

Maxim Gorky, "January 9"

The following selection is from "January 9," a story by Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), written in 1906. Gorky was a participant in the march to the Winter Palace on Bloody Sunday. He indicates that the violence perpetrated against the workers destroyed their faith in the tsar as well as their belief that change could be initiated by him alone. It was a harsh lesson, and one that had far-ranging consequences.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why did the Petersburg workers believe the Russian tsar would not allow them to be turned away or hurt?
2. Why did Bloody Sunday initiate a revolution in Russia?
3. Besides the events on Bloody Sunday, what were some of the other underlying social and economic causes of the Russian Revolution?

The crowd resembled a dark ocean wave; barely awakened by the first gust of the storm, it moved forward slowly; the grey faces of people were like the turbid foamy crest of a wave.

Their eyes glistened excitedly, but people looked at one another as though not believing their own decision, having surprised themselves. Words circled over the crowd like small grey birds.

They spoke softly, seriously, as if justifying themselves before one another.

"It's impossible to endure any longer, that's why we have come . . ."

"Without a reason, they won't touch the people . . ."

"Is it possible 'he' doesn't understand this? . . ."

More than anything they talked about "him," convincing each other that "he" was kind, loving, and understood everything . . . But the words which created his image were colorless. It seemed as though for a long time—and perhaps never—they had not thought seriously about "him," had not imagined him as a real living person, did not know what he was like, and even poorly understood why "he" existed and what he could do. But today "he" was needed, all hastened to understand him, and not knowing the real person, they unwittingly created in their imagination something formidable. Their hopes were great; they needed greatness for their own support. . . .

When the crowd poured out onto the street along the river's edge, it saw before it a long broken line of soldiers, blocking the path to the bridge, but this thin grey fence did not stop the people. There was nothing threatening in the figures of the soldiers; they hopped up and down, warming their cold feet, waving their hands, bumping against one another. Before them, beyond the river, the people saw the dark house—there "he" awaited them—the tsar, the ruler of the house. Great and strong, kind and loving, he could not, of course, order his soldiers to forbid the people to go to him, the people who love him and wish to speak with him about their need.

But nevertheless many faces were shadowed with doubt and the people in the front of the crowd slowed their steps. Some glanced backwards, others went off to the side, and all tried to show one another that they knew about the soldiers, that this did not surprise them. Several looked peacefully at the golden angel, glistening high in the sky on the dismal fortress; others smiled. . . .

And suddenly something spewed forth into the air dryly and irregularly, quaked, and thrashed the crowd with tens of invisible whips. For a second all voices suddenly seemed to freeze. The mass slowly continued to march forward.

"Blank cartridges . . ." someone said; another asked in a colorless voice.

But here and there groans could be heard; at the feet of the crowd lay several bodies. A woman, moaning loudly, gripping her chest with her hand, lunged forward with quick steps toward the bayonets poised to meet her.

And again the crack of a gun volley, still louder, still more uneven. Those standing at

the fence heard the planks quivering—just as though some kind of invisible teeth were chewing them. And one projectile shot along the wooden fence and breaking off small splinters threw them into people's faces. People fell in twos, in threes, dropped to the ground, ran limping off into nowhere, crawled along the snow, and everywhere, all over the snow, bright red stains blazed forth. Oozing and steaming, they drew all eyes to them. . . . The crowd fell back, stopped for a moment, froze, and suddenly, a wild tremendous howl of a hundred voices rang out. It burst forth and began to flow through the air in a continuous tremulous cacophony of shrieks, sharp pain, horror, protest, sad bewilderment, and cries for help.

With their heads bowed, people ran forward in groups to gather up the dead and wounded. The wounded also shouted, shook their fists; all faces suddenly became transformed, all eyes glazed with madness. . . . There was a singeing horror, which like freezing iron froze the heart, stiffened the body, and forced people to look around with open eyes at the blood being devoured by the snow, at the bloodied faces, hands, clothes, at the corpses strangely peaceful in contrast to the frantic movements of the living. . . .

Everything permanent and familiar was overthrown, smashed, and had vanished. Everyone, more or less clearly, felt depressed and strangely alone, defenseless before the cynical and harsh force which recognized neither rights nor the law. All lives were in its hands; and it was able to sow death unaccountably among the mass of people; it was able to destroy the living in the way it chose and as many as it chose. Nobody could hold it back. Nobody could communicate with it. It was all-powerful and calmly displayed the limitlessness of its strength, thoughtlessly filling the streets with corpses, filling them with blood. Its bloody, mad caprice was seen clearly. It inspired unanimous anxiety, caustic fear, a devastated soul. And it insistently set one thinking of the need to create plans for a new defense of the individual, for new preparations for the protection of life.