The revolutionary upheaval that convulsed Russia throughout 1905 produced undeniably profound changes in her institutions both in terms of immediate impact and in terms of long-range consequences. The strikes, riots and the ensuing armed repression, for example, compelled the tsarist regime to improve its image abroad as well as to take measures that would ease tensions at home. In several instances the two efforts were identical, the most important being the attempt to create a body representative of the Russian people. However, so sensitive was this question and so profound were its implications for the autocracy, that the imperial regime acted only under the greatest duress, ceding first a limited plan of reform and then, under the pressure of continued revolutionary upheaval, a second, more “democratic” one.¹

Not surprisingly, Western historians have concentrated on the latter plan and its creation, the Imperial State Duma. Since the latter played a major role in Russia’s subsequent history, this attention is merited. However, little similar attention has been paid to its abortive predecessor, the “Bulygin” Duma.

Promised at the height of revolutionary activity in early January and drafted during the relative lull between February and August, the Bulygin Duma belongs to history’s curiosity shop of institutions that have emerged still-born into the world. In this its unfulfilled potential is similar to the Conditions of 1730 and to the Constituent Assembly of 1917. The Bulygin Duma never sat, and elections to it were never held; it was succeeded almost immediately after its creation by the October Manifesto and the Imperial State Duma. The machinery necessary to bring it to life never operated.

Despite this fact, it should not be considered just a quaint but irrelevant episode in Russia’s constitutional history. On the contrary, its creation is not only an example of the philosophy of the tsarist government and a telling indication of its readiness to reform itself, but also points up the “situational interpretation” of the regime—i.e., its perception and interpretation of its position at the time and the extent to which its responses were a result of this perception.²

In spite of repeated promises of reform both preceding and following Bloody Sunday, bureaucratic lethargy impeded the progress of institutional change and undoubtedly would have killed it had not the whole question become linked with Russia’s inter-

---

* I would like to express my gratitude to L. F. Magerovsky, Director of the Russian Archives at Columbia University, for his assistance in locating materials for this project.

1. For a detailed discussion of the government’s efforts at reform following the revolutionary upheavals and mass strikes of October, 1905, see Howard Mehlinger and John Thompson, Count Witte and the Tsarist Government in the 1905 Revolution (Bloomington, Ind., 1972).

national finances early in February, 1905.3 Russia's military failures in the Far East and her internal discord had created a sorry impression in France, where she was then attempting to secure a badly needed loan to support her sagging financial structure. Consequently, when Eduard Noetzlin, a representative of the Russian syndicate of French banks, visited St. Petersburg in February, he bluntly informed Minister of Finance V. N. Kokovtsov that the Russian government had to do something to reassure French public opinion. Only concrete steps toward political reform could satisfy this requirement; without them, the success of the loan was doubtful.4

Repeating these same views in a private audience with Nicholas the following day, Noetzlin was "greatly heartened" by the emperor's seeming agreement and so departed for Paris prepared to recommend to the Syndicate that it continue the preparations for the loan—contingent upon the reform.5

Yet Nicholas still hesitated to act. His own conservatism was reinforced by resentment over foreign dictation in Russia's affairs6 and by a struggle between two distinct "parties" which were attempting to influence his decision. The shrewd Lev Tikhomirov distinguished them as a "court" or conservative group consisting of Baron Friedrichs, the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna and other figures from the Ruling Senate and the Council of State, on the one hand, and a "ministerial" party on the other. This latter circle included Kokovtsov, Sergei Witte, Count D. M. Sol'skii, President of the Department of State Economy, and A. S. Ermolov.7

Despite the efforts of the ministerial group, the court faction persuaded Nicholas to issue an uncompromisingly harsh document which advised Minister of Interior A. G. Bulygin to take "all available measures" to "crush revolutionary activity and eradicate sedition."8 At the same time it was totally devoid of any mention of the reform indicated as necessary by Noetzlin. In a state of near-panic, the ministerial group appealed to Nicholas to hear their views in an emergency session of the Committee of Ministers the following day. Here both Witte and Kokovtsov warned of dire financial complications if some concessions to French opinion were not finally made.9

Faced with the unwelcome prospect of French displeasure and, perhaps more to the point, the financial ruin of Russia, Nicholas relented and issued yet another rescript, this one based on the suggestions of his reform-minded ministers. Promising to "enlist the people in a more active and permanent participation in matters of legislation" and an elected assembly, Nicholas dated this second rescript for the same day as the more

3. The regime's stuttering attempts, characterized by almost classic indecision on Nicholas' part, are detailed in S. E. Kryzhanovskii, Vospominan'ia iz bumag S. E. Kryzhanovskogo, poslednego gos. sekretar'ia Rossiiskoi imperii (Berlin, 1938), pp. 15-17; Le Matin, December 21, 1904 (N.S.); Russ, December 7, 1904; E. D. Chernenskii, Burzhuaziia i tsarizm v pervoi russkoii revoliutsii (Moscow, 1970), pp. 43-54; and Mehlinger and Thompson, p. 15.


5. Ibid., p. 63. See also "Pis'mo A. I. Neliyova gr. V. N. Lamsdorfu iz Parizha 17 fevralia/2 marta, 1905g.,” Russkie finansy i evropeiskaia birzha v 1904-1906gg. (Moscow, 1925), p. 156.


8. Kokovtsov, I, 64. See also Poboe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii [hereafter PSZ], XXV, Pt. I, No. 25852.