Concessions of Nicholas II in the Revolution of 1905

The "Bloody Sunday" massacre had an electrifying effect on all segments of Russian society. It intensified radicalism, increased agitation, and brought on clashes with authorities; it precipitated strikes and demands for a constitutional government, equal rights, and autonomy for minorities; and even led to mutiny. Under the mounting nationwide radicalism, which was accompanied by critical military reverses in the war with Japan, Nicholas II was forced to yield. On October 30, 1905, he issued a manifesto (drafted by Sergei J. Witte) which granted the people of the Empire "personal inviolability, freedom of conscience, speech, assembly and association," and promised to allow the disfranchised elements of society to participate in the election to the Duma. Finally, it established as an "unbreakable rule" that no law should be promulgated without the sanction of the Parliament. The October Manifesto marked the end of absolute monarchy in Russia.

Then on November 16, 1905, the tsar canceled peasant redemption payments, which since the emancipation in 1861 had been one of the main deterrents to progress in the Russian villages. The cancellation paved the way for the agrarian reform commonly known as the Stolypin Land Reforms (1906–1911). These concessions, while failing to satisfy the extreme radicals, pacified the liberals and the majority of the people, thus enabling the authorities to restore order and direct Russia to a period of "constitutional experiment."

The October Manifesto, October 30, 1905

By the Grace of God, We Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of all Russia, Tsar of Poland, Grand Duke of Finland, etc.

Make known to all Our loyal subjects: Rioting and disturbances in the capitals and in many localities of Our Empire fill Our heart with great and heavy grief. The well-being of the Russian Sovereign is inseparable from the national well-being; and the national sorrow is His sorrow. The disturbances which have appeared may cause a grave national tension that may endanger the integrity and unity of Our state.

By the great vow of Tsarist service We are obligated to use every resource of wisdom and Our authority to bring a speedy end to an unrest dangerous to Our state. We have [already] ordered the responsible authorities to take measures to terminate direct manifestations of disorder, lawlessness, and violence, and to protect peaceful people who quietly seek to fulfill the duties incumbent upon them. To successfully fulfill general measures which We have designed for the pacification of state life, We feel it is essential to coordinate the activity of the higher government.

We impose upon the government the duty to execute Our inflexible will:

1. To grant the population the inviolable foundations of civic freedom based on the principles of genuine personal inviolability, freedom of conscience, speech, assemblies, and associations.

2. Without postponing the scheduled elections to the State Duma, to admit in the participation of the Duma insofar as possible in the short time that remains before its scheduled meeting all those classes of the population which presently are completely deprived of voting rights, and to leave further development of general elective law to the future legislative order;

3. To establish as an unbreakable rule that no law shall become effective without the confirmation by the State Duma, and that the elected representatives of the people shall be guaranteed an opportunity of real participation in the supervision of the legality of the acts by authorities whom We shall appoint.

We summon all loyal sons of Russia to remember their duties towards their country, to assist in terminating this unprecedented unrest, and together with Us to make every effort to restore peace and tranquility in Our native land.

Given in Peterhof, October 30, the year of Our Lord 1905, and eleventh of Our reign.

Nicholas

The Cancellation of Redemption Payments, November 16, 1905

By the Grace of God, We, Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of All-Russia, Tsar of Poland, Grand Duke of Finland, and so forth.

Make known to all Our loyal subjects: Our heart is filled with deep sorrow over disturbances that have developed in villages of certain districts where
the peasants have resorted to violence. We can tolerate neither violation of
the law nor high-handed actions, and have instructed Our military and civil
authorities to use every means to prevent and terminate the disorder and to
punish the guilty.

We have the needs of the peasants close to Our heart and do not ignore
them. Violence and crime do not, however, aid the peasant; [on the contrary]
they may bring much sorrow and misery to the country. The only way to
permanently improve the well-being of the peasant is through peaceful and
legal means; to improve his condition has always been one of Our first concerns.
We have lately issued orders to gather and submit to Us information con-
cerning the measures that might be adopted immediately to benefit the peas-
ants. After consideration, We have decided:

1. To reduce by half, from January 1, 1906, and to terminate completely
after January 1, 1907, [redemption] payments from peasants for land which
prior to the Emancipation belonged to nobles, state, and Crown.

2. To increase the resources of the Peasant Land Bank, in order to enable
it to offer better terms for loans to petty peasants to buy additional land.

We have issued special instructions to realize these measures. We are
convinced that if We unite Our efforts with those of the best men to be
elected in Russia by Our loyal subjects, including peasants, We shall succeed
in satisfying the other peasant needs without harming the interests of nobles.

We hope that the peasant population, which is so dear to Our heart, will
follow Christian teachings of love and good and will listen to Our Tsarist call
to maintain peace and order and to not violate the laws and rights of others.

Given at Tsarskoe Selo, November 16, the year of Our Lord, 1905, and
the twelfth of Our reign.

Nicholas

The Fundamental Laws of Imperial Russia, 1906

Until the Revolution of 1905, imperial Russia's autocratic tsars embodied
the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches of the government.
Moreover, since each tsar was also nominal head of the Russian Orthodox
Church, his power was not only absolute but divine as well. The tsars
jealously guarded their prerogatives and rebuffed all suggestions—even
the most moderate ones—to alter this arrangement.

The Revolution of 1905 changed the situation. In his October Mani-
ifesto Nicholas II granted Russia a parliament, and by April 1906, when
the country received its first constitution, imperial Russia had begun its
slow development from an autocratic to a constitutional regime. It was
an erratic process because the country lacked many necessary prerequisites
for a constitutional system: established political parties, a literate popu-
lation, the experience of self-government, and an atmosphere of mutual
trust between the elected legislators and government bureaucrats. The
transition was painful also because the tsar, as the following articles
indicate, still retained power over matters which in parliamentary coun-
tries belonged within the competence of the legislative branch of gov-
ernment. He retained, for instance, his historic title of Autocrat (Article
4), and under Article 43 he had the right to issue imperial decrees in
emergencies between sessions of the parliament, which later, however,
were to be submitted for approval by the legislature. No longer was he
an absolute monarch.

The Fundamental Laws

1. The Russian state is unified and indivisible.
2. The Grand Duchy of Finland, while comprising an inseparable part
of the Russian state, is governed in its internal affairs by special decrees based
on special legislation.

From Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiskoi Imperii... (Complete Collection of the Laws of the Russian
are mine.