

Origins and progression of the russian revolution essay sample

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The origins of the Russian Revolution can be explained in terms of the peasant consciousness of land which can be traced back to 1861. Russia had been the last country in Europe to abolish serfdom; nevertheless, Alexander II's emancipation edict of 1861 though earning him the title Czar Liberator, had left peasants feeling cheated. The Russian Revolution of 1905 failed to solve the land issue, reaction of the government in trying to suppress the grievances of the peasants helped less. Economic and social changes in Russia from 1905 affected the peasants. The Russo-Japanese war of 1905 humiliated the Russians and increased the economic downturn. The defeat increased the unpopularity of the Tsarist regime among the generals as also did the Bloody Sunday and World war One.

“ The Russian Revolution is an extremely complex event, made all the more complex by the varying historiographical traditions – Soviet, liberal, libertarian and revisionist – that have sought to explain it.” ¹ The period after the outbreak of the Revolution in 1917 to 1922 saw the Revolution going through various shapes. These include the abdication of Czar Nicholas II and the establishment of the provisional government, the October Revolution and assumption of power by the Bolsheviks, Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Civil War and collapse of opposition to the Russian Soviet State. At the heart of the Revolution there is a paradox: an autocratic, oppressive, bureaucratic and militaristic police state under the Czars was replaced by an autocratic, oppressive, bureaucratic and militaristic police state under the Bolsheviks. ² On December 30 1922 only the personnel had changed but the system was still the same.

The origins of the Revolution can be traced back to the unsatisfactory legislation which abolished serfdom in Russia in 1861. Wood says that, the emancipation of the serfs has been variously described as the ‘ most important single act of legislation in the entire history of Russia’, and as being ‘ not worth the paper it was written on’. 3 Czar Alexander II conservative though he was, realized that the rising tide of peasant revolts, especially after the Crimean War 1853-1856, would not permit further delay. As he told the nobility: ‘ Better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until it abolishes itself from below.’4 Some features of the complex legislation were as follows.

First, the serfs were given their legal freedom that is they were no longer the private property of their masters and were free to trade, marry and acquire property. However, the emancipation of 1861 had left peasants feeling cheated since an elementary theory of property, believed by many peasants, was that land should belong to those who work on it. 5 The landed gentry kept roughly one-sixth of the land – usually the best-quality land – and the peasants had to pay for the land they received at a price above its market value. Therefore the emancipation of the serfs was the foundation of Czar Alexander’s reforms which generated new social, political and intellectual forces confined within the rigid political framework of an absolutist, autocratic state but however made the revolution inevitable. 6

The Russian Revolution of 1905 failed to solve the land issue. On January 9, 1905, as a group of unarmed workers approached the Winter Palace to present a petition of grievances to the Tsar, they were fired upon by Cossack

troops. About two hundred demonstrators were killed and hundreds more were wounded. The incident, which became known as Bloody Sunday, sparked the 1905 revolution. Before Bloody Sunday, the Russian masses had not played a major role in the political turmoil of late tsarist Russia. That soon changed; however, as general demonstrations were held to protest the massacre, and several hundred thousand workers went on strike. 7 Liberals used the occasion to press the Tsar to abandon autocracy in favour of a constitutional monarchy.

Nicholas's initial attempt to appease popular opinion backfired: he decided to allow university students to hold assemblies for the first time since 1884 and, quite unexpectedly, forbade the police to enter university grounds. The situation looked especially bleak from the Tsar's perspective, as fresh waves of workers' strikes spread across the country. At the same time, the regime was faced with continued student demonstrations, peasant disorders, mutinies in the armed forces, and unrest among national minorities in the non-Russian regions of the empire. According to one historian of the period, 'the autocracy was consistently on the defensive, seized by panic and confusion and apparently unable to restore order.'

After the 1905 strikes, the peasants and workers saw in the state and capitalists a single mechanism of oppression. In October, the minister of finance, Sergei Witte, convinced Nicholas to grant concessions to the liberals in order to separate them from the radicals and hopefully restore order. According to Witte, there was no other way to save the state. Hence Nicholas signed the October Manifesto, by which he promised to grant civil liberties

and create a nationally elected parliament, the Duma. Laws were passed during the next several months abolishing censorship and guaranteeing freedom of assembly and association. The concessions did not satisfy everyone, but they were effective in creating divisions among the revolutionaries proffers Marples.

It was in large part the granting of such concessions that enabled Nicholas to weather the storm of 1905 and preserve his monarchy intact. By no means, however, was stability restored to Russia in 1905. Political terrorism and social unrest remained key characteristics of Russian life: in 1908 alone, 1, 800 officials were killed and 2, 038 were wounded in politically motivated attacks. 11 Workers remained actively revolutionary and became increasingly militant throughout 1905. The intelligentsia became more, rather than less, radical; in general, they saw the events of 1905 as an episode on the road to full scale revolution.

The growing unpopularity of the Tsarist regime and its clinging to autocracy culminated in the coming of the Russian revolution in 1917. With the publication of a constitution—the Fundamental Laws—in 1906, it became clear that Nicholas intended to retain what he could of his autocratic powers. In fact, the document still referred to the Tsar as ‘ autocrat’. As promised in the October Manifesto, a two-chamber parliament was established, of which the lower house, the State Duma, was made up entirely of elected officials. But this was in some senses a hollow concession: the franchise system was designed to ensure the representation of the propertied classes at the expense of peasants, workers and ethnic minorities.

Further undermining the possibility of true reform was the fact that the Crown reserved the right to dissolve the Duma at any time, and Article 87 of the Fundamental Laws empowered the Crown, in emergencies, to rule by decree when parliament (which included both the Duma and the State Council) was not in session. Ironically, these reforms were widely resented by a majority of the peasants, who chose to remain in the commune because of their traditional opposition to private landownership and because of the greater security the commune offered; most peasants felt threatened by the reform, which aimed to destroy the commune system.

Industrialisation and modernisation brought with them enormous strains on the society. Smith avers that, “ the collapse of the autocracy was rooted in a crisis of modernization” 14 and Bromely concurs that, the pressures of modernization and industrialization made ruling Russia in the period 1848 to 1917 a daunting task. 15 By 1860 and particularly from the 1890s the government tried hard to keep abreast militarily and economically of the major European powers by modernizing Russia’s economy. 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 that industrialization could bring. By 1913 Russia had become the fifth largest industrial power in the world. Moreover, with industrialisation came a social transformation with enormous political implications. The old hierarchy of legally defined estates – noble, clergy, merchant, peasant and others – 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. 16 This emerging class

structure created identities and aspirations that played a major role in the coming of the Russian revolution.

The Russo-Japanese war of 1905 and the First World War were central both to the coming of the Russian revolution in 1917 and to its outcome. The wars placed enormous strains on the population and increased popular discontent. Heavy losses during the war strengthened thoughts that Tsar Nicholas II was unfit to rule. They undermined the discipline of the Russian army, thereby reducing the government's ability to use force to suppress the increased discontent. Russia faced a series of defeats in the First World War that contribute to growing popular discontent among both the educated elite and the masses.

Russia was poorly prepared for the war, militarily, industrially and politically. This culminated in shattering defeats by the Germans at the battles of Tannenburg and Masurian lakes. Wade opines that, 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 greatly shaped the revolution that did occur. 18 By 1915 Russia had lost a large and rich part of the empire in the west; all of Poland and parts of Ukraine Russia's armies lost about two and a half million men in addition to the million and a half already killed, wounded or taken prisoner in 1914. Defeat and government mismanagement led to widespread discontent among all segments of the society.

On February 23 1917 a revolution had broken out. Thousands of female textile-workers and housewives took to the streets of Petrograd the Russian capital. To protest about the bread shortage and to mark International Women's Day. The next day, more than 200 000 workers were on strike and demonstrators marched from the outlying districts into the city centre hurling rocks and lumps of ice at police as they went. Students and members of the middle classes joined the protesters who now bore placards proclaiming ' Down with the War' and ' down with the Czarist Government.' Soldiers from the garrison were ordered to fire on the crowds, killing hundreds. The next morning, the Volynskii regiment mutinied, its example quickly followed by other units. By March 170 000 soldiers swarmed among the insurgents who were now attacking prisons and police stations arresting officials and destroying Czarist ' emblems of slavery.'

In 1905 the autocracy had withstood the revolutionary movement for 12 months; in February 1917, deprived of the support from the army, it survived for less than 12 days. 19 Looking at the failure of the 1905 revolution, the Mensheviks quickly called on workers and soldiers to elect delegates to a Soviet or council, the ' Petrograd Soviet or workers' council.' Members of the Duma, or parliament, alarmed at disorders on the streets, also resolved to capitalize on the crisis. On 2 March the Duma went ahead without a formal mandate and established a provisional or temporary, government. The next day Nicholas abdicated and the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty came to an end.

The Provisional Government was announced and it was initially chaired by a liberal aristocrat, a member of the Constitutional Democratic Party. The Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government competed for power over Russia. The effective power of the Provisional Government was challenged by the authority of an institution that claimed to represent the will of workers and soldiers and could, in fact, mobilize and control these groups during the early months of the revolution. In February 1917, striking workers elected deputies to represent them and socialist activists began organizing a citywide council to unite these deputies with representatives of the socialist parties. The leaders of the Petrograd Soviet believed that they represented particular classes of the population, not the whole nation.

They also believed Russia was not ready for socialism. So they saw their role as limited to pressuring hesitant “ bourgeoisie” to rule and to introduce extensive democratic reforms in Russia. The representatives of the Provisional Government agreed to take into account the opinions of the Soviet of Workers, however this “ dual power” was the result less of the actions or attitudes of the leaders of these two institutions than of actions outside their control, especially the ongoing social movement taking place on the streets of Russia’s cities, in factories and shops, in barracks and in the trenches, and in the villages.

A series of political crises ensued in the relationship between population and government and between the Provisional government and the Soviets which developed into a nationwide movement with a national leadership; the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets which undermined the

authority of the Provisional Government but also of the moderate socialist leaders of the Soviet. Although the Soviet leadership initially refused to participate in the Provisional Government, Alexander Kerensky, a young and popular lawyer and a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, agreed to join the new cabinet, and became an increasingly central figure in the government, eventually taking leadership of the Provisional Government.

Kerensky promoted freedom of speech, released thousands of political prisoners, did his very best to continue the war effort. Nevertheless, Kerensky still faced several great challenges, highlighted by the soldiers, urban workers and peasants, who claimed that they had gained nothing by the revolution. Other political groups were trying to undermine him, heavy military losses were being suffered on the front, the soldiers were dissatisfied, demoralized and had started to defect. There was enormous discontent with Russia's involvement in the First World War, and many were calling for an end to it.

In April 1917, Vladimir Lenin and other revolutionaries returned to Russia after having been permitted by the German government to cross Germany. The Germans hoped that the Bolsheviks would undermine the Russian war effort. Lenin galvanized the small and therefore cautious Bolshevik party into action. The courses he advocated were simplified into the powerful slogans "end the war," "all land to the peasants," and "all power to the Soviets." This was to be a decisive factor in the turn of events during the course of the Revolution as the Revolution now had a figurehead, a leader who gave it direction which it had lacked during the first few months.

The Revolution was to take a major shift in October 1917. Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin led his leftist revolutionaries in a revolt against the ineffective Provisional Government. The October revolution ended the phase of the revolution instigated in February, replacing Russia's short-lived provisional parliamentary government with government by Soviets, local councils elected by bodies of workers and peasants. Liberal and monarchist forces, loosely organized into the White Army, immediately went to war against the Bolsheviks' Red Army, in a series of battles that would become known as the Russian Civil War.

The Russian Civil War, which broke out in 1918 shortly after the revolution, brought death and suffering to millions of people regardless of their political orientation. The war was fought mainly between the Red Army, consisting of the uprising majority led by the Bolshevik minority, and the White army officers and Cossacks, the "bourgeoisie", and political groups ranging from the far Right to the Socialist Revolutionaries who opposed the drastic restructuring championed by the Bolsheviks following the collapse of the Provisional Government to the soviets under clear Bolshevik dominance. The Whites had backing from nations such as Great Britain, France, USA and Japan, while the Reds sported internal, domestic support which proved to be much more effective. Though the Allied nations, using external interference, provided substantial military aid to the loosely knit anti-Bolshevik forces, they were ultimately defeated.

To sum up on the origins and progression of the Russian revolution, one can safely proffer that had the liberal spirit of the 1860s continued to pervade

the Russian government, the revolution ordeal from 1917 in Russia need not have occurred. 20 The modernisation of Russia undertaken after the debacle of the Crimean War 1853-6 only served to worsen existing tensions and to create new ones. These culminated in the 1905 Revolution which, remarkably, the Czar survived. Mass discontent rose again by 1914 and Nicholas II could not contain it; the aspirations of the various opposition groups were different and did not really constitute an alternative to 300 years of Romanov tradition. Accordingly, a revolution was not inevitable.

On the verge of the First World War the regime was still intact. It was, therefore, brought down by the war. A succession of defeats exposed the inadequacy of the government in general and the Czar in particular. He was blamed for the defeats and he was removed. Once he was removed there developed a climate of disobedience that gave full reign to the aspirations of the oppressed. The chaos that followed created a political vacuum into which Lenin and the Bolsheviks stepped, by means of a coup leading to the October Revolution and the outbreak of the Civil War which ended in 1922 and to the creation of a Russian Communist State, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

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