

Is it possible to assert that in 1905-1917 Russia was a constitutional monarchy?

After the 1905 revolution efforts were made by the Tsarist government to introduce constitutional institutions and a constitutional monarchy. A constitutional system began to emerge as a legislative assembly, the State Duma, was set up. However, it could be said the Tsar and other conservative forces were reluctant to allow the Duma to play its full role and the Duma was undermined. Furthermore, traditionalists continued to hold the overwhelming majority in the State Council and so radical change, including constitutional change, was prevented.

In 1905 the Tsar issued a Manifesto which was intended to be a concession to end the protests and strikes. The Manifesto intended to "guarantee full civil liberty, to give major legislative powers to the promised Assembly (the State Duma), and to broaden greatly the franchise on which it was to be based" (Acton: 1995, 117). During this period new parties were set up that would participate in the Duma, such as the Kadets who wanted a movement towards full democracy, and the Octobrists who were committed to the Manifesto (Acton, 1995: 117). Strikes and disruption continued into 1906 and the government was aware of a need to control the situation without inciting another revolution. Thus "an uneasy balance between reform and reaction was reflected in the Duma Statute and the Fundamental Laws issued in February and April 1906" (Acton, 1995: 120). This meant that because of the continuing volatile situation in Russia, the government was not prepared to give excessive powers to the new institutions. This is demonstrated in the way it organised the upper and lower chambers; "the State Council was to be preserved, and was to form an upper Chamber designed to counterbalance any radical tendencies in the Duma" (Acton, 1995: 120). This shows the Tsar was cautious in allocating powers to the Duma and was reluctant to grant it significant powers because of the current revolutionary atmosphere of the country. Moreover, there were limitations to reform as the electoral system which discriminated heavily against peasants and workers (Chubarov: 1999: 135). In addition; "half the councillors [of the upper chamber] were to be appointed by the Tsar, and the other half were to be elected from such reliable institutions as the Holy Synod, the provincial assemblies of the nobility, the zemstvos, and the city dumas, as well as the academic and business communities" (Acton, 1995: 121). This illustrates how the Tsar sought to balance the radicalism of the lower chamber as it is evident that he intended the upper chamber to be almost entirely conservative.

Furthermore, the Tsar retained his right of veto (Acton, 1995: 121). He would be able to put a stop to any legislation even if it had been approved by both chambers. In this sense the monarchy of Russia was not constitutional as it was not constrained by any other power. The existence of the Imperial Veto undermined the legislative nature of the Duma as it made it an almost advisory body whose 'advice' could be either taken or ignored. Similarly, the Tsar was able to take direct control over the legislative and executive "should an emergency arise while the Duma was not in session" (Acton, 1995: 121). This was through Article 87 which "enabled him to legislate by decree" (Acton, 1995: 121). In addition to this the Tsar would retain absolute control over foreign and military affairs (Acton, 1995: 121). This was engrained in the Fundamental State Laws which "retained for Nicholas the title of autocrat and complete control over the armed forces and foreign policy, which between them accounted for 40 per cent of the state budget" (Dukes, 1998: 180). This meant there were no constitutional restraints upon the Tsar in his dealings with foreign or military aspects of government and these departments were almost his private domain. These limitations upon the powers of the Duma and the lack of limitations upon the power of the Tsar meant that Russia was barely a constitutional monarchy in the sense that we understand it.

Nevertheless efforts had been made by the Tsar to reduce the absolutist nature of Russia as the promises set out in the October Manifesto were kept. The State Duma was to be a Legislative Assembly elected on a broad franchise (Acton, 1995: 120). Additionally; "the Duma's consent was required before any change could be made to the Fundamental Laws; it was to control a portion of the budget; and its members were given immunity against prosecution" (Acton, 1995: 120). The significance of these concessions should not be understated when they are compared with the political situation before 1905 in which power was heavily centralised. In 1906 the State Duma would have a constitutional role to play in the maintaining of the Fundamental Laws, would have a say in the budget, and were immune from prosecution which essentially gave them freedom of speech while the Duma was sitting. Thus, in theory, Russia was developing into something like a constitutional monarchy but was not yet one.

In practice the role the Duma was to play in government was continuously undermined, ultimately because it was seen as too radical. The First Duma was dominated by the Left Wing Kadets and Trudovik Group. They demanded "a series of profound reforms including the appointment of a government responsible to the Duma and the redistribution of private land" (Acton, 1995: 121). These proposals were not taken seriously by the Prime Minister or the government and so the "radical proposals were dismissed out of hand" (Acton, 1995: 121). The Duma was then left to deal with far less important legislation and was eventually dismissed after just two months. However, this

does not mean that the Tsar and government now gave up on the idea of a more constitutional system as they proceeded to appoint a new Prime Minister, Stolypin, who was "convinced of the need to combine firm assertion of government authority with measures to assuage popular discontent" (Acton, 1995: 123). In appointing a reformist Prime Minister this shows that the Tsar recognised the need for reform although he was not prepared to make significant radical changes as proposed by the First Duma. It could be said that he therefore wanted a Duma that could be seen as constitutional but also didn't stray from his personal intentions for the country and wanted to maintain his personal grasp on the Empire.

The Second Duma was more radical than the first and Stolypin was thus "unable to establish any common ground between his demands and the radical proposals of the Left" (Acton, 1995: 125). He dissolved the Duma four months after its first meeting. This shows again the reluctance of the government to allow the Duma to play a leading role as they wanted it to fit into their own plans and not contradict their intentions. This is shown decisively when Stolypin "used Article 87 to issue a new electoral law, which drastically altered the franchise on which subsequent Dumas were to be elected" (Chubarov, 1999: 154). This was unconstitutional as it was in violation of the Fundamental Laws "which forbade any changes to the electoral system without the consent of the Duma and the State Council" (Chubarov, 1999: 154). The electoral changes would supposedly create a more favourable Duma that would work with the government. This is because it would empower "Russia's traditional classes – the landed nobility and the peasantry" (Chubarov, 1999: 154). This shows the government's and the Tsar's disregard for constitutional methods as they violated the Fundamental Laws and changed the electoral laws to suit their own needs. This therefore undermines the view that Russia was in any way a constitutional Monarchy, as the Tsar could bend the rules as he saw fit.

The Third Duma was now far more conservative than any previous. Stolypin had the support of most of the deputies within the Duma in the Octobrist and occasionally the Kadet Parties. However, he faced considerable opposition from the upper chamber – the State Council (Acton, 1995: 127). This was because the upper house was "dominated by men who ... were closely bound by ties of kinship and friendship to upper-class society outside officialdom". They were thus "predominantly on the conservative end of the political spectrum and inclined to resist Stolypin" (Acton, 1995: 127). This shows the misguided nature of the new 'constitutional' Russia, in that meaningful legislation was often paralysed by the overwhelming power of conservatives. This is highlighted by the existence of the pressure group 'United Nobility'. This group wielded considerable power and would "skilfully [exploit] their ready access to senior bureaucrats, the State Council,

and the Tsar himself" (Acton, 1995: 127). They exercised great influence and hindered any reforms they disapproved of. For example, they; "urged the Tsar to beware of any encroachment upon his absolute authority over military affairs, and severely criticised a Duma bill ... for implying the Duma's right to make recommendations on naval administration", the Tsar then vetoed the legislation (Acton, 1995: 127). This shows the unbalanced nature of the Russian system and further demonstrates the lack of real power the Duma had.

The fourth Duma of 1912-1917 marked a major breakdown in relations between the government and the Duma (Acton, 1995: 129). Ministers now "took no pains to win support and became increasingly intolerant of the slightest criticism" (Acton, 1995: 129). They also "treated the Duma with contempt and presented it with no substantial legislation" (Acton, 1995: 129). This gives the impression that the government had simply grown tired of the institution and saw it as pointless and interfering. The Tsar even "considered stripping the Duma of its legislative functions" (Acton, 1995: 129). This shows that the Tsar had no real commitment to the Duma and thus had no real commitment to instigating a constitutional monarchy.

The notion of a constitutional monarchy in Russia can also be questioned based on the organisation of the government itself. Power within the government was greatly dispersed as the Tsar feared that a "unified Cabinet under a powerful premier threatened the independent authority of the Crown" he thus "encouraged the breakdown of collective Cabinet responsibility" (Acton, 1995: 129). He created a system whereby the Prime Minister was a mere figurehead and "individual ministers reverted to reporting independently and in haphazard manner to the Tsar" (Acton, 1995: 129). Nicholas thus sought to centralise power around himself; fearful of a powerful Prime Minister.

Additionally, the powers of the Duma were called into question as a result of the war. It was thought that the Duma would "hinder" the government's wartime actions and so it was intended for the Duma to be suspended for sixteen months (Pearson, 1977: 13). This was a direct violation of the Fundamental Laws as "the Duma had to be convened to pass the State Budget" (Pearson, 1977: 13). The Tsar did attempt to act constitutionally and reached a compromise in which the Duma would retain some peacetime rights but would still be considerably further weakened (Pearson, 1977: 14). While this shows that the Tsar did intend to keep the Duma in the process of governance it nevertheless demonstrates how easily the Duma could be swept aside at his behest or at the will of the government. It demonstrates that the Duma was thus expendable and was seen as nothing more than a nuisance, especially in times of emergency such as war.

It must be remembered, however, that Russia was in an unstable and revolutionary state and this could be seen as an unwise time to be granting wide ranging powers to elected assemblies. For this reason the Tsar's reluctance and wariness in trusting publicly elected institutions can be understood. He did make efforts to increase the democratic nature of Russia as he did give the Duma legislative powers. However, his own religious convictions in absolutist power and perhaps his fear of revolutionaries which had killed his grandfather overrode any serious attempt to create a true constitutional monarchy. Nevertheless he did set out the beginnings of institutions which within time *could* have developed into true democratic institutions and eventually ensuring a true constitutional monarchy.

In conclusion in the years 1905-1917 attempts were made to transform Russia into a constitutional monarchy in the form of the elected assembly of the Duma. This did have legislative powers and was in control over a portion of the budget. However, its already minimal powers were undermined by the hostile attitude of the conservative forces that restrained its powers and could dismiss the Duma if they felt it was too radical. The Tsar did recognise the need to democratise elements of the state, if only to pacify the masses, however his conservative beliefs and those around him prevented the Duma from becoming a real force and thus prevented Russia from becoming a true constitutional monarchy.

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