First Duma: April–July 1906

The First Duma opened on 27 April in an elaborate ceremony designed to impress the deputies who had been elected into the body. The ceremony did exactly the opposite, serving only to highlight the vast gap between rich and poor in Russian society; the opulence of the imperial monarch being compared to the destitution of the majority of the population.

Peasants held a large majority of the deputy positions, totalling thirty-eight per cent, while the Kadets were the largest political party, accounting for thirty-seven per cent of the seats. These two groups formed a coalition, seeing the Kadets sponsor an ‘Address to the Throne’, pursuing rights for the people. They demanded the following:

- freedom to strike
- freedom to publicly assemble
- the abolition of capital punishment
- political amnesty
- the abolition of the State Council of Imperial Russia
- significant reform to the civil service
- ministerial responsibility to be handed to the duma
- universal and direct voting
- universal and free education
- the seizure of large estates and redistribution to the peasants
- more equitable distribution of the tax burden

Nicholas found these demands unacceptable, seeing them as openly anti-government. The First Duma was dissolved after only seventy-three days.

Two-hundred deputies, mostly Kadets, staged an appeal, encouraging people to refrain from paying taxes and refusing orders to enlist. Violence broke out across the nation and the government acted decisively, appointing Pyotr Stolypin as Prime Minister. A second duma was promised for February the next year.

Second Duma: February–June 1907

Having hoped for a more conservative body, the government was shocked to find that the Second Duma was more radical than its predecessor. This time the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Social Democrats participated in the elections, realising the potential for the Duma to fuel anti-tsarist sentiment.

The Second Duma was greatly divided ideologically, with deputies ranging from Socialist Revolutionaries to monarchists, with even a few poor peasants thrown in. It was near-impossible for the Tsar and Prime Minister to work with such a disparate group, despite Stolypin’s commitment to make it work.

Following disturbances throughout April and May, including the Duma openly criticising the administration of the military, the Tsar sought to dissolve the group and more importantly, to gain a more docile duma for the future. After it became obvious that the body would not support Stolypin’s proposed land reforms and that deputies wanted to nationalise land, the Second Duma’s time was limited. The Tsar and Prime Minister were given a perfect opportunity to dissolve it following the arrest of a Social Democrat who had allegedly planned to overthrow the regime. The Duma was dissolved on 3 June. The Tsar stated that the decision was made on account of the irresponsible and obstructive behaviour of representatives. The public responded to the closure of the Duma in a mostly quiet manner; there were few arrests.

45 M. Bucklow and G. Russell, Russia, 89.

DID YOU KNOW?
Stolypin’s favourite method of execution, hanging, was nicknamed ‘the Stolypin necktie.’
Third Duma: November 1907–June 1912

The hope of real reform was further shattered when, on the same day, sweeping changes were made to the electoral system by Stolypin, who acted while the Duma was not in session. Voting was suspended in districts where, according to the Tsar, the population had not yet reached sufficient levels of civic development and further change to the system occurred, greatly restricting the franchise (right to vote). This move violated the constitution and was, thereby, illegal. In essence, the number of deputies from peasant, urban worker, small landowning and national minority backgrounds was drastically reduced, while the number from the landed gentry was greatly increased. The new laws were complex, but transparent. Now only one in six males was entitled to vote, with one per cent of the population now responsible for electing 300 out of the 441 deputies.

The result was exactly what the Tsar and Stolypin had hoped for, a more conservative and compliant duma, dominated by right-wing parties willing to work with the Prime Minister. Stolypin considered this new group to be comprised of ‘responsible and statesmanlike people’ and was able to further pursue his land reform without the opposition of the Duma. The body did, however, continue to be a forum for political discussion and proposal, most importantly raising the political consciousness and awareness of the wider community. For the Tsar, the existence of the Duma continued to serve as a message to the European superpowers Britain and France, with whom Russia was now allied, that Russia was a modern nation committed to constitutional monarchy. It is for these reasons that the Third Duma was permitted to serve its full five-year term.

Fourth Duma: November 1912–August 1914

The term of the Fourth Duma was plagued by mounting tensions and crises, most notably the assassination of Prime Minister Stolypin in 1911. Arguably the most conservative of the dumas, the body was tested by radical protests, to which it responded repressively. The workers’ movement began to resurface, prompted by the massacre of 500 miners from the Lena Goldfields in Siberia in 1912. The miners, demanding better pay and conditions, were brutally massacred by government forces, highlighting the growing reactionary methods of the Tsar. Over the following two years, three-million workers staged 9000 strikes. Many moderate deputies in the Duma tired of the reactionary approach of the Tsar and began to voice their concerns, in some cases even forecasting the breakdown of parliamentary government in Russia.

Historians have long debated the successes and failures of the constitutional period in Russia. While the Stalin-sponsored History of the CPSU says the dumas were nothing more than ‘an impotent appendage of tsardom’, most Western historians contend that the dumas played an integral role in provoking debate, pursuing reform and, to some extent, awakening the political consciousnesses of the masses. Having said this, when considering the events of 1917, some historians lament the fact that, though they were not without their achievements, the four dumas of Tsar Nicholas II constituted a wasted opportunity that did not present itself again.

47 M. Lynch, Reactions and Revolutions, 52.
49 O. Pipes, A People’s Tragedy, 225.
50 O. Pipes, A People’s Tragedy, 245.
52 R. Pipes, Russian Revolution, 153.
Pyotr Stolypin.

DID YOU KNOW?
Stolypin said of his land reforms: “The government has placed its wager, not on the needy and the drunken, but on the sturdy and the strong.”

DID YOU KNOW?
A post-mortem revealed that Stolypin’s heart and liver were so diseased that he would have probably died of natural causes before long.

STOLYPIN: REPRESSION AND REFORM
Pyotr Stolypin became known for his far-reaching land reforms and ruthless tactics after the 1905 Revolution. His first political job was as a provincial governor. He quickly climbed the ranks by improving peasant welfare and suppressing rural rebellions. Nicholas II appointed him Minister of the Interior in 1906 and, soon after, Prime Minister. In this role Stolypin set about suppressing revolutionary groups and reducing the social discontent that fuelled them. His guiding principle was ‘suppression first and then, and only then, reform’. A committed monarchist, he set about protecting the ‘Tsar from revolution.

Stolypin focused on the ‘rural crisis’, land shortages and rural overpopulation, which had been exacerbated by a series of poor harvests. His land reforms, issued while the Duma was not in session, were set down by executive decree in November 1906. His aim was to transform peasants into a class of independent landowners that would serve as a loyal and conservative class - a barrier to revolution, rather than a catalyst. Stolypin planned to replace village communes with private land ownership and to give peasants more rights in selecting zemstvo members. Under his system, peasants were allowed to keep the mir and sell land shares or claim single plots of land. Land taxes were halted from 1 January 1907, depriving the mir of financial power. The result was mixed. Some peasants, especially those in western regions, were able to get more land and adopt modern (Western European) farming methods. Others were left out of the process. This was largely due to the policy of redistributing, rather than expanding, land ownership, thus forcing many peasants to look for work in cities, further exacerbating stresses from Witte’s industrial reforms.

Stolypin’s program remained largely unfulfilled. The reluctance and inexperience of peasants made land distribution and new farming methods difficult to implement. Land shortages, high building costs, poor irrigation and inefficient transport made Stolypin’s aims virtually unattainable. He did, however, succeed in pacifying rural Russians and raising their living standards overall. Pipes suggests that among Stolypin’s achievements was his ability to offer ‘a sense of national purpose and hope’ after the traumas of 1905; most of Stolypin’s social and political reforms, however, remained ‘on paper’.

Accompanying land reforms were severe acts of repression. Stolypin introduced a network of military tribunals in 1906 which processed cases without investigation or delay. Between August 1906 and April 1907, 1144 people were executed by these courts and a further 2000 by ordinary courts. Stolypin also censored the Press and conducted searches, arrests and surveillance of universities and liberal activists. He enraged reformists and radicals by dismissing the Second Duma and revising the electoral system single-handed.

Stolypin gained support from some moderate groups, such as the Octobrists and the Union of Russian People. Hence he was able to further his land reforms, reintroduce ‘Russification’ in Finland and extend the zemstvo system into Poland. He was seen by many as an abuser of the constitutional system, perhaps explaining his assassination in September 1911. Dmitry Bogrov, a revolutionary, fatally shot Stolypin on 1 September 1911. It is widely thought that, in any case, the Tsar had lost faith in his Prime Minister and was looking for a chance to end Stolypin’s post. As one Duma member said, Stolypin ‘died politically long before his physical death’.56

53 M. Lynch, Reaction and Revolution, 23.
54 R. Pipes, Russian Revolution, 90.
55 C. Darby, Tsarism in Bohemian, 47.
56 R. Pipes, Russian Revolution, 190.
Conclusion

The period 1904–1914 saw a series of crises hit Russia, crises which were met with a variety of reformist and repressive acts from the government of Tsar Nicholas II. The humiliating defeat of the Russo-Japanese War added to anti-tsarist sentiment, and prompted Father Gapon’s protest march which was brutally extinguished on Bloody Sunday, 1905. The ensuing revolution around the country saw major strikes, peasant seizures of land and acts of terror directed at landowners. The state bureaucracy was shown to be weak and ill-informed, based as it was on arbitrary and corrupt practices. The police and military were unable to control the situation. Tsar Nicholas, however, was able to appease the masses, at least in the short term, by setting up a parliamentary system – the duma – which allowed for limited popular representation. Autocratic methods remained, however, as seen in the Fundamental Laws and Stolypin’s system of court-martial executions, among other actions.

Many important groups emerged during this period, such as the Octobrists and Kadets on the moderate side and the Socialist Revolutionaries and Social Democrats on the radical side. Due to Nicholas’ successful employment of reform and repression, it was difficult for such organisations to mount a united and effective campaign to overthrow the regime. Revolutionary sentiment, however, simmered just below the surface, ready to seize any opportunity to challenge the Tsar. It was the potential for such action that most worried Nicholas, as he remained devoted to the notion of autocratic rule.

Perhaps the most significant factor to emerge out of this period was the people’s perception of the tsar. The almost-mystical union that had previously existed between the tsar and his subjects was forever broken. Ironically, it was the creation of the duma, which saved Nicholas in the short term, that allowed his enemies to mount an effective challenge to tsarism.

Despite the dissolution of several dumas, the parliaments were to some extent a check on royal power and a place where opposition parties could be heard. This gave strength to the movement that was to lead to all-out revolution in 1917.

DID YOU KNOW?

Nicholas II’s son, Alexei (heir to the throne), suffered from haemophilia, a disease preventing the blood from clotting properly. It was passed to him by his mother, granddaughter of Queen Victoria of England. As many royals suffered from this hereditary disease, it became known as ‘the royal disease.’