The Revolution of 1905–7

OBSCHESTVENNOST' AND LIBERALISM The revolution of 1905–7 completely changed the context of Russian politics. Hitherto confined to timid and artificially restricted contacts among themselves and occasionally with a few workers and peasants, members of the intelligentsia and obschestvennost' were abruptly thrust into mass electoral politics. In a few short months they had to create political parties, draw up programmes and project them to a population even less accustomed to politics than they were themselves.

The decisive change came with the Manifesto of 17 October 1905, in which the Tsar guaranteed his subjects a broad repertoire of civil rights and announced the establishment of a legislative assembly, the State Duma, to be elected on a wide suffrage, including workers, peasants and non-Russian nationalities. This was a triumph for the majority of political activists among obschestvennost' who had long called for an end to the autocracy.

The origins of the liberal movement went back to the early 1890s, in the upsurge of public opinion which resulted from the famine of 1891–2. The spectacle of rural poverty and official incompetence which the famine disclosed moved many young intellectuals and professional people first of all to offer their services in the provision of supplies and the treatment of disease, then to start trying to do something to change the conditions which had caused the famine in the first place. The natural arena for such activity was the zemstvos, which had responsibilities for economic aspects of local life. Another was autonomous scientific associations like the Moscow Law Society, and the St Petersburg Free Economic Society (see Part 2, Chapter 3) and its offshoot, the St Petersburg Literary Committee.

During the 1890s consultative meetings of professional associations took on an increasingly political colouring. Delegates were especially concerned by the barriers which segregated peasants from the rest of society: the administrative isolation in volosti, the tutelage of the land commandant, the stigma of corporal punishment. Many called for the introduction of universal primary education. The zemstvos too were trying to coordinate their activities. In 1896 D.N. Shipov, chairman of the Moscow provincial zemstvo board, convened a meeting of his colleagues at the Nizhni Nnovgorod Fair, to discuss common concerns, but when he tried to repeat the exercise the following year, the police refused him permission.1

Real unrest began, however, where it always lay closest to the surface, in the universities. In February 1899 the students of St Petersburg University were forbidden by the police to celebrate Foundation Day in their usual exuberant manner on the streets of the city. They ignored the prohibition, citing their 'rights', and clashed with the police, who dispersed them forcibly. The students went on strike in protest, and sent missives to other universities: within a few days Moscow and Kiev students were boycotting lectures too, calling for an end to arbitrary discipline and police brutality. The authorities arrested the strike leaders, but later released them as their colleagues drifted back to their classes.

The whole incident was typical of the tense relations which existed between the authorities and the students. As Richard Pipes has commented, 'The government chose to treat a harmless manifestation of youthful spirits as a seditious act. In response radical intellectuals escalated student complaints of mistreatment at the hands of the police into a wholesale rejection of the "system"'.2 This proved to be merely the beginning of chronic unrest in higher educational institutions during the following years.

In the zemstvos discontent was also mounting, though it was less exuberantly expressed. By the early years of the twentieth century, faced with blank immobilism from the regime, the participants at 'third element' consultations were beginning privately to discuss forming clandestine political movements to bring about change.3 In 1901 a liberal newspaper, Osvobodenie (Liberation) began to appear abroad, in Stuttgart: its editor, P.B. Struve, was a former Marxist (he had in fact written the initial programme of the Social
A few years later, in Switzerland, twenty representatives met from the zemstvos and the radical intelligentsia, and formed the Union of Liberation, whose aim was the abolition of the autocracy and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, with a parliament elected by universal, direct, equal and secret suffrage (the "four-tail formula", as it became known).

Following the reverses in the Japanese war during the summer and autumn of 1903, the Union began to campaign ever more openly inside Russia, distributing its newspaper and holding "liberation banquets", at which oppositional speeches were made and money was contributed for the cause. At some of these banquets, demands were heard for a Constituent Assembly - a more radical demand, since it left open the question of whether Russia should continue to be a monarchy, or should become a republic.

Although the Union of Liberation was a liberal movement, and opposed violence as a means of changing the regime, the circumstances in which it had to operate willy-nilly threw it together with the revolutionary socialist parties. In October 1903 it held a joint consultation with them in Paris. All those present agreed to cooperate to achieve the goals they had in common, which included at this stage ending the autocracy and establishing a democratically elected legislative assembly responsible for appointing the government.

Liberals were thus thrown together with revolutionaries, obshchevsernovye with workers and peasants, and, perhaps most important, moderates with terrorists. This indiscriminate mingling of political views and methods continued for much of 1904. Whatever their other opinions, everyone agreed that the first priority was to get rid of the autocracy. Zemstvo activists began to demand a democratically elected parliament, then some of them a Constituent Assembly and the "four-tail formula", and together with Liberationists proclaimed "No enemies to the left!" The Union of Unions, set up in May 1905, to coordinate the political campaigns of the professional associations, typified this polymorphism. Largely professional in composition, it also included one workers' union and two single-issue campaigning groups. Its member unions were those of the professors, schoolteachers, doctors, engineers, journalists, pharmacists, veterinary surgeons, accountants, railwaymen and zemstvo employees, the Association for the Emancipation of Women and the Association for the Emancipation of the Jews.

The circumstances of its formation thus imparted to the Russian liberal movement a radicalism, even a revolutionary tendency which was to colour its subsequent political activity and to prevent it achieving a fruitful working relationship even with a reforming government committed to cooperation with the Duma. This tendency was later reinforced by the radical nature of the liberals' electorate in the elections to the First Duma.

The standard-bearer of Russian liberalism and of obshchevsernovye was the Constitutional Democratic Party, set up at the height of the revolution, in October 1905, under the leadership of the Professor of Russian History at Moscow University, P.N. Miliukov. Its rather stodgy name reflected the fact that professors and lawyers set the tone, but it was hardly shortened in popular parlance to 'Kadets'. From the outset this was a real party, with a network of branches in the provinces, whose members agitated among the public and elected delegates to regular policy-making congresses. In spite of this, it was never formally legalized by the regime, even at the height of official tolerance, because it refused to condemn revolutionary terrorism.

At its first two congresses the new party rejected the October Manifesto as inadequate and called for the establishment of a full 'constitutional and parliamentary monarchy', based on universal suffrage. Its programme included compulsory expropriation of landowners (with compensation) for the benefit of land-hungry peasants; the replacement of indirect taxes by a graduated income tax; guarantees of civil rights; the introduction of an eight-hour day and workers' insurance; the introduction of universal, free and compulsory primary education; and self-determination for the nationalities of the empire.

Having experienced little political responsibility, obshchevsernovye had always tended to be radical in its outlook. All the same, there was a substantial minority, especially among the zemstvo landowners and the commercial bourgeoisie, which found the Kadets' programme subsersive, likely to undermine social order rather than to guarantee it. These more conservative liberals founded the Union of 17 October, whose leader was A.I. Guchkov, a Moscow businessman from a family of Old Believers. The Octoberists shared much
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of the Kadets' programme, but they saw themselves as moderate reformers, gave greater weight to the state and to private property. As their name implies, they did not regard themselves as a party, but as a union of political groups with similar concerns. Unlike the Kadets, they denounced semi-revolutionary terror and accepted the political order springing from the October Manifesto, and they opposed compulsory expropriation of private property, including land. They also gave greater priority to maintaining the unity of the empire than to granting ethnic rights to non-Russians.9

Divided though its political representatives were, obshchestvennost was largely united in the view that after the October Manifesto further violent attempts to overthrow the regime were unjustified and should not be supported. The regime had thus achieved the aim of splitting its opponents. Most workers and peasants, and of course the socialist parties remained dissatisfied with the concessions made by the government, and were ready to support further violence. Even the self-avowedly liberal and peaceful Kader Party felt unable openly to condemn this violence: they continued to feel pressure from below, and did not renounce the slogan 'No enemies to the left!'.

Workers and Peasants in the City

Eugen Weber has shown how in France in the late nineteenth century peasants were gradually being drawn into a national civic culture as a result of the spread of markets, the building of roads and railways, the spread of primary education, universal military service, the growth of the mass media, and so on. Many of these processes were visible in Russia, too, especially from the 1880s onwards. The short-term call-up of young men meant that an increasing proportion of village males had seen the wider empire and met non-Russians in the course of their military service. Primary education was expanding rapidly, especially in the villages, and by the first decade of the twentieth century was turning out a generation of young village men of whom many were literate. It has been estimated that the literacy rate among the rural population rose from just under ten per cent in the early 1880s to about a quarter by 1910-13, while literacy among army recruits rose from 21.4% in 1874 to 67.8% in 1913.10

Above all, more peasants were gaining experience of urban life through work in industry and transport. Urban and rural culture

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were beginning to come together, but not in such a way as to generate a secure urban identity among the newcomers, or to contribute to the consolidation of a civil society. So many migrant workers were coming to the city that in 1881, 42% of St Petersburg's inhabitants were peasants, in 1900 61% and in 1910 69%. In 1902 the similar figure for Moscow was 67%.11 Some of these were 'peasants' only in the administrative sense that they were classified as such in their passports: actually they had long ago left the village and broken their ties with it. But that was true of surprisingly few. A survey of the Tsindel' cotton-printing mill in Moscow in 1899 showed that, although the workers interviewed had spent an average of ten years in industrial labour, 90% of them still possessed a land allotment in the village (though they left relatives to cultivate it) and had to have their passports renewed annually by the elder of their commune.

A high proportion of migrant workers, then, came to the towns without fully losing their rural identity. Even those who did were not in a position to join urban institutions or integrate into urban society. The factory and its housing was often a semi-closed world, especially if, as was usually the case, it was situated in the outer suburbs, or even outside the town in an industrial settlement close to a railway station. Besides, the regime prevented the establishment of associations of any kind to represent workers' interests. A worker might join an artel or semisotnost (an association of migrants from the same region), or he could become a member of a cooperative or mutual credit association run by the employer.12 In other words, the only societies he could participate in were either those with their roots in the village or those dominated by the employer. He had not been able to break out of the village and semi-serfdom, though he had lost the relative degree of protection, participation and self-government afforded by the rural community.

It is natural, then, that workers who stayed for more than a short time in the city often inched to gain some degree of control over their living and working environment - such as a peasant normally expects to have - and to reassert some sense of their dignity as human beings. The harsh industrial environment offered them precious little of this, and the regime permitted them no institutions through which they could advance their own interests in the framework of a class struggle regulated by legal boundaries. The response of workers to
this situation differed according to many individual factors: the length of time they had worked in the town, the strength of their links to the village, their education, skills and qualifications, whether they had a family with them or not. Most historians, and some contemporary observers as well, divided them into two main categories, 'conscious' workers and the rest, the 'grey' mass.

If this classification corresponds even roughly to the truth, it shows how the absence of civil society simplified and, as it were, flattened the workers' movement. There was in Russia just as great a variety of industrial employments, skills and qualifications as in advanced European countries, but they did not each generate guilds and unions, associations and hierarchies, for these were prohibited. Workers were excluded from access to culture, society and the political process. All reacted to this basic situation with bitterness and often despair. But while the mass of workers probably resigned themselves to their fate, perhaps seeking solace either in drink or in some form of religious belief, perhaps hoping that the Tsar might one day come to their aid, 'conscious' workers tried to understand their plight and even, when it seemed possible, to change it.

Such workers were attracted to the study groups or libraries set up by young radical intellectuals from the 1870s onwards. Here, in the congenial company of the like-minded, they could take a basic course in social sciences, read the classics of European socialism and learn about the labour movement in other countries. In the course of their studies and discussions, they would usually abandon the vestiges of the faith they had inherited or brought with them from the village, in the Orthodox religion and the Tsar, seeing them as linked indissolubly to the capitalist system to which they attributed their sufferings. Marxist circles were especially popular, for they claimed to offer a science and inculcated a special pride in the status of worker, but Populist ones persisted too, for they spoke to the consciousness of many workers that they were close to the peasantry, and they taught that Russia had a special mission, was not fated simply to imitate advanced European countries. As for the mass of workers, their resignation or apathy was punctuated by outbursts of primitive lawlessness and casual violence, directed against foremen, officials or police, or against the property of the employers. At root, they had not abandoned the peasant

belief that property is legitimate only when it is earned by the sweat of one's brow; hence they regarded the capitalist's property as basically theirs, as fair game to be pillaged in difficult times or openly attacked if opportunity offered. They resented the casual and brutal treatment they often received from employers and foremen, and the way they were addressed with the pronoun ты, which implied that they were children or serfs. As with peasants, their apparent indifference would at times become moods of violent defiance, surging into rebelliousness which would astonish not only the authorities but the intelligentsia leaders who were normally in despair over their apathy.

To oversimplify what all this meant was that workers and radical intelligentsia were thrown into mutual dependency. Workers, like peasants, needed outside leadership if they were to become politically effective. In the study circles they were taken seriously as individuals, they learnt a good deal about their wider environment, and some of them assimilated techniques of 'agitation' which were useful to them in conflicts with their employers. But there remained a distance between the intellectuals and the workers: workers wanted political change because there was no other way to improve their condition and achieve some degree of human dignity, while intellectuals wanted a transformation of society. As Allan Wildman has commented, the primary commitment of the Social Democratic intellectual was 'to the mystique of revolution itself, to the vision of a faultless society purged of the anomalies of the existing order in which the "intelligentsia" had no place. The workers' movement had always served him as a vehicle through which the world of values he rejected could be overthrown.'

Workers and Politics For that reason workers were always willing to try out other methods of making an input into the political system. A much larger number of workers than had ever entered study circles were willing to join labour unions run by the police from 1901 by Sergei Zubatov, head of the Moscow Okhrana. This was not necessarily because police unions were inherently more attractive but because they were legal, and offered the worker a sanctioned mode of economic self-defence. Zubatov believed that the great advantage of autocracy, compared with the bourgeois state,
was that it was above social class, and need not take sides in the class struggle. It could and should defend the economic interests of the workers, since otherwise they would be compelled to do so by political means, and thus would be delivered free of charge into the camp of the revolutionaries.\textsuperscript{17}

Zubatov wanted to integrate workers into patriotic, Orthodox and monarchical Russia. This was not hopeless, as was shown by a demonstration of February 1902, commemorating the emancipation of the serfs, when some 50,000 workers took part in a peaceful procession, led by clergy bearing icons, to the statue of Alexander II, where they celebrated a requiem mass, laid wreaths and said prayers.\textsuperscript{18}

The trouble was that Zubatov's support among his colleagues was not strong enough for him to deliver what he promised. The Ministry of Finance openly encouraged industrialists to stand out against the demands of the Zubatovite unions. Many of Zubatov's workers lost patience and deserted to the Social Democrats. He was finally discredited when a general strike in Odessa in the summer of 1903, launched by his union, fell into the hands of the Social Democrats. He was dismissed and his union disbanded.

His indirect successor was a priest, Father Gapon, who admired Zubatov but felt that the church was a far more appropriate agency for helping workers than the police, since it could attend to the workers' spiritual as well as political needs. He suggested to the authorities that it would be better to allow workers to satisfy their natural desire to organise for self-help and mutual aid and to engage in independent activity explicitly and openly, rather than leave them to organise (as they surely will) and manifest their independence secretly and guiltily, harming themselves and perhaps the entire nation. We particularly underscore the danger of exploitation by others, enemies of Russia.' Instead he proposed to 'build a nest among the factory and mill workers where Rus', a truly Russian spirit, would prevail'.\textsuperscript{19}

For this purpose he set up his Assembly of Russian Factory and Mill Workers.

Patriotism, however, proved to be insufficient because by this time it did not attract the conscious workers, who were vital to the success of the movement. Realizing that he was politically inexperienced, Gapon turned for advice to the Union of Liberation and to a group of Social Democrats, led by Aleksei Karelin, who were dissatisfied with their party's narrowness and secrecy, and wanted to appeal to a wider working-class constituency. Together with them Gapon drafted a programme, radical but not revolutionary in nature, which drew upon constitutional and moderate socialist thinking. Since we shall see elements of this programme cropping up again and again in 1905–7 and in 1917, among both workers and peasants, it is worth describing.

One of the early drafts put the main problem succinctly. 'The present position of the working class in Russia is totally unequipped by law or by those free personal rights which would enable workers to defend their interests independently. Workers, like all Russian citizens, are deprived of freedom of speech, conscience, press and assembly... No improvements coming from bureaucratic government can achieve their aim. Therefore workers must strive to acquire civil rights and participation in the administration of the state.\textsuperscript{20}

This was the sentiment which underlay the Gapon petition. Workers had learnt by experience that to obtain improvements in their desperate material circumstances they required political rights, and that the best way to fight for them was by class solidarity. The two main evils they faced were 'bureaucratic lawlessness' and 'capitalist exploitation', hence their petition was both political and economic in its demands. It called for the working day to be limited to eight hours, for 'normal' wage rates, and for state insurance of workers, as well as the freedom to form unions and associations and to elect workers to factory committees responsible for settling grievances. Significantly, it took account of peasant concerns, recommending the abolition of redemption payments, the transfer of land to those who worked it and the provision of cheap credit to them. Its political demands were for popular representation to be guaranteed through a constituent assembly elected by the four-tail formula; the replacement of indirect taxes by income tax; equality before the law and freedom of speech, press, association and worship; free universal and compulsory primary education; an amnesty for political prisoners; a law-abiding government answerable to the people's representatives; separation of church and state.\textsuperscript{21}

By the autumn of 1904, in view of the war with Japan, and the mounting wave of agitation from professional groups and constitutional associations, Gapon considered it essential for the workers
to register their aspirations publicly. After much hesitation, he
decided that the most appropriate form would be a loyal petition to
the Tsar, presented after a peaceful march through the capital city.
Workers received the idea enthusiastically, especially since the
discussion coincided with the fall of Port Arthur to the Japanese and
with the outbreak of a strike at the huge Putilov works. In workshop
meetings which were held to discuss the situation, observers spoke
of a "kind of mystical, religious ecstasy". 'People listened reverentially,
as if in church. On Vasil'iev Island the branch president asked "And
what, comrades, if the Ruler will not receive us and does not want
to read our petition ...?" Then, as if from a single breast, a mighty
shattering cry exploded: "Then we have no Tsar!" and like an echo
repeated from all corners: "No Tsar! No Tsar!" 92
This was a climactic moment when workers dared to hope that
at last they might become citizens by laying their grievances and
aspirations at the feet of their sovereign: this was the age-old chrezdi-
nata (loyal petition) in a new form. Such was the feeling that pervaded
the procession held on 9 January 1905. Thousands of workers,
dressed in their best as for a religious festival, marched solemnly
from the various industrial suburbs towards the city centre, carrying
their petitions together with icons and portraits of the Tsar. The
government tried at the last moment to ban the procession, failed
and brought in troops without proper instructions: they panicked,
opened fire and killed two hundred people.
Bloody Sunday, as it immediately became known, was a crisis in
the long confrontation of empire and people. It was the moment
when the workers, on behalf of the peasants as well as themselves,
tried to break out of the semi-rural ghetto and into the modern
urban world of citizenship and interest representation. Gapon's
Assembly was appropriate to the occasion: a cross between a trade
union and a traditional Russian sudomnyi delegation presenting
its humble requests to its sovereign lord. The massacre was the
moment when both types of representative association, the ancient
and the modern, failed, and the image of the just and merciful Tsar,
hitherto almost universal among the people, was fatally besmirched.
The church – admittedly in the person of a maverick priest – had
made a last attempt at mediation, and it had miscarried. The workers
and the peasants were thrown back on systematic opposition, if
necessary violent, and on the radical liberal and revolutionary parties.
As one St Petersburg worker later recalled: 'On this day I was born
a second time, but now not as an all-forgiving and all-forgetting
child, but as an embittered man, prepared to struggle and to
triumph.' 93
The memory of Gapon's Assembly and its demands remained vivid
with the workers throughout the tumultuous year which followed.
Bloody Sunday ignited a series of strikes and protests all over the
empire. The government yielded so far as to appoint a special com-
misson, with working-class representatives, under Senator Shidlov-
ski, to consider the labour question. Such was the standing of
Gapon's Assembly that many workers submitted petitions that its
'locals' (branches) be revived, to be used as a framework for the
elections to the commission. When elections were held, a good
number of Assembly members were chosen. The representatives
were suspicious of the government and wanted to be sure that their
participation would have a palpable impact, and so they put forward
a number of conditions. They wanted the 'locals' reopened, and
worker representatives to have the right to appear en bloc before
the committee, not just be invited to appear separately. They also
demanded immunity from arrest and complete freedom of speech,
together with a guarantee that their views would be published in
full. The government refused to grant these conditions, and as a
result the Shidlovski Commission never met. Another attempt at
mediation had broken down. 24
The impact of Bloody Sunday was such that strikes broke out in
towns and industrial settlements all over the empire. They swiftly
became massive and political in the non-Russian regions [see pre-
vious chapter], where ethnic sentiment helped to impart an immedi-
acy and solidarity. In Russia they arose more sporadically, and at
first with mainly socio-economic demands. Those involved included
railway, river and port workers, cosalmiers, textile and machine-tool
workers, printers and bakers. Some of them protested about Bloody
Sunday or the closure of the Shidlovski Commission; most made
demands about pay, hours and conditions of work, compensation for
injury and representation on conflict commissions at the workplace. 25
In the early part of the year, the socialist parties were still poorly
prepared for involvement in the workers' movement. Their leaders
were in emigration, engaged in heated polemics with one another and isolated from the rank and file inside Russia. The local activists, students and young professional people, living from hand to mouth, kept in touch with workers as they could, convening the occasional letchka – an improvised gathering at the factory gate or in a corner of one of the shops – and composing appeals and leaflets for handing out. Their influence on the workers was already strong – they had suggested the whole tactic of ‘agitation’, and they inspired the thinking behind the slogans and demands – but it was not yet organized or consistent. For the most part workers improvised their own organizations to cope with the demands of strikes and demonstrations: workshop and factory committees, strike committees to negotiate with employers and police.16

In September the government, anxious to conciliate liberal opinion, granted autonomy to the institutions of higher education, which meant that the police were no longer authorized to break up meetings held in them. This concession transformed the prospects of the socialist parties, which were henceforth able to call mass meetings and enrol large numbers of members. SRs, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks hastened to take advantage of the situation. The new freedom augmented workers’ self-confidence and their readiness to react in organized fashion to any incident. In St Petersburg towards the end of September a meeting of railway employees took place to discuss a pension scheme: it was soon infiltrated by the new Railwaymen’s Union and turned itself into the ‘first delegates’ conference of railway representatives’. When rumours – false, as it transpired – reached Moscow that some of these delegates had been arrested, workers on the Karazin railway went on strike, demanding their release. They were soon joined by the staff on other lines. Since Moscow was the centre of the railway network of the entire empire, the movement spread to other towns and sparked off stoppages there. By rapid osmosis the strikes became general and assumed a radical political colouring, with demands for an amnesty, civil liberties and a constituent assembly elected on the four-tail formula. By the middle of October many towns were paralysed. In Moscow, a newspaper reported, ‘Neither gas nor electric lights work ... A majority of the shops are closed, and the entrances and windows are boarded up with grilles and shutters ... In various parts of the city, water is available [only] at certain times.’17 This was the situation which compelled the Emperor to concede the October Manifesto. Such widespread action demanded a new form of workers’ solidarity. Some precedents were to hand. From the early summer onwards, workers began to improvise a novel kind of organization, not anticipated by the government, the liberals or even the socialists. Known as soviets (councils) of Workers’ Deputies, they were joined when a general strike broke out in a particular town and workers’ representatives were needed to lead the strike, to keep order and to negotiate with employers, government and police. Shishlovskii delegates often played a key role in their creation, but as the only halfway legitimate spokesmen for their colleagues. Social Democrats were at first hesitant to endorse them, since they seemed disorganized and lacking in political direction, but the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries soon gave their support. The largest soviet of all, St Petersburg, was launched following an appeal issued by the Mensheviks to form a ‘strike committee’ at the Technological Institute.18

In any given town soviets were elected from all the major factories and workshops, usually one per 500 workers in larger towns, fewer in smaller ones. They met in a large building, or even on a river bank, where not only deputies but their constituents were permitted to attend and contribute to debates, although only deputies could vote. In principle, a deputy could be recalled at any time by those who had elected him and replaced by someone else. Each soviet elected an executive committee to deal with day-to-day business. Although at first soviets declared themselves non-partisan, in practice executives were composed more or less equal numbers of Mensheviks, Bolsheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, as a tacit expression of the workers’ perceived need to have an undogmatic socialist leadership.19

The soviets enabled the intelligentsia, the conscious workers and the mass workers to cooperate in political action better than any other organizations, certainly better than the socialist parties, which were hierarchical, liable to splits, and dominated by intellectuals. The soviets saw themselves as embodying direct democracy, where the people, their representatives and their ‘government’ (executive committee) were brought as closely together as possible, cutting out formality and bureaucracy. In that respect they resembled the village.
assemblies more than any other form of workers’ organization, and
it may be that the worker-peasant experience of rural politics explains
the readiness and spontaneity with which the workers improvised
them, and the high reputation which they enjoyed. Certainly the
soviets were very different from workers’ organizations seen else-
where in Europe at this time, even in revolutionary situations.

Of course it was impossible for anything like a village assembly
to function effectively in twentieth-century urban politics. The
strengths of the soviets were also their weaknesses. They did not
organize the general strike of October 1905, but came into being as
a result of it, to take charge of it, to negotiate with employers, police
and government, and to keep minimal public services operating
during its course. However, their very spontaneity, the impetus which
gave them birth, prevented them from becoming stable institutions.
They could not sustain the routine business of daily administration
without contradicting their own nature. Either they kept up their
revolutionary elan, or they collapsed. As Trotsky commented of the
St Petersburg Soviet: ‘From the hour it came into being till the hour
it perished, it stood under the mighty elemental pressure of the
revolution, which most unceremoniously outpaced the work of politi-
cal consciousness.’ However, later Trotsky, it was also true that
they were too disorganized to launch an armed uprising to end
the autocracy, though their delegates daily deployed the rhetoric
appropriate to one and openly encouraged workers to arm themselves
with weapons for it.

The greatest moment for the St Petersburg Soviet came on the
day after the October Manifesto, 18 October, when huge crowds
from all strata of society thronged the streets and squares to celebrate
Russia’s liberation from autocracy. For a brief moment the workers
enjoyed the enthusiastic support of propertied society. From the
balcony of the university building Trotsky, who was gaining a reputa-
tion as the soviet’s most brilliant orator, harangued the assembled
multitudes, urging decisive action to complete the victory over Tsar-
isim. Political demands were approved by acclamation: an amnesty
for all political prisoners, abolition of the death penalty, the dismissal
of Trepow (Governor-General of St Petersburg), the removal of
the army from the city and its replacement by a people’s militia. For a
short time, St Petersburg became a huge and rebellious village

assembly, euphoric and carried away by the collective mood. But by
evening fighting had broken out, involving Cossacks or the newly
formed Black Hundred gangs. The crowds dispersed, having
achieved little beyond sonorous declarations of principle.21

The soviet’s tactics reflected this turning point. The October
Manifesto had split the support the soviet had enjoyed among all
strata of society. The general strike began to subside, some partici-
pants feeling that its main aims had been achieved, others that in
any case it no longer had solid public backing. The soviet switched
its focus to a demand voiced by all workers: the eight-hour working
day. This campaign had the advantage that it could be implemented
by workers themselves, by simply putting down their tools and going
home each day after eight hours’ work. By the same token, however,
the initiative shifted from the soviet to each factory floor and its
workers’ meeting; the sense of collective, unanimous action was
diluted.22

Eventually the government plucked up courage to exploit the
Petersburg Soviet’s political weakness. At the end of November the
police arrested its chairman and a week later closed it down by sealing
its building and arresting the entire Executive Committee and some
two hundred delegates.

The resulting explosion came not in St Petersburg but in Moscow,
where the largest surviving soviet decided to launch an armed rising
despite considerable misgivings among its leaders about whether this
was wise. They were impelled by the feeling that the alternative was
a passive and inglorious defeat. As one activist said, ‘It was better to
perish in a struggle than to be bound hand and foot without fighting.
The honour of the revolution was at stake.’23

Without the support of most Muscovites and facing government
artillery, the rising was doomed. On 15–17 December the Pensa
textile district, its centre, was mercilessly bombarded. The soviet
acknowledged the inevitable and surrendered, after more than a
thousand citizens, many neither soldiers nor workers, had been killed,
in the fighting.

In the course of 1905, workers had moved from being respectful
petitioners to being deputies negotiating from a position of weakness,
then deputies negotiating from strength, to a brief, heady moment
when they seemed able to dictate to both employers and government.
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Then came the collapse. But at no stage had they been able to create functioning representative institutions which could advance their interests in competition with other social groups. Trade unions had appeared semi-legally during 1905, but were not given legal standing till March 1906, and even thereafter found it difficult to enforce their rights.

The Armed Forces Almost nowhere during 1905–6 were the workers able to gain support from soldiers or sailors. In June 1905 sailors in the Black Sea seized control of the battleship Potemkin, one of the most powerful ships in the Russian fleet, and took it into Odessa harbour, where its appearance sparked off rioting in the city.

There was however no serious attempt to coordinate mutiny and insurrection: troops massacred the crowds near the harbour while the ship’s guns remained silent, and the crew later put to sea in an unsuccessful attempt to arouse solidarity elsewhere in the fleet.18 Only once did soldiers and workers act together. This was in November at Chita and Krasnoiarsk, on the Trans-Siberian railway, where discontented troops being ferried home from the war mutinied and seized local stations and garrisons, and then joined workers’ strike meetings. In Krasnoiarsk a railway battalion became the mainstay of a ‘workers’ and soldiers’ soviet’, which held power locally for a couple of months. Special troops had to be despatched along the line to restore order.19

Elsewhere, as John Bushnell has shown, soldiers’ mutinies were self-contained, directed against the officers in their own regiments, and they did not link up with workers’ or peasants’ movements. Indeed, on occasions the authorities managed to use mutinous units to suppress disorder: ‘peasants as soldiers repressed themselves’.20 If one compares 1905 with 1917, the isolation of the soldiers and sailors within the revolutionary movement becomes especially conspicuous. It underlines the extent to which the 1905 revolution took place in a society whose strata were still divided from one another, deprived of a civic focus and incapable of common action.

Peasant Political Action The spectacle of the autocracy undergoing crisis affected the peasants almost as much as the workers. As we have seen, peasants had often responded in an exci-
the less familiar terms. Nor were the points of the motion approved indiscriminately; they were sometimes amended and voted on paragraph by paragraph, before being passed more or less unanimously after a discussion which lasted well into the night.\textsuperscript{40}

Overwhelmingly the most popular demand expressed in the priozyr was for the land to be given to those who cultivated it. Virtually every village and volost assembly wanted private ownership of land abolished, and land no longer to be the object of commercial transactions, and in one form or another they wanted pomeshchik land to be redistributed to peasant households on an egalitarian basis. 'It is essential to abolish private property in land and to transfer all privately owned, state, appanage, monastery and church land to the disposal of all the people. Land should only be used by those who cultivate it, in their families or in mutual associations (tovarishchestva) but without hiring labour, and in such quantity as they are able to cultivate.' This resolution, from peasants in the Volokolamsk uyezd of Moscow gubernia, reflected an almost universally-held view. Most meetings refused any thought of compensation for those expropriated, but a few did envisage it, perhaps because among them enough peasants already owned private land to appreciate its benefits.\textsuperscript{41}

The next commonest grievance was over indirect taxation and redemption payments, both of which were felt to be inequitable and oppressive. Many petitions called for an income tax, to be levied fairly, so that it fell most heavily on those most able to pay, and/or for taxes on commercial and industrial capital.\textsuperscript{42}

Another very widespread demand was for universal, free primary education, evidently because increasing contact with the outside world and with government officials 'numerous as stars in the sky' (as one petition put it) had persuaded peasants that they were at a permanent disadvantage without being able to read, write and add up. 'One of the main reasons we have no rights is our ignorance and lack of education, which result from the lack of schools and the poor teaching in them; therefore it is essential to introduce universal education at the state's expense.' Thus a village in Kursk province.\textsuperscript{43}

Peasants were less concerned than workers about civil rights and the political structure of the empire as a whole, but when they mentioned the subject they envisaged an assembly elected by all the people, to which the government should be answerable. 'Let all the officials, from the lowest to the highest, be elected by the people and answer to the peoples' delegates. The officials we have now receive money collected from us, but do us nothing but harm.'\textsuperscript{44}

For some village societies this meant a demand for a Constituent Assembly, to be elected on the four-tail formula; others were less definite and still seemed to envisage some kind of monarchy. Many specifically mentioned that peasants should no longer be segregated, but should enjoy the same civil rights as the rest of the population.\textsuperscript{45}

In essence, what the peasants were demanding was that the business of the 1861 emancipation be completed, both by awarding them all the land they cultivated, and by elevating them into full citizenship on equal terms with the rest of the population. The tone and nature of their petitions was on the whole very close to that of Gapon. Despite Bloody Sunday - which was much talked about in the countryside as well as in the towns - the peasants mostly still revered the Tsar.\textsuperscript{46}

Village assemblies drew up their priozyry when there seemed some prospect that they would be listened to. When that was not the case peasants tried other methods, but always with the same aim in view: gaining control over the land and over their own affairs, and ensuring that their grievances were listened to 'higher up'. Differences between wealthier and poorer households, which had undoubtedly widened over the preceding decades, lost much of their significance at this time of crisis and opportunity. Much more important was the conflict between the whole of the village community and external authorities, including pomeshchiki, police, tax-collectors and army. Within the community itself, it was usually not the rich or the poor who took the initiative and exercised leadership, but those whom sociologists refer to as 'middle peasants': that is to say, traditional householders, heart and soul of the community, those neither impoverished nor much enriched by recent commercial opportunities. Following their lead, communities tended to act where possible as a whole, taking their risks together, in accordance with the familiar pattern of 'mutual responsibility'.\textsuperscript{47}

During the spring and summer of 1905 peasants gradually took the law into their own hands in many areas. There was a kind of demonstration effect at work, as news spread from village to village, so that disorder was regionally concentrated. It might start like this:
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A bale of straw or a bonfire would be set alight. At that signal a crowd would swiftly gather from the surrounding villages. Sometimes 500–700 carts would arrive. The crowd would make for the estate buildings, would break open the padlocks on the grain stores, would load up grain in their carts and peacefully trundle it back to their homes.44 Methods of action varied according to local economic conditions and work relationships. In some places peasants would go with axes into the woods owned by the pomeshchik and fell his timber; or they would graze their cattle on his meadows; or they would plough his pasture land and sow it with grain for themselves; or, if wage labourers, they would go on strike. Increasingly, especially if the police showed up to discouraging lawbreaking, they would raid the manor house and outbuildings, seizing whatever they could for themselves, and then set fire to them all, driving the pomeshchik out and ensuring that he would find it very difficult to return.45

After a lull during the haymaking and harvesting period, disorders resumed in October. The publication of the October Manifesto seemed to show the government in a hesitant and yielding mood, and the peasants reacted by redoubling their efforts to secure political and economic power in the village. A wave of burnings of manor houses began in Saratov gubernia in the east and Chernigov in the west and spread to cover much of the central black-earth and mid-Volga regions, where poverty and land shortages were greatest. Decisions to burn were usually taken in the village assembly and followed by immediate action, in which as many villagers as possible would be involved. Over large areas of rural Russia the night sky was red with the glow of flaming buildings, the ‘red cockerel’, as the spectacle was known. The peasants were ‘smoking them out’, getting rid of the gentility, so as to take over both the land and the fullness of authority in the countryside.46

According to a Soviet historian’s estimate, some three thousand manor houses were burnt down at this time, and more than forty million rubles’ worth of damage inflicted.47 Then the flow of destruction abated as suddenly as it had arisen. Part of the explanation is determined repression by police and army. When systematic official coercion was applied, it became clear that the peasants had not the material or organizational resources to sustain a full-scale armed uprising, as many of the Socialist Revolutionaries would have liked.

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They had not mastered the art of coordinating their activities at a level higher than the volost, and they had little or no military equipment. Besides, many peasants were naturally ambivalent about the prospect of taking on even a weakened imperial state. The government exploited their hesitation, sending in punitive expeditions. Where, as was usually the case, the community refused to name any ‘ringleaders’, they would flog all the men; where, however, they could identify the militants, they would deport them individually.48 Then in the summer of 1906 the disorders broke out again in the form of a further wave of arson, almost as intense as the previous year, and accompanied more frequently by personal violence against landowners. This time the precipitant was the Duma’s failure to persuade the government to expropriate the gentry in favour of the peasants. The troops had finally all returned from the Japanese war, and the government was in a stronger position to restore order. The result was a heightened level of repressive violence, which probably explains the peasants’ more sanguinary response.49 In some areas disorders continued well into 1907.

Peasants often made great efforts, not always successful, to preserve some order during the seizure of land and goods, not to allow violence to get out of hand and become anarchy. After all, they wanted to establish a new kind of social order, not to unleash mutual destruction. In the autumn of 1905, for instance, during disturbances in Saratov gubernia, ‘everywhere the liquor shops would be closed. The money seized from the landowner would become public property. The landowners were peacefully conveyed to the nearest railway stations and dispatched to the town. Grain, cattle and produce was distributed according to strict rules. Advance wages were paid from the common treasury to the labourers and servants. Then the estate’s manor house and outbuildings were set alight.’ This effort did not always succeed, and probably was not even made in all cases, and in some places peasants looted indiscriminately or broke into liquor shops and drank themselves stupid – simplifying the authorities’ task of dealing with them.50

One serious attempt was made to organize peasants above the level of the volost, and thus to enable them to feed their aspirations and grievances into the imperial political system. This was the All-Russian Peasant Union. Characteristically its formation resulted
be handed over to all who can work it. 'The land is the true mother of us all. It was made not by human hands, but by the Holy Spirit, and therefore ought not to be bought and sold.' The final resolution was not quite so categorical: 'Land should be confiscated from private owners partly for compensation, partly without compensation.' This was a compromise between those who insisted that land should only be collectively owned, and those who held that small-scale private property for subsistence was justified.37

On other matters, the Union was close in spirit to the majority of peasant propaganda. The first congress unanimously passed a resolution demanding full civil liberties and the convocation of a constituent assembly elected by the four-tail formula. There were also demands for more democratic and autonomous local government, and for universal, secular primary education free of charge. The second congress, in November, in more robust political mood, condemned government repression, demanded democratic freedoms and an amnesty for political prisoners, and the immediate transfer of land into peasant hands. It called for a national strike and boycott of landowners, but rejected the idea of an armed uprising.38

Thereafter, unexpectedly and precipitately, the Peasant Union fell apart as a national organization. This was in part the result of government repression. After the November congress orders went out to arrest all its participants. In Sunny used alone 1100 peasants and rural intellectuals were arrested or exiled.39 But this was probably not the only reason for the Union's collapse: elections to the First Duma had been announced, and peasants saw in them a new opportunity to put their case where it mattered. Without the constancy of purpose to concentrate on more than one tactic at a time, they let the Peasant Union slide. This happened even though the Socialist Revolutionary party tried to keep it going, and urged peasants to boycott the elections. Here the split between the masses and the intellectuals came into play again, with the peasants ignoring intellectuals' advice in order to use every opportunity presented to them to achieve their paramount goal of obtaining the land. The attraction of the Duma elections was perhaps enhanced by the fact that their first stages took place in the familiar village and volost assemblies. In most regions, though not all, peasant participation was high. As in the previous year, many assemblies took the
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chance to draw up a projevavor, which their delegate would be expected to present at the next stage of the electoral process and ultimately if possible to the Duma. One Menshevik observer reported that the peasants 'took the nomination of electors to the usage electoral conventions very seriously, often nominating them after public prayers and giving them detailed instructions'.

The land issue, as before, overwhelmed all others in salience, and assemblies of otherwise differing political views would agree on this one point. A typical motion was the following, from Nizhni Nogodor gubernia: 'Land should belong to the entire people so that anyone who needs it can have use of it. Therefore the lands of the state, appanages, monasteries and church are transferred to the use of the labouring masses without compensation; private lands are transferred compulsorily, in part for compensation by the state, in part without compensation.'

In nearly all cases, peasant electors avoided party labels: they were chosen for their literacy, their social status, their proven political competence, or merely as 'worthy people'. In some cases, local professional people were elected, for the same reasons. Sometimes village officials were chosen for similar considerations, and sometimes rejected because of them. Much depended on the circumstances in individual villages. Peasants who voted in the landowners' curia by virtue of holding a private plot as well as an allotment expressed the same views on the land question as their counterparts in the village curia.

On the other hand, when peasants were disappointed by the work of the First Duma, they returned to direct action in their villages, as we have seen above.

The experience of revolution in 1905–7 showed that the disparate elements of Russian society – workers, peasants, soldiers and sailors, professional people, non-Russians – were each capable of articulating their grievances and taking action on them. But they were not capable of cooperating with each other or of projecting a vision of nation or empire which could appeal over boundaries of national and ethnos. Nor could their disparate grievances be reformulated within the framework of a class struggle conducted under the rule of law. There was a brief moment when all the discontented elements seemed to work together, but the promulgation of the October Manifesto

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punctured what unity there had been, and the revolution subsequently dissipated its impetus in futile and uncoordinated violence.

The new political framework which emerged from the unrest offered some prospect of a civic forum, centred on the Duma, where diverse social and ethnic groups could minimize their differences and work together. The attempt to achieve such cooperation forms the subject of the next chapter.