

The Cause of Bloody Sunday

In January, 1905, strikes and unanswered demands for political reform spurred thousands of Russian workers to march to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg where the tsar was supposed to be in residence. They intended to present him with the petition quoted below. Hundreds of the unarmed demonstrators were killed when troops fired on the crowd. The day came to be known as Bloody Sunday.

Sire! We, the workers and residents of the city of St. Petersburg, of various ranks and strata, our wives, children, and helpless old people, our parents, have come to you, Sire, to seek justice and protection. We have become destitute, we are being persecuted, we are overburdened with work, we are being insulted, we are not regarded as human beings, we are treated as slaves who must endure their bitter fate in silence. We have suffered, but even so we are being pushed more and more into the pool of poverty, disfranchisement, and ignorance. We are being stifled by despotism and arbitrary rule, and we are gasping for breath. We have no strength left, Sire. We have reached the limit of endurance. For us that terrible moment has arrived, when death is preferable to the continuance of unbearable torture. . . .

We have been enslaved, and enslaved under the auspices of your officials, with their aid, and with their cooperation. Every one of us who has the temerity to raise his voice in defense of the interests of the working class and the people is thrown into jail and sent into exile. We are punished for a good heart and for a sympathetic soul as we would be for a crime. . . .

Sire! Is this in accordance with God's laws, by the grace of which you reign? Is it possible to live under such laws? Isn't it better to die—for all of us, the toiling people of all Russia, to die? . . . This is the dilemma before us, Sire, and this is why we have assembled before the walls of your palace. This is our last resort. Don't refuse to help your people, lead them out of the grave of disfranchisement, poverty, and ignorance, give them an opportunity to determine their own fate, and cast off the unbearable yoke of the

bureaucrats. Tear down the wall between you and your people, and let them rule the country with you. . . . Look without anger, attentively, at our requests; they are not intended for an evil, but for a good cause, for both of us, Sire. We do not talk arrogantly, but from a realization of the necessity to extricate ourselves from a plight unbearable to all of us. Russia is too vast, her needs too diverse and numerous to be run only by bureaucrats. It is necessary to have popular representation; it is necessary that the people help themselves and govern themselves. Only they know their real needs. Do not reject their help; take it; command at once, forthwith, that there be summoned the representatives of the land of Russia from all classes, all strata, including also the representatives of the workers. Let there be a capitalist, a worker, a bureaucrat, a priest, a doctor, and a teacher—let them all, whoever they are, elect their own representatives. Let everyone be equal and free in the matter of suffrage, and for that purpose command that the elections for the Constituent Assembly be carried out on the basis of universal, secret, and equal suffrage. . . .

And if you do not so decree, and do not respond to our supplication, we will die here, in this square, in front of your palace. We have nowhere else to go and it is useless to go. There are only two roads open to us: one toward freedom and happiness, the other toward the grave. Let our lives be the sacrifice for suffering Russia. We do not regret this sacrifice. We are glad to make it.

Questions

1. What groups brought the petition to the Winter Palace?
2. Identify as many conditions as you can which were causing unrest in Russia in 1905?
3. What is the main plea being made by the petitioners?