

# 1905: The first Russian revolution

Wed, 20/12/2006 - 12:50

The Russian Revolution of 1905 was a titanic event that shaped the 20th century and the history of the working class movement.

Though defeated, the 1905 'Dress Rehearsal' was rich in lessons that fed into the strategy and tactics of the Bolshevik Party, leading directly to the successful seizure of power by the Soviets in 1917 and the establishment of the world's first workers' republic.

These lessons concern:

- ? the tasks of the working class in a democratic revolution
- ? the relationship between the working class and other classes: the liberal bourgeoisie and the peasantry
- ? the development and role of workers' Soviets
- ? the power and the limitations of the tactic of the General Strike
- ? how the working class can undertake an armed uprising
- ? the role of a Marxist party in a revolution
- ? the role of a working class International (world party) in a revolution in one country
- ? the goals of the workers' struggle - what sort of government and what sort of society should the workers aim to create?

A hundred years ago, deep discontent was mounting in Europe's most conservative state. As an unpopular war with Japan led to a series of crushing military reverses, opposition was spreading across the Russian Empire to the autocratic dictatorship of the Tsar.

Few of the leading Marxists in Europe had paid much attention to Russia, regarding it as a backward country with a small industrial working class, a huge peasantry and a reactionary feudal regime based on the all-powerful Tsar, the nobility and a huge state bureaucracy. An exception, however, was the most prominent of the German Marxists and a key figure in the Second International - Karl Kautsky. He believed that Russia was heading for a revolution, and that the outcome of this struggle would have a huge impact on the development of the socialist movement in Europe. In a series of articles he pointed out that Russia had a developing capitalist economy that was coming into sharp contradiction with the outmoded political superstructure of Tsarism. In particular, the war with Japan would drag Tsarism into crisis. But the Russian capitalist class was too weak and too tied to landlordism to see the revolution through to full democracy. In Russia's coming bourgeois revolution, the working class would have to come to the fore as an independent force.

The main thrust of Kautsky's analysis was quickly vindicated. By the end of 1904, smart bourgeois 'society' was in a state of great excitement. The reputation of the Tsar and his ministers had been cruelly undermined by defeats at the hands of the Japanese. A series of banquets organised by the local 'Zemstvo' councils had heard radical speeches from liberal agitators, calling for greater checks and controls over the Tsar, with some speakers going so far as to call for a Constitution or even the election of

a Constituent Assembly. Emboldened, the Zemstvos had begun to send petitions to the Tsar.

But of greater concern to the regime was that alongside the liberals' genteel activity, the working class had begun to show signs of involvement in the campaign against autocracy. The workers' party - the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP) - was only seven years old and had just a few thousand members. It was severely divided, having split into two almost autonomous factions (the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks) in 1903, a split that was reinforced in December 1904. Yet the RSDWP responded creatively to the Zemstvo campaign. Initially at the proposal of Menshevik leaders, the party called on workers to demonstrate outside the liberals' banquets, calling for broad democratic freedoms and a Constituent Assembly.

Menshevik and bourgeois historians have long claimed that the Bolsheviks opposed the tactic of holding workers' demonstrations at the Zemstvo banquets, only backing them when the Mensheviks' tactics succeeded in rallying thousands of workers across Russia. A closer reading reveals the truth. The Bolsheviks never opposed these demonstrations - but they warned that the Mensheviks wanted to put more emphasis on making speeches to the liberals than on fighting the government and the police in the streets. While the Mensheviks worried that an excessively militant attitude by the workers might frighten the banqueting bourgeois and push them to the right - perhaps even panicking them into calling the police - the Bolshevik leader V. I. Lenin argued that mass workers' demonstrations would not only increase pressure on the liberals but would help mobilise the workers as an independent force. If anyone called the police, then mass militant workers' demonstrations would be the way to repel them.

And in late 1904 this was just what happened. Large workers demonstrations were held at liberal Zemstvo gatherings: a banquet in Smolensk, the educational society of Nizhni-Novgorod, the Kharkov Law Society, and the Ekaterinodar municipal council. In Odessa, two successive demonstrations were held. 5000 workers and students convened mass meetings calling for democracy. The second protest was broken up by baton-wielding police.

In an effort to calm the mounting wave of popular protest, the Tsar offered an apparent concession - the Decree of December 12. This promised certain vague liberal reforms, such as easing restrictions on the press, but at an unspecified time in the future. Above all, the decree promised no involvement of the people in choosing the government or running the country. It satisfied nobody - it inflamed the opposition.

The liberal campaign in late 1904 had a tremendous impact on working class activists. As N. Simbirsky wrote: 'I remember the outpouring of petitions that was sent to Petersburg from all corners of Russia... Petitions poured out in abundance, were printed in newspapers, workers read them and ardently discussed them at their meetings...And then, at workers' meetings there emerged the idea: We must go to the people!' And Abraham Ascher recounts that at a meeting on 28 November, 35 workers leaders met in Petersburg to discuss supporting the intelligentsia's demands for freedom. The proposal was adopted unanimously, 'but no one knew how to proceed.' An attempt by the RSDWP to call a march in Petersburg ended in a fiasco - the Bolsheviks accused the Mensheviks of disrupting the mobilisation for factional ends.

When it emerged, mass working class struggle for democracy expressed itself not at first through the RSDWP, let alone through any broad democratic structures, but through an organisation of a very different and indeed highly dubious type. Founded in the capital city under the initiative of the police chief Zubatov, who encouraged the development of pro-Tsarist trade unions, the Assembly of the Russian Factory and Mill Workers of the City of St. Petersburg was headed by an orthodox Priest, Father Georgii Gapon. In return for limiting the Assembly's activities to social and educational initiatives, Gapon received 100 rubles a month from the secret police and their agreement not to harass his members.

Yet Gapon was not just a police stooge. He appears also to have been a naïve idealist, in his own confused and mystical way committed to helping the workers who began to flock to his Assembly organisation. Despite his police connections he came under the influence of liberal activists around the paper *Osvobozhdeniye*, (?Emancipation?), edited by the ex-Marxist intellectual P.B. Struve. Though Gapon at first opposed demonstrations and strikes, as an able organiser, a charismatic speaker and a priest able to appeal to the religious prejudices of the workers, he soon found himself at the head not only of an organisation of nine branches with up to 20,000 members but of a burgeoning movement of direct working class action.

Towards the end of 1904 Gapon broke the statutes of his own organisation and began to admit non-Russian, non-Orthodox and women members. Though he kept his ties to the police, he began to draw up plans to prepare a petition to present to the Tsar on behalf of the workers of Russia.

The first week of 1905 saw a strike movement erupt in Petersburg. In December, four workers - all members of Gapon's Assembly - were sacked from one of Petersburg's most important factories, the Putilov arms and shipbuilding plant. When Gapon tried to do a deal with the plant's director, management refused to deal with the assembly. Gapon realised he had to sanction action, or his authority would be undermined.

The Vasilii Island branch of the assembly then met. In Gapon's absence over 600 workers turned up and voted for a strike. It spread fast. On 4 January the Franco-Russian works came out in support. The next day the Shtiglits factory and the Nevskii shipbuilding plant joined in. By 7 January, 382 factories and offices stopped work - 100,000 workers, two-thirds of the Petersburg workforce, were on strike.

The strike leaders realised that they would attract broader support by raising political demands about society at large, as well as economic ones about their own conditions of work. Gapon quickly raised his idea about presenting a petition to the Tsar, which was enthusiastically taken up. He informed the Governor of Petersburg that he was proposing a peaceful procession on Sunday 9 January.

The priest threw himself into frenetic activity; Ascher reports that one day alone he addressed over 50 meetings of workers, delivering short speeches in favour of the march, "arguing that the Tsar was a good man who would help the people once he understood their plight". He explained the contents of the petition and held votes on its programme, which were generally carried overwhelmingly. Many RSDWP members who attended these meetings were struck not only by the contradiction between the petition's democratic content and Gapon's faith in the Tsar, but also by the powerful emotional impact the meetings had on thousands of workers.

The RSDWP warned against workers having faith in Gapon and the Tsar. The Mensheviks pointed out that servants of the Tsar had founded Gapon's organisation; the Bolsheviks called directly for an armed uprising. They issued a leaflet on 8 January, the day before the march, which pointed out that the Tsar would never voluntarily agree to the petition's demands: "Freedom is bought with blood, freedom is won with weapons in a fierce battle. Don't beg from the Tsar, don't even demand from him; don't abase yourselves before our sworn enemy, but eject him from the throne and with him the entire gang around the autocracy - only in this way will it be possible to gain freedom."

At first, the Bolsheviks' intransigence antagonised some of the pro-Gapon workers. They were sometimes shouted down. One Bolshevik correspondent wrote to Lenin's paper *Vperyod* that the "Zubatovites" would shout down calls for a rising or for the overthrow of the Tsar. But the events of 9 January would change the workers' reverence for the monarch and dramatically vindicate Bolshevik tactics.

For the government was preparing for a savage attack on the procession. On 7 January general Fullon declared that the march would not be tolerated; he moved thousands of troops into the capital. The next day, the regime issued an order to arrest Gapon - but the priest had gone into hiding.

He re-emerged the next day at the head of a vast demonstration. 100,000 workers and democrats turned up; the workers were dressed in their Sunday clothes and many carried Orthodox icons and pictures of the Tsar. There were many women, and families had also brought their children, expecting no trouble.

Surrounded by an honour guard of Assembly workers, Gapon carried the petition, which began:

"Sire: We, the workers and inhabitants of St. Petersburg, of various estates, our wives, children, and our aged, helpless parents, come to Thee, O SIRE, to seek justice and protection. We are impoverished; we are oppressed, overburdened with excessive toil, contemptuously treated...We are suffering in despotism and lawlessness. O SIRE, we have no strength left, and our endurance is at an end. We have reached that frightful moment when death is better than the prolongation of our unbearable sufferings."

The petition then set out a series of significant reforms, including calls for release of political prisoners, freedom of the press, of association, of speech and of worship, free state education, separation of church and state, abolition of indirect taxation and the introduction of a progressive income tax, transfer of land to the people, "termination of the war in accordance with the will of the people", workers' committees in the factories with a veto over all dismissals, an eight-hour day. It then went on to conclude:

"...if Thou withholdest Thy command and failest to respond to our supplications, we will die here on this square before Thy palace."

And so they did. As the front of the great march reached the Narva Gate, a bugle sounded. The soldiers had been given the signal - they opened fire. Forty people fell. As two of Gapon's bodyguards died instantly, the priest famously declared "There is no God any longer! There is no Tsar!" before escaping over a hedge.

Wherever the marchers refused to disperse, troops opened fire. The workers' illusions having been so brutally dispelled, they responded with uncontrollable anger. From then on, the slogans of the day were "Murderers", "Death or Freedom", and "You run from the Japanese but kill your own people!"

L. I. Gurevich wrote that on Bloody Sunday, "the Russian Revolution ceased to be the preserve of the conscious upper stratum and began to spread throughout the country, turning into a deeply rooted spontaneous movement." And it is true that the events changed the character of Russia's democratic agitation from one taking place under the direction of the liberals through bourgeois channels, into a mass movement of the working class. Though small in number compared with the large industrial proletariats of more developed capitalist nations, the Russian working class was highly concentrated, in large-scale enterprises. Now it came to the fore.

The year ahead saw successive general strikes, peasant uprisings and land seizures, student rebellions, national liberation struggles, mutinies in the army and navy, the creation of hundreds of new trade union and workers' organisations, the emergence of democratic workers' committees and Councils of Workers' Deputies ("Soviets"), the growth of the RSDWP from a propaganda society into a party of the workers and - in December 1905 - an armed uprising in Moscow under Bolshevik leadership.

A year of revolution had begun.

**1905: mass strikes and soviets**

The carnage in the streets of St Petersburg on 9 January 1905 unleashed a storm of strikes across the Russian Empire. In January, 414,000 and in February 291,000 workers struck in 122 towns and localities. Militant rail workers spread the strikes to all the industrial centres of Russia and Poland, from the huge metalworking plants in the capital to the mines of the Donets Basin. They broke out too in the non-Russian areas: Poland, Finland and the Baltic provinces. In March all the universities were forcibly closed, as students joined the striking workers.

This mass strike wave was remarkable; nothing like it had been seen before. Not in Britain, Germany or the United States had such a huge, prolonged and spontaneous wave of strikes taken place. The Russian workers' mass strikes which linked immediate economic demands and calls for democratic rights to the overthrow of the autocracy opened the perspective of a nationwide revolution to bring down the Tsarist regime.

In January and February over 13,000 enterprises were affected by strikes. Workers' demands included increases in pay, a maximum eight-hour working day, provision of medical care, an end to verbal and physical abuse by managers and foremen, and the election of recognised workplace representatives. Then strike figures fell in March and April. Was the revolution over? As if to give a resounding 'no', the strike wave quickly resumed with 220,000 workers striking in May. Strike figures remained high in June and July (142,000 and 150,000 respectively) and then fell back again in August and September.

Lenin, in a lecture he gave on the 1905 revolution 12 years later, said that in these months: 'Russia was transformed into a Russia of a revolutionary proletariat and a revolutionary people. (...) The principal factor in this transformation was the mass strike.'

The mass strikes had given birth to another new phenomenon, one that was to prove of historic importance for the world working class - the soviet. On 12 May, a strike of textile workers broke out in Ivanovo-Voznesensk which lasted for a staggering 72 days. Textile workers were some of the poorest, worst paid, most downtrodden workers in Russia. A large majority of them were women. On 15 May, 110 delegates from the various factories met in a sort of council (in Russian, soviet).

Initially this was a meeting of elected workers' representatives to put their case to the government factory inspector. But it decided to continue in existence as a strike committee. It took on more and more tasks in the city. It arranged food and supplies, created a militia to keep order, issued its own press, held daily mass meetings of the strikers. On 3 June fights occurred with the police and the Cossacks. Eventually the strike was defeated and the soviet dissolved but the example was to be copied in the next great upsurge of mass strikes in the autumn.

In the soviet the textile workers of Ivanovo had created an instrument excellently adapted to the new means of struggle workers were already using, the mass strike. It was a body that challenged the employers and the Tsarist police as to who ruled in the factories and streets of the city. This instrument of struggle would soon be taken up by workers in the main cities, particularly in St Petersburg and Moscow and become an instrument of the struggle for power. The soviet was the embodiment of working class democracy - democracy for the class struggle.

## **Defeats and mutinies**

The main thing undermining the prestige and self-confidence of the regime was the war with Japan which was going from bad to worse. In January, Port Arthur - the Russian base in the Far East, which had been besieged for months - surrendered. In February 1905, the Russian army was defeated at Mukden, losing 90,000 men. The Tsar ordered the Baltic fleet to sail halfway round the world to recover the desperate

situation but it was ignominiously beaten and sunk by the Japanese navy at the battle of Tsushima on 14 May.

There were major naval mutinies at Sevastopol, Vladivostok and Kronstadt, peaking in June, with the famous mutiny aboard the Battleship Potemkin and the associated revolutionary upheavals in the Black Sea port of Odessa. The Tsar scrambled to accept American mediation and a peace treaty was signed with Japan in Portsmouth, Connecticut in August.

Simultaneously the Tsar finally decided to offer some fake concessions to help confuse and demobilise the mass movement. On 6 August he issued a ukase (decree) which announced that a parliament or Duma would be elected in the coming months. Nevertheless he also made it clear that the great mass of the population, the workers and all but the richest peasants, would be excluded from the electorate. This proposal, which came to be called after the minister in charge of it, the Bulygin Duma, greatly excited the Liberals but was rejected out of hand by the workers' party, the Social Democrats, and the Socialist Revolutionaries (peasant based populists). They determined to boycott any elections and press on with the demand for a constituent assembly. The Bolsheviks stressed that only an armed insurrection and a provisional revolutionary government could convene a constituent assembly.

In August Lenin published a pamphlet, 'Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution'. He accepted that the Russian revolution was a bourgeois revolution (one which would open the road to democracy and capitalism), and not a socialist revolution that would enable the working class to commence the construction of a planned economy in place of capitalism. Nevertheless, Lenin added that the bourgeoisie in Russia was anti-revolutionary and would always seek to compromise with Tsarism, using the mass action of the workers and peasants to win reforms but betraying their interests once they had secured themselves a place at the ruling table. The social classes that would carry out the revolution were the working class leading the peasantry, so a provisional revolutionary government would have to be what he called a 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry'. This envisaged a provisional government of social democrats and SR populists.

By contrast the Menshevik leaders, Pavel Axelrod, Yulii Martov and Georgi Plekhanov, argued that because of the bourgeois character of the revolution, the liberal bourgeoisie had to be pressured into replacing Tsarism. Instead of an alliance with the peasantry, they sought an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie. The social democracy, representing the working class, would remain a party of opposition and would not participate in the government.

A third alternative perspective was advanced by Trotsky and Alexander Helphand, known as Parvus. This was known as the permanent revolution, meaning that starting as a bourgeois and democratic revolution, it must pass over to working class and socialist measures and spread on an international level. Trotsky and Parvus argued that the working class must seize power and form a workers' government, relying on the support of the peasantry. Once in power this government would be obliged to make inroads into the economic domination of the capitalists, if only to prevent them sabotaging the revolution. The economic backwardness of Russia meant that there was no question of completing the socialist revolution in Russia. It must be actively spread to the advanced capitalist countries of central and western Europe. Clearly Trotsky and Parvus' perspective and that of Lenin and the Bolsheviks were the closest since both emphasised placing no reliance on the bourgeoisie to overthrow the Tsar and take power, the necessity of an armed uprising by the workers, and the formation of a provisional government which would break up the Tsarist state.

Nevertheless the summer saw a distinct ebbing of the revolutionary tide. Repression increased, and the Tsar moved ahead to impose the 'Bulygin Duma'. Nicholas even felt secure enough to go on holiday. But

he was relaxing too soon. The most intensive phase of the revolution was about to break out.

## **The October general strike**

Towards the end of September mass strike action broke out again. The combination of the autocracy's police violence and social-democratic agitation increasingly spurred this to a higher, more directly political, level. On 19 September the Moscow printers began a strike for higher wages. On 2 October printers in St Petersburg struck in solidarity. On 22 September clashes occurred with the police ? firearms were reportedly used. Spurred by a police attack on a meeting of the bakers' union, delegates of strikers convened a soviet. On the railways, the workers were already set on staging an all-Russian strike to coincide with the opening of the new State Duma which was scheduled to take place in January 1906.

The struggle was subject to numerous ebbs and flows. On 4 and 5 October the Moscow printers returned to work ? the St. Petersburg printers followed. Trotsky observed that ?everyday life seemed about to return, but that was only how it looked.?

Yet over the coming days the strike movement unexpectedly gathered momentum. A railway strike began on 7 October; an all-Russian railway union was finally founded on 8 October. The next day the other lines struck. Moscow-Kiev-Voronezh, Moscow-Brest. The slogans of the railway workers linked economic and political demands: eight-hour day, civil liberties, amnesty, constituent assembly. Along the lines the telegraph spread news of the mounting action.

As the strikes in various sectors gathered force the strikers themselves began to elect delegates. The Mensheviks saw a conference of such representatives as an embodiment of their call for ?organs of revolutionary self-government?. Trotsky who arrived from Finland about this time had developed the idea of a council of elected delegates to organise the strike actions. Thus at a meeting of about 40 delegates, held in the St Petersburg Technological Institute a soviet was formed on 13 October. The first chair was a lawyer and Menshevik sympathiser, Krustalev-Nosar. But the real political influences on the soviet soon became Trotsky and Parvus. It set out to draw delegates from as many factories and trade unions as possible on the basis of one delegate per 500 workers. By November 562 delegates from 147 factories and 16 trade unions took their places in the soviet. The example was followed in Moscow and 50 other cities and towns, plus a few peasants' and soldiers' soviets.

The Bolshevik faction in St Petersburg was initially cautious about the call for an all out general strike and downright suspicious about the formation of the soviet. It was not until 13 October that the Petersburg Committee of the RSDLP issued a call for a general strike. By then the entire rail network ? some 750,000 workers ? were on strike. Hundreds of thousands of workers from enterprises of every type walked out alongside them. The principle Bolshevik leader then present in St Petersburg, Alexander Bogdanov, was hostile to the idea of a soviet. The Bolsheviks correctly opposed the Mensheviks' idea of creating what they called ?organs of self-government? whilst there was still a fully blown Tsarist dictatorship in operation and as an alternative to an armed insurrection. For the Bolsheviks this was central to winning democratic liberties and then it would not be a matter just of self-government but of power over the whole of the country.

Bogdanov and the Petersburg Bolshevik leadership however made a serious mistake. Bogdanov came up with the idea of issuing an ultimatum to the nascent soviet: adopt the party programme of the Social Democrats or convert itself into a purely trade union body. However this wooden schematic approach fell apart the moment the Bolsheviks tried to apply it. It soon became clear to them that if their ultimatum were to be passed an important minority of Socialist Revolutionaries and the majority of non-party delegates might well be driven away from the soviet. The soviet itself did not even vote on the proposal. And the

Bolsheviks quickly abandoned it.

Soon Lenin's arrival from abroad in early November buried this ultimatum approach. Lenin attended the soviet and was immediately impressed with both its actual role in leading the general strike and its potential. This quickly led the Bolsheviks to a more proactive and positive attitude to the soviets. Lenin saw that far from being obstacles to it, they could become organs of the insurrection. And if it were successful, they could become the foundation of a provisional government.

In fact the Bolsheviks and most of the Mensheviks, plus the small group of militants around Trotsky and Parvus had taken a clear stance in support of the mass strike as a key weapon of working class struggle. At the same time they all opposed the arguments of the anarcho-syndicalists that a general strike would be sufficient to bring down Tsarism and capitalism and install decentralised working class control over the economy. Their view was that a general strike could unite the working class and rouse even its more backward sections to struggle, but that alone it would be insufficient to overthrow the autocracy.

Thus Trotsky wrote: "... a strike brings the army of the revolution to its feet. But neither the one nor the other, in itself, creates a state revolution. The power still has to be snatched from the hands of the old rulers and handed over to the revolution. That is the fundamental task. A general strike only creates the necessary pre-conditions; it is quite inadequate for achieving the task itself."

What months of liberal petitioning and pleading had failed to achieve, the general strike wrung from the Tsar within a matter of days. On 17 October, he issued what became known as the Constitutional Manifesto. In it the frightened Nicholas promised freedom of conscience, speech, assembly, and union; that the lower classes would be able to vote in elections to the Duma; and that no law would take effect without the approval of the Duma. The Tsar followed this initiative with the appointment of the liberal stockbroker Witte as prime minister.

In countless revolutions since, movements have responded to such concessions by entering into negotiations with the regime. Under reformist leadership the working class movement has invariably sacrificed its independence, ceding hegemony of this "democratic revolution" to the bourgeois compromisers, often with the approval of people who call themselves revolutionaries or the "far left". Yet in 1905, the Liberals' joyous reaction to the Tsar's manifesto was not matched by the revolutionary social democrats. They warned the masses of the Tsar's deceit and his real aims - the demobilisation of the movement.

On 17 October, the very day of the Tsar's manifesto, Lenin's article An Equilibrium of Forces stated unambiguously: "If we do not rise to a higher level, if we do not manage to launch an independent offensive, if we do not smash the forces of Tsarism, do not destroy its actual power, then the revolution will stop half-way, then the bourgeoisie will fool the workers. Rumour has it that a constitution has been decided upon. If that is so, then it follows that the tsar is heeding the lessons of 1848 and other revolutions: he wants to grant a constitution without a constituent assembly, before a constituent assembly, apart from a constituent assembly...this implies ... skipping the revolution deceiving the people..."

Meanwhile in Petersburg Trotsky and the leaders of the new workers' soviet took a similar stance. In a famous speech, he contrasted the Manifesto's words with the repressive actions of the autocracy and described the Manifesto not as a step towards democracy but as a gambit of a desperate regime and "a prelude to martial law".

The Tsar appointed Witte prime minister with responsibility for fuelling illusions in the coming "constitutional" monarchy, but still relied on his police chief in Petersburg, General Trepov, who had



posted the infamous order to the troops on the eve of the October general strike ?no blank shots: spare no bullets?, and his Minister of the Interior P. N. Durnovo. The latter, with his imperial master's approval, unleashed the most reactionary forces across Russia to try to poison the consciousness of the workers with anti-Jewish racism and also savagely attack the revolutionaries and the militant vanguard of the working class.

Who were these forces, who in many ways pre-figured 20th century fascism? The Union of the Russian People united a number of reactionary forces which had been springing up after 1900 as the revolutionary ferment increased. The secret police ? the Okhrana ? played a large part in organising and arming bands of thugs, the Black Hundreds. It was the Okhrana who had manufactured the bible of anti-Semitism the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in 1903. The Tsar and the court clique also played a key role in encouraging atrocities against the Jews by launching a furious campaign of pogroms. Lumpenproletarian gangs attacked Jews, students, workers and, in one recorded instance, school students. Hundreds were killed in Kiev, thousands in Odessa.

In Zhitomir, a city with a two-thirds Jewish population, seminary students mounted armed resistance to the pogromists. By the end of October, there had been more than 57 pogroms in cities and towns across Russia. In St Petersburg however the soviet enormously expanded its workers militia. It persuaded gunsmiths to sell large quantities of revolvers, despite police attempts to stop them. Engineering factories produced sabres. Printers stopped the production of pogromist literature. Attempts by the Black Hundreds to march on the Soviet were broken up. No pogrom occurred in St Petersburg.

But the turn of the regime and its arch-reactionary social base to these actions made it clear that no hope or reliance could be based on Witte and the Tsar's constitutional guarantees. The only safety and hope for the working class, the peasants, the oppressed nationalities, the persecuted Jewish population was to go forward to the overthrow of Tsarism. The working class movement, the revolutionary social democrats had now to put the question of the struggle for power at the top of its agenda.

### **?The soviet is preparing an insurrection?**

Russia was gripped by a general strike, led by the newly formed St Petersburg soviet of workers' deputies. It had forced the Tsar Nicholas II to issue the 17 October Constitutional Manifesto, which promised freedom of speech and organisation as well as a Duma (Russian Parliament) with some real powers. Its author Count Sergei Witte was appointed prime minister.

Elements of dual power now developed - two sources of authority in society existed. Though the Tsar still had a monopoly of the armed power, he scarcely dared use it. The police hardly appeared on the streets and the troops, especially the sailors, were openly mutinous. On the other side, the St Petersburg soviet armed its own militia.

This situation lasted fifty days: the ?Days of Freedom?. The soviet abolished censorship, freedom of assembly was won with a wide variety of meetings, revolutionary and liberal newspapers were freely on sale and political parties organised openly. Local government bodies consulted the soviet over food supplies and order.

These democratic rights were not enshrined in law, let alone enforced by the state, but by the soviet. In other cities soviets were also set up.

Deprived of the use of the police and the army, the Tsar and the secret police (the Okhrana) resorted to creating an auxiliary force from the dregs of both the propertied classes and the lumpenproletariat: the so

called Black Hundreds. A wave of anti-semitic programs and terrorist attacks on revolutionaries broke out and raged for a month. These mobs killed between 3,500 to 4,000 people and wounded over 10,000. On 8 November the Black Hundreds formed the Union of Russian People. Thus the revolution of 1905, a dress rehearsal for so many things, pre-figured fascism too.

Lenin was later to observe: "The whole course of the Russian revolution after October, and the sequence of events in Moscow in the December days, strikingly confirmed one of Marx's profound propositions: revolution progresses by giving rise to a strong and united counter-revolution" (On the Moscow Rising July 1906)

But the tide of revolution was still rising. On 26-27 October, a major mutiny occurred amongst the sailors on the island of Kronstadt and on 30-31 in the port of Vladivostok. In the countryside a wave of peasant disturbances took place. Between 6 and 12 November a Peasants' Union was founded.

On 29 October the St Petersburg soviet launched a struggle for the eight hour day. There was, however, a serious obstacle. Whereas the liberal bourgeoisie had supported the strike for a democratic constitution, the eight hour day would hit them where it hurt, in their wallets.

The bosses responded immediately with a lockout and the strike had to be abandoned. The limits of the mass strike in a period of economic recession were becoming obvious. But this did not mean that the revolution was over, that nothing could be done.

Dual power cannot last indefinitely - one or the other power must triumph and liquidate its rival. The leadership of the St Petersburg soviet, which included Bolsheviks and Mensheviks as well as Leon Trotsky and Alexander Helphand (Parvus), appealed for the formation of soviets across Russia and for them to join an armed uprising. Only a provisional revolutionary government could destroy the state and summon a constituent assembly, they argued. New workers' councils were indeed formed, though not in Moscow until 21 November.

The spreading of the revolution across the vast Russian Empire, combined with the reverses suffered by the workers in the capital, restored decisiveness to the counter-revolutionary forces. These were led by the Interior Minister Trepov, the city governor Durnovo and the Tsar himself.

On 26 November, Durnovo and the Tsar had the chair of the St Petersburg soviet, arrested. The soviet declared: "The soviet is electing a provisional presidium and continuing its preparation for an armed insurrection." Trotsky, long the real leader, became the chair.

It was not till the 3 December that the soviet called the general strike. But, at that very moment, troops surrounded the building and the deputies were all arrested. A third general strike began. But it soon became clear that the centre of the movement had moved to Moscow.

### **The uprising in Moscow**

The Moscow soviet was formed late. Why? The Bolsheviks' negative attitude, to non-party bodies may have played some role in this. But Lenin's growing conviction that soviets could organise the armed insurrection and form the basis of the "dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" changed attitudes. The Mensheviks also followed Trotsky and Parvus' line - towards an armed insurrection and a workers' government.

For two months Lenin had been urgently advocating the formation of small fighting groups: "What is needed is furious energy, and again energy. It horrifies me ? I give you my word ? it horrifies me to find

that there has been talk about bombs for over six months, yet not one has been made! And it is the most learned of people who are doing the talking? Go to the youth, gentlemen! That is the only remedy!?

He urged the Bolsheviks to take the lead, obtaining weapons from mutinous regiments, striking an agreement with the Socialist Revolutionaries, and agreeing the timing and launch of an uprising.

The Bolshevik committee, headed by Lyadov, Vasiliev and Shantser, led the Moscow uprising. By December a militia had around 1,000 men with arms ? some with rifles, most with Mauser revolvers, and a small number of bombs. Above all, central coordination and communications were weak. Nor was there any overall plan for how the uprising should proceed, no selection of strategic targets to capture.

Despite the insurrection being the Bolsheviks? key slogan since January, the attack on the Petersburg soviet caught the party unawares. A special conference of several hundred Bolsheviks was held in Moscow, with delegates sent from each by district and factory. It decided to agitate for a rising.

The next day, 6 December, Moscow saw a mutiny and rising of one of the Rostov regiments. Though this was quickly suppressed, General Dubasov dared not put most of the garrison on the streets, fearing their reliability. He kept wiring the government and Tsar to send reinforcements from St Petersburg. They hesitated, still fearing an uprising in the capital.

The Moscow soviet met on 6 December in a sombre atmosphere: no one was sure what the attitude of the troops would be; unless the garrison came over to the side of the rising, it would probably fail. But delegates were also aware that the working masses were thirsting for action. Even if the Soviet did not act it was very likely that fighting would break out. Thus, despite their forebodings, both the Social Democratic factions and the SRs voted for ?a general political strike, which transforms itself into a rising.?

On the first day 100,000 workers stopped work , and 150,000 on the second day of the strike. Huge demonstrations packed the streets; mass meetings were held in many venues. At one point an infantry regiment, marching down a central street, broke into singing the Marseillaise ? one of the main revolutionary songs of 1905. Print workers rushed a deputation to meet them but it arrived too late, and the authorities marched them back to their barracks.

After some hesitation the city governor tried to round up the ringleaders. On 9 December dragoons attacked a huge crowd in Strasnaya Square. The Fiedler building was also raided that evening. In response barricades began to be built to impede the movement of the cossacks and the police. On 10 December the regime used artillery fire; the workers responded by building barricades on a mass scale. The rising had begun.

Squads of militia fighters ? druzhniki ? spread out across the city in teams of three and four. They attacked police stations and military units to secure arms; they raided gunsmiths? shops and stores. The general strike promised by the railwaymen came good.

The fundamental weakness of the rising was its lack of central organisation and communication, and above all an offensive plan. A real disaster was the immediate arrest of two of the three members of the Bolshevik committee, Shantser and Vasiliev. The third, Lyadov, was unable to establish communications with the party cells or the fighting groups. It was several days before any instructions appeared and when they did, the advice focused on saturating the city with small fighting groups, pinning down the police, concentrating fire on officers and securing escape routes.

Good enough advice for guerrilla actions, but totally inadequate as a strategy for seizing power. The problem was that the forces of counter-revolution, initially paralysed, began an offensive against the

insurrection. For an insurrection to remain on the defensive is fatal for just this reason.

Despite all this, the insurrection had a real prospect of success. The academic historian J L Keep observed, 'The evidence suggests that if the insurgents had made a sudden determined assault on the main centres of authority they could have gained control of the city.' This vital lesson would be deployed to epoch-making effect just 12 years later.

On 10 and 11 December the fate of the rising hung in the balance. The troops were tired and frustrated, unschooled in responding to guerrilla operations. But the insurgents lost momentum. Between 12 and 15 December the spirit of the masses finally began to weaken, when they saw no prospect of victory and casualties from artillery fire began to mount.

Critically, the St Petersburg-Moscow railway remained unsevered. Despite the rail strike the regime sent troops to occupy the line. It should, of course, have been destroyed at several points to delay the advance of the troops but this was not even attempted till it was too late.

As the crack Semyonovsky guards arrived from St Petersburg ever greater numbers of workers began leaving the city. The insurrection broke up into a series of district defences. The forces of order eventually concentrated on the Presnya district, finally taking it on 17 December. Reprisals began immediately, across the city. By official figures, 442 were killed and 822 wounded.

In reality the number of dead was probably near 1,000.

### **Mensheviks and Bolsheviks debate the uprising**

Once the rising was over a debate developed as to whether it was an error - either tactical or strategic. The Mensheviks especially the exiled leaders Georgi Plekhanov and Pavel Axelrod thought it was. The Social Democrats should not have tried to take power because this was not a socialist but a bourgeois revolution. The Mensheviks in Russia too, despite having supported the rising, began to criticise their own headstrong actions. Trotsky and Lenin staunchly stood by the rising.

Trotsky argued in his work 1905: 'But in a developing revolutionary situation a planned retreat is, from the start, unthinkable. A party may have the masses behind it while it is attacking, but that does not mean that it will be able to lead them away at will in the midst of the attack. It is not only the party that leads the masses: the masses, in turn, sweep the party forward. And this will happen in any revolution, however powerful its organisation. Given such conditions, to retreat without battle may mean the party abandoning the masses under enemy fire.'

He goes on: 'The army's political mood, that great unknown of every revolution, can be determined only in the process of a clash between the soldiers and the people. The army's crossing over to the camp of the revolution is a moral process; but it cannot be brought about by moral means alone... Only when the soldiers become convinced that the people have come out into the streets for a life-and-death struggle - not to demonstrate against the government but to overthrow it - does it become psychologically possible for them to cross over to the side of the people. Thus an insurrection is, in essence, not so much a struggle against the army as a struggle for the army. The more stubborn, far-reaching, and successful the insurrection, the more probable - indeed inevitable - is a fundamental change in the attitude of the troops.'

Lenin totally agreed with this analysis, harshly rejecting the view of Plekhanov that the uprising was a mistake, but also making a self-criticism of the way the revolutionaries had prepared the uprising.

'In December, we, the leaders of the Social-Democratic proletariat, were like a commander-in-chief who

has deployed his troops in such an absurd way that most of them took no active part in the battle. The masses of the workers demanded, but failed to receive, instructions for resolute mass action.

Thus, nothing could be more short-sighted than Plekhanov's view, seized upon by all the opportunists, that the strike was untimely and should not have been started, and that they should not have taken to arms. On the contrary, we should have taken to arms more resolutely, energetically and aggressively; we should have explained to the masses that it was impossible to confine things to a peaceful strike and that a fearless and relentless armed fight was necessary. And now we must at last openly and publicly admit that political strikes are inadequate; we must carry on the widest agitation among the masses in favour of an armed uprising and make no attempt to obscure this question by talk about preliminary stages, or to befog it in any way.

We would be deceiving both ourselves and the people if we concealed from the masses the necessity of a desperate, bloody war of extermination, as the immediate task of the coming revolutionary action.

For all their mistakes, the defeated Moscow fighters of 1905 prepared the way for the victorious fighters of October 1917.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/1905-first-russian-revolution>