

REVOLUTIONARY FAILURE

A PAPER EXPLORING THE FAILED RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1905



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In the history of political revolutions, many successful overthrows stand out from the bunch. The United States heroically stood against the semi-hegemonic British Empire to attain independence. The French brought down a Reign of Terror, a monarchy, and instilled in the population a tradition of revolutionary democracy. In Russia, the outstanding revolution is the rise of Bolshevik communism at the end of World War I; however, this revolution followed a rebellion in 1905. The Failed Revolution of 1905 represents a trend of Russian history; a change from despotism to communism, and eventually, to democracy in the late 20th century. The Failed Revolution of 1905 represents the uneasy political evolution of government in Russia. It would lay the framework for a future communist revolution and would perfectly exemplify the repressive tendencies of the existing regime. The Failed Revolution of 1905 would pit serfs against the Czar Nicholas II in a revolution with wide-ranging causes and implications.

It began in 1861 when Czar Alexander II emancipated serfs in Russia, laying the foundation for a rebellion to follow 44 years later (Poon). The emancipation began with a change in status from effectively enslaved to legally free, usually a source of celebration for the freed. For compensation for the land, however, the

serfs were to pay compensation over a period of 49 years (Poon). During that time, the property would belong to the local village communities, and the peasants would pay a tax on the land that was not theirs to the village. In other words, the land produced a sort of double jeopardy in payments: one to the previous owner and one to the village.

Clearly, this is not what the peasants wanted. Instead of redistributing the wealth to the lower classes, this effectively kept the wealth in the upper class while allowing private use of land for the grandchildren of those who would witness Alexander II's emancipation. This was exacerbated by the fact that the previous dues to the nobles were often less than the tax to the government (Poon). Moreover, the amount of land provided to the serfs was insufficient for keeping them above the poverty line. Alexander II had merely complicated the issue of serfdom in Russia, adding to it a mess of economic and property issues that would lay the groundwork for future communists to make their claims that a worker revolution would be necessary.

Even with a liberal czar came repression. When Nihilists tried to use mass media to identify the worst aspects of the Russian regime, Alexander II imprisoned editors, writers, Nihilists, and sympathizers. Fundamentally, the conservative structure of a czardom led to conservative behavior, even by a liberal Czar Alexander II. Regardless of what good his regime would do to

modernize or improve Russian society, it was abundantly clear that growing resentment of the czar developed during and after the rule of Alexander II. Apparently, the liberal reforms of Alexander II may have brought out the evils of czardom when his policies changed from an emancipation of the serfs to repressionist tendencies. Over the course of Alexander II's later years, terrorism and revolutionary behavior generally increased.

Alexander II's son took the throne after revolutionaries killed him in 1881. Alexander III's autocratic reign presented enough fear to reduce rebel behavior. Punishments were tough for those who did not even speak the enforceable Russian language. Terrorists would be treated worse. When Alexander II died, boiling hatred for the czardom in Russia had ample room to develop under Nicholas II. To this point, the seeds of rebellion have been planted with the liberal policies of a czar followed by simmering resentment over the fundamentally reactionary ideology of the czardom. All that was needed was a mobilized mass of citizens to start the revolutionary process.

Nicholas II created that spark when he signed an alliance with France that led to loans and a heavily industrialized proletariat (Poon). Of those serfs from his grandfather's Russia, many and their children would become part of this simmering society seeking an overthrow. During this period, illegal worker strikes developed from 15-hour workdays and pay measuring around 30% of the pay

workers in Britain received at the same time (Poon) By 1903, nearly 100,000 strikers took their grievances to the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg. During this time, it was clear that political organization was possible even though it was illegal; therefore, both moderate and Marxist political parties formed to contest and even overthrow the autocratic czardom in Russia. In summary, the Failed Revolution of 1905 would pit the serfs against Czar Nicholas II's regime in a worker rebellion.

Growing frustration with the autocratic regime led to organized political resistance. In order to divert the growing discontent with his regime, Nicholas II waged a miserable failure of a war with Japan in 1904 (A&E). Russian was simply not prepared for war with Japan. Due to catastrophic corruption in the government and awful military preparedness led to exactly the opposite of the unity that Nicholas II hoped a war would produce (A&E). Food prices skyrocketed, and unemployment became a growing issue. Historians tend to point to this as the direct cause of the Failed Revolution, but it could never have happened without previous discontent and the repression existent in Russia's czardom.

Bloody Sunday marked the earliest point of the Failed Revolution. Although previous repressive tendencies and strikes presented themselves years before this, Bloody Sunday's massacre single-handedly mobilized masses across Russia. Bloody Sunday began when Father Gapon, a trade union leader, rallied 135,000

workers to petition Czar Nicholas II on a variety of political and economic issues at the Winter Palace (Poon). In effect, that many individuals had already committed to the cause before any rebellion occurred. Over 150,000 peaceably marched to the Winter Palace with Father Gapon with the intention of resolving discontent (Poon). Safely, one deduces that Gapon's intended to leave the czardom intact. Demonstrators displayed portraits of the czar and Orthodox saints before the Winter Palace.

Abruptly, guards of the palace fired on the crowd, killing over 100 demonstrators and wounding hundreds more (Poon). Revolt engulfed Russia on an impromptu basis. An organization, the All-Russian Peasant's Union, organized in the effort to unite a class previously not allowed to politically organize. 3 million workers immediately went on strike (Poon). This was a clear sign that repression of this magnitude would no longer be tolerated by the peasantry. The overwhelming reaction against the czar led him to establish an advisory legislature, the Duma (Britannica). The Duma would be elected by landowners and other affluent members of a clearly classist society. While this represented a move toward democracy, it was not enough to bring a rioting Russia under control (Britannica). By this point, the Failed Revolution had lasted from 22 January all the way to September 1905.

Thus far, much of the rebellion included strikes by workers, riots, and political demands from a variety of groups, including liberal and communist groups. Between 20 September and 30 October, a general strike developed from a long series of strikes organized not by the rebels who had been seeking regime change but by ordinary workers (Britannica). They set up soviets to direct the strikes in major industrial areas, many of which would be under Menshevik influence. Their competition with the Bolsheviks would lead to Russia's next great revolution.

With so many workers striking, it was apparent that a classist Duma was not adequate. Nicholas II signed the October Manifesto on 30 December, granting constitutional free press, free speech, free assembly, free religion, very inclusive suffrage, and that the Duma have legislative power (Poon). While leaders sought to benefit from further revolution, such as Leon Trotsky, the czardom's sudden transition to a constitutional monarchy seemed to appease the demands of the Russian peasantry.

An evolutionary rebellion, the Failed Revolution of 1905 represents temporary success for the peasants whose demands were finally met at the cost of too many lives and political gain by what would become the dominant political force in Russia, the communists. An inspiring tale of sacrifice for freedom by the Russian peasantry, the conclusion is far from permanent. Over the next decade,

political strife would continue to grow, and a revolution would take the throne from Nicholas II, Russia's final czar (A&E). Without the events of the Failed Revolution, world history would be much different. Had the czar caved earlier, organized soviets may have never led to a future Soviet Union; countries beyond the iron curtain would have been free to develop into prosperous democracies; there would be no Sputnik, nor would there be the symbols of the Cold War and the competition that pitted Russia and the Warsaw Pact against NATO and the United States; Russia would never have invaded Afghanistan, leading to US support of al Qaeda, perhaps avoiding future terrorist attacks halfway across the world and years later. Though it is only conjecture, the possibility remains that nothing in the world would be the same 100 years later. While rights were temporarily granted to those who had fought so hard for them, their hard work would be in vain. By the end of World War I, their rights would be the property of a communist state, along with the land Alexander II granted that started it all.

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