured the government through the Duma. Dismayed by the early military defeats and mismanagement, moderate conservatives and liberal political leaders in the Duma formed the "Progressive Bloc" in the summer of 1915. This was a broad coalition of all factions except the extreme left and extreme right, based especially on the Octobrist, Kadet and Progressist Parties. The Progressive Bloc called for a series of measures that its members felt were essential for the successful conclusion of the war. First and foremost was the creation of a government enjoying "public confidence" and which would work with the Duma. They also called for "decisive change in the methods of administration," greater civil rights for non-Russian nationalities, meeting the pressing needs of workers and other reforms.<sup>12</sup> Some government ministers supported their position.

It appeared for a moment in 1915 that the government's critics might successfully use the war and attendant problems to force Nicholas II to agree to significant reform of the political system. Pressure from the Duma and from industrial circles led in the summer of 1915 to the dismissal of some of the more ultraconservative and anti-Duma ministers. So confident were the reformers that speculation about the membership of a new government began to circulate; on August 13th and 14th the newspaper *Utro Rossii* published two lists of a possible new government, both dominated by the Octobrists, Kadets and Progressists from the Duma, the WIC and Zemgor. Most of the men on these and similar lists circulated in 1915 actually did become members of the