Democracy In Russia (1900) Essay, Research Paper

There were no prospects for democracy in Russian in 1914. Tsar Nicholas II believed he had the god-given right to rule over his country absolutely. His power to govern was reinforced by the strongest institutions in Russia, The Orthodox Church, The Army, and the peasant class. Even the Tsar s opposition unwittingly aided him in quashing all hope for democracy. While there were some small democratic institutions, they only helped reinforce the Tsar s belief that the people could never govern themselves. Embodied in Stolypin s reform s, these polices helped sustain the Star s rule until its eventual collapse. That couplep with the Tsar s policies of oppression, brutality, censorship, and class separation all helped him further in his goal to hold on to supreme power. The concessions he made to the people only served to further reinforce his right to rule. Nicholas II used repression, propaganda, the Orthodox Church, religion, migration, anti-Semitism, and war to help sustain what he believed to be his divine rule.

Nicholas was educated by private tutors and the reactionary Pobyedonostzev. Alexander III gave his son little training in affairs of state, and Nicholas proved to be a charming but ineffective and easily influenced ruler. Soon after his accession Nicholas stated that he intended to maintain the autocratic system. Nicholas was convinced that he had an absolute, God-given right to rule as he saw fit he refused to grant democratic right even to the Russian nobility. (Kronnenwetter, 43) The Tsar s belief in his religious right to power was pushed on to the people both by himself and the Orthodox Church, which had been a creature of the Tsar since Peter the Great. (Moynahan, 30)

The Russian Orthodox Church dates from the conversion of the Slavs by missionaries from Byzantium, led by Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius, in the ninth century A.D. In the tenth century Christianity became the Russian state religion, and the chief official, the metropolitan, was established first at Kiev and later at Moscow. Until the downfall of the Eastern Roman Empire, the Russian metropolitanate was considered an integral part of the Byzantine Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Constantinople. When Byzantium fell to the Turks, Russian Orthodox believers assumed an independent attitude and a century later elected their own patriarch. The Russians considered themselves the sole defenders of the true faith. (Roberts, 7)

The Russian Orthodox Church was favored by, and subordinated to, the Tsars. In 1721 Tsar Peter the Great by his Ecclesiastical Regulations deprived the church of its autonomy by abolishing the patriarchate. Peter placed the church under the administration of the Holy Synod, composed of clerics and laymen whom he had personally chosen. The tsar was represented in the Synod by the high procurator, and although this lay official had no vote, he nevertheless possessed enormous influence. No action could be taken by the Synod without the high procurator’s approval. Since the church was dominated by the tsar, it became a politically conservative element in Russian society during the next two centuries, and the hierarchy decried all liberal attempts to reorganize either the church the imperial government. The Tsar used the church alongside the military to control the mostly peasant population. (Hosking, 30)

The military was mainly composed of peasants and the uneducated who populated the lower ranks of the enlisted, making up the vast majority of the army. These soldiers were indoctrinated in the love for the Tsar from the beginning of their service, coupled with the teachings of the Orthodox Church, this made for a highly loyal force. Their military was also highly successful up until the Russo-Japanese war in 1904. It was an imperialistic conflict that grew out of the rival designs of Russia and Japan on Manchuria and Korea. Russian failure to withdraw from Manchuria and Russian penetration into N Korea was countered by Japanese attempts to negotiate a division of the area into spheres of influence. The Tsar, however, was inflexible, and provoked a war with Japan in 1904, (Kronenwetter, 43) in the belief that Japan was bound to be defeated and that a Russian victory would head off the growing threat of internal revolution in Russia. Japan broke off negotiations and severed diplomatic relations with Russia. Two days later, without a declaration of war, Japan attacked Port Arthur and bottled up the Russian fleet. A series of quick Japanese victories, which astounded the world, culminated in the fall of Port Arthur, the victory of troops under General Oyama at Shenyang), and the destruction of the Russian fleet under Rozhdestvenski at Tsushima by Admiral Togo’s fleet. The disastrous outcome of the war for Russia was one of the immediate causes of the Russian Revolution of 1905. (Russo-Japanese War, Columbia Encyclopedia)

The spark needed to ignite revolution came when an order to fire on a workers’ demonstration was given to the St. Petersburg militia. The demonstration had been peaceful. The workers of the capital with their wives and children had marched to the Winter Palace to petition the tsar to intervene on their behalf against the intolerable conditions brought about by depression and war. The demonstrators, carrying religious icons and pictures of the tsar, sang hymns as they marched to the palace. It was not a violent or even particularly angry demonstration, in fact, several of them sang God save the Tsar, as they strolled along. (Kronnenwetter, 43) The militia opened fire at close range, and the resulting massacre, known in Russian history as Bloody Sunday, was the first act of violence of the Revolution of 1905.

For the remainder of the year Russia was torn by strikes and civil strife, and at times the Tsardom itself seemed to be in danger of collapse. By granting concessions of certain civil liberties and, more important, a legislature, Nicholas managed to survive. The importance of the Revolution of 1905 lay in the fact that the masses of Russian people had risen against extreme oppression. This was not a revolt instigated by the Marxist Bolsheviks or Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries, or any other radical group. This was the voice of the long-suffering Russian people making themselves heard by means of a popular revolution-a fact seemingly missed or ignored by Nicholas, who returned to his autocratic ways.

By the end of 1905 revolutionary fervor was waning, and opposition to the monarchy was divided between the Bolshevik-led groups that wanted complete overthrow and those less radical factions that were willing to settle for the minimal constitutionalism promised by the tsar. (Roberts, 5) Elections were held in December, and the first Duma convened in St. Petersburg in May 1906. Nicholas, expecting a subservient Duma because of the restrictive election laws, was horrified by the liberal demands of the new legislative body and forthwith dissolved the first Duma by imperial decree. By waiting forty years to establish a Parliament, the Tsar s act only served to unify the radical-revolutionary movement against the regime and split the conservative and liberal intelligentsia, whose united support was essential if the dynasty was to survive. (Keenan, 8) New elections were held, but a second Duma was heavily socialist in membership and, after meeting for only three months, met the same fate as its predecessor.

After considerable manipulation of the electoral laws, a third Duma met with the tsar’s grudging approval and served its full five-year term. The fourth and final Duma sat through the war years until it was abolished by the Bolsheviks, ending Russia’s brief experiment with parliamentarianism. Despite the extreme limitations placed on the Duma, it was a rudimentary legislature. Nicholas thought of his powers as God-given and viewed any constitutional limitation as sinful and heretical. He was guided by the idea that the throne of the Romanovs should be passed on to his son as he had received it from his father: absolute and autocratic. (Hosking, 35)

In the face of inevitable change presaged by the Revolution of 1905, the intransigent Tsar gave ground slowly and only when there was no alternative. During the Duma period of limited constitutionalism, a strong man emerged as prime minister. Peter Stolypin, a monarchist who dedicated himself to preservation of the autocracy, was also a practical man who realized that certain reforms were necessary for the survival of the regime. He was a reforming conservative, who saw the necessity of agrarian reform and perceived the peasant land commune as the primary obstacle to society s efficiency and the economy s stability. (Service, 16)

Stolypin’s first move was a program of pacification by which he planned to eliminate the nuclei of revolution. The new prime minister established military courts to deal with revolutionaries, and soon references to the “Stolypin necktie” (Roberts, 4) became common as more and more enemies of the regime were summarily tried and hanged. As pacification progressed, Stolypin introduced land reforms, which began the transformation of the Russian countryside from the centuries-old communal system to a capitalistic farming structure. He allowed peasants the right to an internal passport, which allowed them to move around the country as they pleased. He also allowed the heads of families to register their shares of village land as private property, thereby circumventing the land communes. He also allowed peasants to enclose common land for private use if there was a 2:1 majority in the commune. By 1914, over one million peasants had taken their own land as private property.

During the reform period hundreds of thousands of peasants were allowed to break their ties with the village communes and acquire land in their own names. The reformers hoped to create a new class of independent farmers who, as landowners, would be conservative in their politics and loyal to the tsar. The reforms were rather slow moving, however, and Stolypin, a hard-driving person impatient with inefficiency and corruption, was making enemies on all sides. In 1911 he was assassinated by a revolutionary in a Kiev opera house. A class of small landholders had been established, but the reforms had not progressed to the desired extent and, without the forcefulness of Stolypin, the reform movement languished.

Without Stolypin, and his democratic views, there was no other way for the Tsar s rule to endure. The only way for opposition to be heard was through a total revolution. The failure of the Duma s and their restriction by the Tsar only served to prove, that under a man who believed he had a divine right to rule, even the seeds of democracy could not grow. The year 1914 culminated in the totality of an environment stifled by oppression, failure abroard, economic hardship, censorship, and inept leadership, there was absolutely no prospect for democracy.

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