

# October Manifesto (UPSC World History Notes)

The October Manifesto was the precursor to the Russian Empire's first Constitution of 1906. The Manifesto was issued by Nicholas II under the influence of Sergei Witte on 30th October 1905 as a response to the Russian Revolution of 1905. The impact of this manifesto would have far-reaching consequences in the history of Russia.

## What led to the proclamation of the October Manifesto?

While most nations of the world had chosen democracy in form or another, Russia still held onto its system of absolute monarchy, with the Tsar at its helm. In addition, the current Tsar, Nicholas II, was a firm believer in the divine rights of kings, an archaic belief that a ruler was answerable only to God and not his/her subjects. This belief had proven to be a major roadblock for many reforms initiated in the past by enlightened ministers.

One of these ministers, Sergei Witte - who was in charge of finance, had embarked on a state-led programme on industrialisation through foreign investments and the imposition of tariffs. Just like Russia's form of government, its industry was still stuck in the past and these reforms were much needed. However, the rapid growth in the industry was not matched by political reforms which lead to conflicts between different social classes and created economic issues.

The conflicts created by Russia's economic and political issues climaxed in the months prior to October 1905, known as the Russian Revolution of 1905. On 22 January 1905, peaceful protesters attempted to bring a petition to the Tsar, as per tradition. What happened instead was that the protest was violently put down outside the winter palace when the guards were ordered to fire on the protesters. This even came to be known as "Bloody Sunday". This event and the Tsar's apparent incompetence and indifference led to unrest throughout Russia with workers refusing to go to work. This general strike crippled the Russian Empire as communication networks and public services were struck a major blow. Due to this, Nicholas II was forced to act before he lost complete control.

## What were the provisions of the October Manifesto?

The October Manifesto addressed the unrest application throughout the Russian Empire and pledged to grant basic civil liberties, including

- To grant to the population the essential foundations of civil freedoms based on the principles of genuine inviolability of the person, freedom of conscience, speech, assembly and association.
- Without postponing the scheduled elections to the State Duma, to admit to participation in the Duma (insofar as possible in the short time that remains before it

- is scheduled to convene) of all those classes of the population that now are completely deprived of voting rights; and to leave the further development of a general statute on elections to the future legislative order.
- To establish as an unbreakable rule that no law shall take effect without confirmation by the State Duma and that the elected representatives of the people shall be guaranteed the opportunity to participate in the supervision of the legality of the actions of our appointed officials.
  - The Manifesto also introduced universal manhood suffrage in Russia which was common in some Western countries, such as France, Germany and the United States.
  - The Manifesto also made provisions for the creation of a legislative body called the Duma, which was supposed to limit the power of the nobles in favour of the Russian people.
  - The provision above was flawed from the beginning as the Tsar maintained veto powers to dismiss any legislation he deemed unfit. He could also disband the legislative body in its entirety in the event that any disagreement rose between the Duma and the Tsar.

This document, although granting basic rights to the Russian people, did not guarantee that the Russian government would function in a democratic way. Instead, the Manifesto just stated that the people now had basic rights and a voice in legislation.

## Impact of the October Manifesto

As soon as the manifesto was proclaimed, the strikes and violence almost ended immediately. There were celebrations across the Russian Empire as people realised their new-found freedom and the idea that their demands could be represented in the government.

The immediate success of the manifesto was short-lived as the Russian Autocracy soon reaffirmed its power. Within months the government began suppressing political parties and increasing the pace of executions. By 1906 - 1907 most of Russia was under martial law. As far as critics of the Tsar were concerned the manifesto had nothing been more than a ploy for Nicholas II to regain control Russia, instead of it being a tool for reform. As far as revolutions were to go, this was far from over.

The failure of the October Manifesto had proven that the Tsar was not inclined to any reforms whatsoever. This would have far-reaching consequences in the coming years as popular dissent, losses in World War I would pave the way for the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the eventual abdication of the Nicholas II.