Chapter One

Long-Term Causes of the Russian Revolution

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At the beginning of March 1917 Tsar Nicholas II abdicated and the Romanov dynasty's 300-year rule over Russia came to an abrupt end. Less than eight months later, the Bolshevik party brusquely swept away the Provisional Government that had replaced the autocracy and began the process of establishing the world's first socialist state. The political cataclysms that transformed Russia in 1917 illuminate significant issues about the ways in which revolutions occur, although the interpretation that the Soviet state placed on 1917 over the following decades complicated understanding of the revolutions. The victors of 1917 – Lenin and his successors – argued that their triumph was inevitable and that the history of Russia was a single process leading to the Bolshevik seizure of power in the October revolution. The Soviet interpretation of Russian history concentrated on identifying every component cause of revolution and subjecting it to intense and detailed analysis. This approach to history did not allow that Russia had different possibilities for its development, but instead forced a single, linear explanation of the past onto circumstances that were complex and often uncertain. Soviet historians read history backward, seeing the October revolution as the inevitable consequence of centuries of historical development. For most of the twentieth century, this conceptual framework also helped to shape the understanding of Russian history outside the Soviet Union. The political antagonisms between the USSR and the western world polarized discussion of the Russian revolution, with history often becoming a function of politics. The Marxist–Leninist prism through which the USSR understood its own history produced a reaction in the west, and it was only in the last decades of the century – as the Soviet Union declined and fractured – that more nuanced views of the Russian revolution came to the fore (Suny 2006, 43–54).

Soviet historians minutely dissected every hint of revolt in the Russian past, alert to the slightest expressions of discontent that could demonstrate the deep roots of the October revolution. Russia's social structures were analyzed in great detail to provide evidence of the long-held commitment of peasants and working people to the overthrow of the Tsarist state. The Soviet state had to reconcile Marxist political ideas, with their focus on the primacy of an industrial working class in making revolution, with Russia's overwhelmingly agrarian society. Lenin himself had performed complex ideological maneuvers to explain how a socialist revolution could take place in the least industrialized of the European great powers, and the Soviet Union recognized that it was continually striving toward the achievement of the utopia of full communism (Harding 1981, 110–34). Marx's explanation of human history argued that economic change lay at the base of the historical process and that politics was a function of economic change and part of the superstructure of society. For a regime that was so intensely political as the Soviet Union, politics played a surprisingly subordinate role in explaining the causes of revolution. The Bolshevik party stood as the vanguard of the working class and of the revolutionary process, but the political regime that Lenin and his party overthrew in 1917 was, for them, doomed to certain failure by the inevitability of economic upheaval and could do nothing to rescue itself. Tsarism – and its pale replacement in the Provisional Government – was fated to collapse. The Soviet explanation of revolutionary change was thus peculiarly one-dimensional: the inevitability of the collapse of Tsarism was mirrored by the certainty of proletarian victory. The problems in this explanation of revolution were manifold, not least in its unsophisticated assessment of the nature of the Tsarist state.

A central question in explaining the success of revolution in 1917 is to understand why the mighty autocratic Romanov regime collapsed with such speed, leaving the way open for authority to disintegrate during the spring and summer of 1917. The nineteenth-century Russian state was

A Companion to the Russian Revolution, First Edition. Edited by Daniel Orlovsky.

recognized as being the most powerful in Europe, and the grip that successive monarchs maintained on their empire was acknowledged as being ruthless and brutal. Russia's borders had witnessed sustained expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the growing power of the Romanov regime enabled its armies to expand in northern Europe, to take control of great swathes of Central Asia, and to consolidate its position in the Far East. The Russian army was the largest in Europe and its military might was feared by the other Great Powers, even though Russia had suffered a humiliating defeat in the Crimean war in the 1850s. In February 1917, however, military commanders lost their grip on the garrison of Petrograd and with troops mutinying, the regime was unable to maintain control of its capital city. Within 72 hours of mutiny breaking out, Nicholas II signed his abdication decree (Hasegawa 1981, 487–507). The experience of war since summer 1914 offers some explanation for the rapid downfall of the Tsarist regime, but the roots of revolution run much deeper and the eventual fragility of the imperial Russian state had more profound structural origins. Pressure from sections of Russian society provides some explanation for the revolutionary upheavals of 1917, but the state itself was vulnerable to assault by that point. The nature of revolutionary change – wherever it occurs – is confused and uncertain. No actor in the revolutionary process has any knowledge of how the historical events in which they are participating will turn out and, indeed, people may not see themselves as being part of a revolution. In 1917, when mass media were in their infancy and when communication in Russia was slow and rudimentary, actors in the drama were themselves often unaware of the wider context of their actions. The Soviet state imposed a single and simplistic narrative of change upon all of Russian history before 1917, minimizing the part played in the historical process by contingency, and reduced the significance of individual actions in bringing about social and political change. The passage of time allows us to identify patterns in the past and to see perspectives that were not open to those people who participated in the events of 1917 themselves. But the random event – the stray bullet or the misunderstood conversation – still plays a part in the shaping of the present and, thus, the past. Applying a corrective to the dominant historical narratives of the Russian revolution should not blind us to the ways in which individual actions have steered events in unthought-of directions.

The Russian state had its origins in the Muscovite princedom that proved able to subdue the other city states of the Russian heartland. Kazan, Novgorod, and Yaroslavl were all overwhelmed by the power of Moscow during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the Muscovite Grand Dukes gradually emerged as the pre-eminent Russian power. Moscow had geographical advantages at the center of the Russian lands, while its rulers were ambitious and prepared to wage war to advance their cause. The forests and slow-moving rivers of central Russia did not provide formidable obstacles to determined troops and the lack of significant natural features, together with the weakness of Moscow's rivals, made Muscovite expansion easy. The geography of Russia, with its gentle undulations and the absence of any significant hills or impassable rivers, had allowed the Mongols to seize control of large areas of the Russian lands during the thirteenth century and, after their suzerainty had been overthrown, Russia's geography presented few challenges to an expansionist princedom. Territorial expansion became a persistent characteristic of the Muscovite and Russian states, and over the coming centuries it was able to grow with ease, taking control of the great expanses of the Siberian landmass, conquering the Caucasus, and seizing much of Central Asia. The defeat of Sweden by Peter the Great at the start of the eighteenth century transformed Russia into a great European power far removed from its origins in the Muscovite principality. Imperial power became a vital feature of the Russian state and maintaining and expanding the empire required very significant military and financial resources (Lieven 2000, 268–71). The priority of the Russian state was to sustain its imperial and international position: Russian wealth and prestige increasingly derived from its vast empire and the state configured itself to focus on this.

This was a difficult task for the Russian regime. By the mid-eighteenth century Russia covered more territory than any other state on the globe, yet it remained sparsely populated. The severe climate that affected much of Russia meant that Russian agriculture was precarious and the livelihood that Russia's farmers extracted from the land was unpredictable (Moon 1999, 120–33). Raw materials formed the bulk of Russian trade with the wider world, with timber and furs playing especially important roles. Industrialization came late to the Russian empire, only really taking a hold of the economy in the closing decade of the nineteenth century (Crisp 1976, 5–54). The state's potential for raising revenue from its population was therefore limited. The weakness of Russia's economy, together with the empire's sparse population, presented significant challenges in levying taxation. Until late in the nineteenth century, the Russian state relied heavily on indirect taxation to sustain itself. This was easier to collect than direct taxes, but rendered the state vulnerable to the vagaries of demand by the Russian population. The regime had to be rigorous and determined in order to sustain its revenues and this required significant coercive power. The Russian regime depended on its army, both to maintain its empire and its international standing among the great powers, but also to ensure that it could keep rebellion in check at home. In 1881 Russia's army comprised 844,000 men and the annual process of conscription required significant resources to provide a regular supply of men to fight. It was only in 1874 that the state felt able to move away from a system of conscription for 25 years to service for 6 years in the regular army, followed by a period in the reserves (Fuller 2006, 542–6). Ensuring a steady supply of

men and money to maintain the Russian state's imperial and international ambitions provided the mainsprings for a political structure that possessed the authority to impose its will across Russian society.

The autocratic regime that developed in Russia from the sixteenth century concentrated its authority in a single person – the monarch – and ensured that all power derived from the ruler. Russia had no form of national legislative assembly until 1906, and political parties were prohibited until 1905. Until the last decade of the regime's existence, law was made by the monarch and there was no formal system of checks and balances to constrain the power of the sovereign. Monarchs who alienated Russia's noble elite could be deposed – as with Peter III in 1762 – or assassinated – Paul I was strangled in his own bedroom in 1801 – but Russian monarchs were essentially immune to broad popular influence. In these circumstances, the bureaucracy that administered Russia was able to acquire substantial autonomy and its overwhelmingly conservative ethos sustained the apparatus of autocracy. The currents of political thought unleashed by the Enlightenment found no practical outlet in Russia where, although Catherine II debated politics with her closest associates, she never seriously contemplated applying the principles of government by consent to Russia (de Madariaga 1981, 139–83). The French revolution of 1789 merely confirmed to Russia's rulers that they were correct in maintaining the principles of autocracy and refusing to make any concessions to popular opinion. The revolts and revolutions that convulsed western and central Europe during the nineteenth century reinforced the Russian regime's commitment to autocracy, serving as a warning to Russia's conservative ideologues of the course events could take if Russia proceeded down the path of modernization. The Russian state imposed severe restrictions on its people: books and newspapers were censored, associations and meetings were subject to firm control by the government, and it was difficult for ordinary Russian subjects to gain any sort of redress against the state (Waldron 2007, 117–35). Even after the legal reforms of the 1860s, when trial by jury and an independent judiciary were introduced, the state found ways to hedge the new system around with restrictions and to maintain its arbitrary methods of government. Russian provincial officials possessed very considerable powers over the population under their control, reflecting the authority of the monarch, and ordinary Russians could easily be subjected to 'administrative justice' without any possibility of access to the court system.

The Russian autocracy's instinct was to impose its authority on its population as vigorously as it could, but the limitations of its own bureaucratic capacity meant that there were restrictions on its power. The great expanses of the expanding Russian empire made communication difficult between St. Petersburg and the provinces, while the state was eventually unable to remain immune from pressure to allow some form of popular participation in the government of Russia's cities and provinces. The autocratic state had relied on its nobility to maintain order in the countryside and had allowed the gentry to form their own local corporate bodies, with each provincial and district noble assembly headed by an elected marshal of the nobility. The autonomy of these noble organizations was limited, since the Russian nobility were well aware that their authority was dependent on the favor of the monarch and were unwilling to jeopardize their privileged position by antagonizing the regime. In the 1860s, however, Tsar Alexander II established formal, elected local government bodies, albeit on a very restricted franchise. Russia's towns and cities gained municipal councils, while their equivalent – *zemstva* – were set up in the provinces and districts of most of European Russia. These organizations were the preserve of the Russian social elite, but they introduced the concept of elected representation into the Russian state and, while the deeply conservative Alexander III tried to limit their authority, the principle of autocracy had been breached (Petrov 1994, 197–211).

Russia's monarchs, however, remained convinced of the necessity of autocratic rule for Russia. Successive Tsars believed that they had been ordained to their position by God and that they had a duty to pass on their domains to their heirs undamaged and intact. As the tide of European political thinking turned against absolutism during the eighteenth century, Russia's monarchs understood that it was no longer sufficient simply to justify their rule by an appeal to the importance of maintaining the status quo. The Romanovs developed an intellectual rationale for their autocratic regime, arguing that Russia could only be governed by an absolute monarchy. The nature of the Russian lands, they asserted, with their sparse population and harsh climate, made it difficult to maintain any sort of stable political regime and thus only a system which could exercise untrammeled power could sustain itself in the physical conditions of Russia. Russia's rulers also argued that the Russian people were by nature anarchic and thus needed to be governed firmly and without any concession to popular sentiment. In 1730, V.N. Tatishchev – a protégé of Peter the Great – argued that 'great and spacious states with many envious neighbors could not be ruled by aristocracy or democracy, particularly where the people is insufficiently enlightened by education and keeps the law through terror, and not from good conduct, or knowledge of good and evil. Spain, France, Russia, and since olden days Turkey, Persia, India, China are great states, and cannot be governed otherwise than by autocracy' (Dukes 2015, 29). The Russian regime combined its justification of autocratic power with its support for the Orthodox Church, using the church's apparatus and clergy to proclaim the message of obedience to the state and the necessity of submitting to lawful authority. These views were formally articulated during the 1830s by Count Sergei Uvarov, the Minister of Education, and his ideas of 'Official Nationality' acted as the lodestone for the Russian regime until his downfall in 1917.

At the same time, Russia's monarchs sought to identify themselves with the Russian population and to demonstrate that, despite the social gulf that existed between the sovereign and ordinary Russians, the Russian people could be confident that the Tsar had their best interests at heart. Russia's monarchs cultivated a patriarchal image, representing themselves as the 'little father' of their people, and this helped to engender a popular monarchism among many Russians (Field 1989, 1–26). The Tsar was viewed as a figure who stood above the day to day activities of government, and this helped the autocratic regime to succeed in sustaining its credibility among the state's populace. The monarchy was able to disassociate itself from the often harsh and arbitrary actions of government officials and to maintain an unexpected degree of loyalty from much of the Russian population who continued to revere the 'little father' of the sovereign. This image of the monarch, connected to the people of the empire by religion and nationhood, was able to give the Russian state a degree of stability and to reduce the likelihood of revolt (Wortman 2000, 525–7). At the same time, however, it suggested a stagnant and deeply conservative society, based on an unchanging polity.

The ambivalent relationship between Russia and the rest of the world presented the state with significant challenges. Formal contact with western Europe had begun during the sixteenth century, as both merchants and formal envoys found their way to Moscow from abroad. The riches of Russia's natural environment were a powerful magnet for stimulating trade with Europe, with fur and timber proving especially lucrative. Over the following century Russia gradually expanded its power on its western borders, aided by the decline of Poland–Lithuania. The turning point in Russian attitudes to the west came with the reign of Peter I at the end of the seventeenth century. Peter believed that Russia could become both a military and economic power in Europe and he was prepared to take practical steps to achieve this. The young Tsar traveled to western Europe, spending almost a year in Britain and the Netherlands in the late 1690s, and returned to Russia filled with ideas about how Russia could learn from western industry and technology. Peter created a Russian navy from scratch, and military and naval men from the west were instrumental in improving Russia's armed forces. At the same time, the Tsar was well aware that military power required an industrial base to produce the weaponry and equipment needed by modern armies and navies, and he sought to improve Russia's weak industrial base by encouraging the development of industries that could contribute particularly to military needs. Peter's outlook was revolutionary: he was convinced that Russia could only prosper if it followed western models – and this required cultural change from Russians themselves. In a symbolic move, Peter ordered his nobles to shave off their beards and thus cast off one of the external features that differentiated Russian men from their western contemporaries. Peter himself was clean-shaven and it was only in 1881 that a bearded monarch – Alexander III – again occupied the Russian throne.

Peter was determined to put his developments to practical use and Russia went to war with Sweden in the first decade of the eighteenth century, delivering a severe drubbing to the forces of Charles XII at the battle of Poltava in 1709 and establishing Russia as a significant power in northern Europe (Hughes 2008, 55–81). The legacy of Peter the Great haunted the Tsarist state for the rest of its existence and introduced a profound ambivalence into Russia's identity. While Peter had lauded European economic and military models of development, the way in which Europe's political structures were changing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries discomforted the Russian regime. The revolutionary cataclysm that destroyed the French monarchy after 1789 and the waves of revolt and revolution that swept across much of Europe in the century after the French revolution were, for many Russians, proof that Russia should stand apart from European models of development and, instead, rely on its own traditions and heritage to advance. The rationale for monarchs and the governing elite to stand against the growing tide of republicanism and democracy was obvious, and for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Russia was ruled by monarchs who were determined to stand firm against the tide of modern social and political ideas and movements that were transforming much of Europe. Nicholas I gained the soubriquet of the 'gendarme of Europe' for his resistance to rebellion and his willingness to put down revolt, and it was only Alexander II who was prepared to make real reforms to Russian society during the 1860s. The 'Great Reforms' that were implemented during the 1860s and 1870s introduced an ambivalence into Russian government and society. New local government and judicial institutions were able to operate with a significant degree of autonomy from the regime, and the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 struck at one of the foundations of the Russian state, yet the autocracy itself remained convinced of its own virtues and utility for Russia.

An appeal to Russian tradition was also part of the ideas of radical politicians during the nineteenth century. The early Marxists, such as Georgii Plekhanov, who argued against the conservative Romanov regime did want to promote industrial revolution along western lines and to reshape Russian society to reflect the contours of the states in the west. Many Russians, however, argued for the exceptional nature of Russia and believed that social and economic change should be based on Russia's own tradition as an agrarian society and economy. The Russian Populists that emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century represented apparently contradictory opinions. They were fiercely opposed to the oppressive Tsarist regime and believed that revolution was needed to overthrow the Romanov autocracy, but the vision that the Populists advanced for the new society that would supplant the Tsarist order was for a peasant-based socialism, rather than for full-blown industrial revolution on

the British or German model (Venturi 1960, 33–5). The legacy of Peter the Great found its expression in many different parts of Russian society and thinking. Educated Russians spoke French and were proud of their knowledge of European ideas and culture, while the Tsarist state attempted to censor books and journals imported from Europe that contained writing that they believed would threaten the Russian regime. Successive Russian monarchs wanted Russia to play a part on the European stage as a great power, and tried to emulate the military prowess of their European neighbors, but – until 1905 – they were never prepared to acknowledge the aspirations of their people for some form of political representation. The Slavophile currents of thought that stressed Russia's uniqueness and its separate identity were in conflict with the Petrine legacy that saw Russia's destiny as closely bound up with the European model of social and economic development. At times, the Russian state appeared to accept the need to follow Europe: Alexander II's decision to emancipate Russia's serfs in the 1860s was significantly motivated by the desire to escape the stigma of 'backwardness' that serfdom symbolized, in comparison to the societies of western Europe (Moon 2001, 56–69). In the 1890s, the economic policy pursued by Sergei Witte, the ambitious Minister of Finance, involved attracting foreign investment and foreign business to Russia, tying the Russian economy into the international economic system (Wcislo 2011, 153–69). In 1894 a formal political alliance with republican France, the antithesis of the autocratic Russian monarchy, appeared to cement Russia's integration into the mainstream of European thinking. But the Russian regime drew the line at domestic political change. In 1905, when revolt seized hold of Russia, Nicholas II had to be forced into making political reforms and, as soon as order was restored, his regime sought to claw back the concessions it had made and to reimpose traditional autocratic government (Ascher 1992, 337–58).

This fundamental ambivalence about Russian identity and Russia's relationship with the wider world provided fracture lines that divided both the state and wider society. The fierce debates about the path of Russian development were not simply reflected in abstract discussion, but had a direct impact on the lives of ordinary Russians. The Tsarist state recognized the dangers to its own existence that were posed by the outside world: the popular revolts that had convulsed Europe in the wake of the French revolution of 1789 appeared to be a warning of the dangers that came with modernization and the Russian state consistently tried to limit the influence of outside ideas on its population. Publications were censored and there were significant restrictions on the establishment of associations and groups and on holding any sort of public meeting. The Russian regime limited the civil rights of its people, believing that the interests of the state took precedence over individual liberty (Butler 1989, 1–12). When rebellion did break out, the regime was ruthless in suppressing it: the Pugachev revolt in the 1770s ended with the execution of its leader and severe reprisals against the rebellion's participants. After the Decembrist revolt in 1825, its five leaders were hanged and others sent to exile in Siberia for long periods. In 1905 and 1906 squadrons of cossack troops were sent into the countryside to put down revolts with great force.

The state was, however, unable to prevent ideas percolating across the Russian border and it could not isolate Russia from wider currents of thought, any more than it could stop Russians becoming aware of events taking place in the wider world. While Catherine II tried to restrict discussion of the ideas of the Enlightenment to a small number of the Russian social elite, growing literacy and the pressure for a better educated society made it impossible to prevent a wider dissemination of ideas across Russian society. The moves toward westernization that Peter the Great had promoted came to a stuttering halt later in the eighteenth century as Russia's social structures remained unreformed, with serfdom fashioning the rural world for both the peasants and nobility. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, a growing middle class and a developing urban working class were both becoming infused with ideas from outside Russia. Political liberalism and ideas about constitutional government began to permeate the Russian educated population, while the nascent working class was fertile ground for Marxism. The complexity of the relationship between Russia and Europe produced paradoxical results: economic modernization was essential if Russia was to continue to be a great military power, but the social consequences of industrial change were unwelcome to the Russian state. Liberal ideas about constitutional government and popular representation appealed to many of the prosperous Russian business and professional classes, but the intransigence of the Tsarist regime stimulated frustration among these groups and prompted some of them to adopt more radical political positions. Even during the First World War, when Russia was faced with its most severe crisis, the Tsarist state was deeply reluctant to allow voluntary and professional groups real access to power. As the war went on, the regime was almost more fearful of the domestic political threat posed by liberal political groups than of the German troops that were marching across its territory.

The cleavages in Russian society ran deep. The great majority of the Russian population were peasant farmers, living an often precarious existence. The extremities of the Russian climate made for a short growing season and this, together with poor soils in much of northern and eastern Russia, made agriculture a risky business. Until the 1860s, most Russian peasants were serfs and the property of either noble landlords or the state itself. Serfdom had a pernicious influence on Russian society, since it deprived the serfs themselves of any rights as individuals and allowed serf owners to treat their serfs simply as items of property. While there were examples of nobles who treated their serfs well, for many Russians the experience was one of great poverty

and grinding humiliation (Hoch 1968, 160–86). Serfdom provided the state with a method of maintaining order in the countryside, without having itself to go to the expense and complexity of maintaining a police force and army in every part of Russia, since the noble serf owners performed the function themselves. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, serfdom was deeply controversial since it was identified as the touchstone for Russia's perceived backwardness in comparison to western Europe. 'Serfdom,' wrote the liberal Konstantin Kavelin, 'is the stumbling-block to all success and development in Russia' and the mere existence of serfdom symbolized the intellectual and cultural gulf that separated Russia from the other great powers, while it was also argued that serfdom inhibited the growth of the Russian economy and prevented both agrarian innovation and the development of a free labor market that would contribute to industrial growth (Kavelin 1898, 33). The decision to emancipate the serfs was taken in the wake of Russia's defeat in the Crimean war, but the discussions inside the government about the way in which it should be implemented reveal the continuing fears harbored by many of Russia's elite about the consequences of making such a radical reform. Powerful arguments were advanced that the serfs should be freed, but not provided with land to work on: noble interests, it was argued, should take precedence. The prospect of a landless rural proletariat, however, worried Russia's rulers deeply and they were prepared to override noble objections so that the eventual 1861 emancipation settlement that freed the serfs did allow for them to receive an allotment of land (Emmons 1968, 209–11). This eventual settlement was not, however, wholly favorable to the peasantry. The state could not itself afford to compensate the nobility for the land which was transferred to the newly freed peasantry, and thus the peasants themselves were saddled with making annual redemption payments for their land for a period of 49 years. This burden was deeply resented by Russia's peasant farmers and it ensured that they maintained a simmering discontent about the way in which emancipation had been enacted for decades after 1861. The land question lay at the heart of Russian politics and it represented the greatest area of discord between the regime and its rural population.

Making the transition from serfdom was difficult both for the former serfs and for their owners. Many Russian farmers believed that they had been given short shrift when land was distributed to them as part of the emancipation settlement, and they found it a demanding task to farm efficiently. This was not helped by the persistence of the traditional communal structures of Russian agriculture: the collective ethos that dominated the countryside provided advantages to peasant farmers by allowing self-regulation of the basic elements of their lives through the village commune, but it did bind peasants to collective decisions about farming and constrained innovation. Russian farmers found ways of adapting to the communal system and Russian agriculture did develop after emancipation (Leonard 2011, 132–40). During the second part of the nineteenth century, there was a slow process of differentiation among Russian peasant farmers, as some were able to buy or rent additional land while other farmers were forced out of agriculture and had to seek other sources of work and income. Russian agriculture was under pressure as the population grew and more Russians moved to work in cities, meaning that, even with improved technology, farmers had to work hard to produce enough grain to feed the empire. It took only episodes of poor weather to disrupt an already finely balanced agricultural system and, as in the Volga region in the early 1890s, produce famine (Wheatcroft 1991, 130–6). Russia's noble landowners also found the process of adapting to a world without serfdom to be difficult and disruptive. Without the free labor of serfs, many estate owners discovered that farming was an unrewarding business and in the decades after 1861 the nobility gradually divested itself of landholdings, so that by 1900 they held only 60 percent of their pre-emancipation land. Russia's nobility too had to search for new ways to earn a living: some chose to enter Russia's growing professions while others tried the new world of industry or business. For some nobles, however, the changing rural world was difficult to adapt to, and the purposeless lives that Chekhov depicted in his plays were not uncommon on decaying noble estates across the Russian countryside. The loss of economic power by the nobility in the rural world was accompanied by a loosening of the social and political control that they had been able to exert over the peasant population. Although Alexander III instituted land captains – minor rural officials – in 1889 to try to reassert authority in the countryside, these men were never able to acquire the same power as the landed nobility and were widely despised by the peasantry (Pearson 1989, 204–9). The changes wrought by emancipation were slow to develop and the tens of millions of people living in the Russian countryside found their lives changing gradually and at an uneven pace in the second half of the nineteenth century. But for a population that was accustomed to stability, the changes to both the economic and social structures of the rural world were disruptive and far-reaching.

The process of rural change was accompanied by concentrated and rapid urbanization in Russia. The need to maintain a powerful army and navy was a consistent priority for the Russian state, but in the 1890s Sergei Witte, the ambitious Minister of Finance, argued that the continuing weakness of the agrarian sector made it imperative for Russia to embark on a much more concerted program of industrialization and his macroeconomic policy was designed to promote rapid industrial revolution. There had been persistent migration – often seasonal – from countryside to city since the 1860s as emancipated peasant men sought work to enhance their incomes. This process accelerated in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and Russia's largest cities expanded very quickly (Bradley 1985, 133–41). By 1900

Moscow and St. Petersburg both had populations of more than one million and were among the ten largest cities in Europe, while Warsaw, Odessa, Lodz, and Riga each had populations of more than 250,000. Much of the focus in the late nineteenth century was on mining and metallurgical industries, as Russia sought to construct an industrial base, and this helped to concentrate Russia's developing working class in large industrial enterprises. The social impact of industrialization in Russia mirrored the experience of other newly industrializing societies: living conditions for the new urban population of Russia were frequently hard and unpleasant. Wages were low and factory owners expected their workers to work long hours in what were often unhealthy and dangerous environments. Housing conditions were cramped and insanitary, as Russia's cities could not cope with the large numbers of new migrants from the countryside. Few Russian cities had satisfactory sewage systems by the end of the nineteenth century and outbreaks of infectious disease were common, with cholera claiming the lives of more than 100,000 people across the empire in 1910.

The process of urbanization and industrialization was deeply disruptive to existing social structures: economic necessity forced many men to leave their familiar village environments and their families and threw them into the difficult world of industrial labor with its uncertainties and very different rhythms from farming life. Russia's late industrialization, however, gave a different character to its developing working class. By the late nineteenth century, socialist ideas had been clearly articulated and were a significant element in provoking discontent across Europe. The new Russian working class was able to take immediate advantage of ideas that provided them with an intellectual rationale for opposing a political regime that they saw as oppressive and responsible for the harsh lives that they endured. The first explicitly Marxist Russian political group was formed covertly in 1883 and socialist parties were able to gain adherents among the working populations of Russia's biggest cities. The imperial capital, St. Petersburg, contained a very large population of working people, many of whom were employed in the demanding shipbuilding, armaments, and metallurgical industries and they proved to be especially enthusiastic recruits to the labor movement (Bonnell 1983, 73–103). The 'many-thousand human swarm shuffling in the morning to the many-chimneyed factories' that Andrei Bely described in his novel *Petersburg* was to pose a potent threat to the empire's social elite in its capital city (Bely 1978, 11).

St. Petersburg and Russia's other large cities were also the focus for a growing and diverse middle class. The development of Russian business, along with the gradual exodus of gentry from the countryside, brought about significant growth in the professions and commerce. The law, banking, medicine, and teaching all became important during the second half of the nineteenth century and attracted well-qualified people who had benefitted from Russia's improving education system to their ranks. Some of these professional groups were concentrated in Russia's biggest cities, but many people also worked in the countryside and in small towns. The *zemstva* and city councils all employed substantial numbers of professional people including agronomists, teachers, and medical assistants who were in regular contact with Russia's farmers (Timberlake 1991, 169–77). Education was also being very gradually extended across Russia and the first national census taken in 1897 showed that just over 20 percent of the population was literate. This, however, concealed very wide differences between groups of Russians; young men living in the cities had the highest rates of literacy, while rural women were the least likely to be able to read and write (Brooks 1985, 4–22). Change was coming to Russian society as elements of Russia's huge population were becoming independent and were acquiring an autonomy from the state. These new groups introduced an instability to Russian society: the traditional social structures dominated by an elite of landed nobility and tens of millions of peasant farmers were being subverted as the rural world underwent profound change in the wake of emancipation and industry and business came to play a more important part in Russia. The push for rapid industrial growth supported by Witte during the 1890s was instrumental in accelerating the rate of change in Russian society. Traditional structures were, however, often resistant to change and the Russian nobility found its political position given reinforcement in the deeply conservative atmosphere that permeated the autocracy after 1881.

The multi-national empire that Russia had acquired was vulnerable to the nationalist ideas that developed in Europe during the nineteenth century. War had given Russia possessions in Europe, and in Central Asia Russia's troops met with only limited resistance as they pushed forward the empire's boundaries during the 1860s and 1870s.

While imperial growth gave Russia considerable prestige, greater economic strength and increased its status as a Great Power, Poles, Finns, Ukrainians, Estonians, and many others came to resent rule from St. Petersburg and became increasingly fractious subjects of the Tsar. The ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of the empire provided a formidable set of problems for its rulers (Kappeler 2001, 329–41).

The Russian regime barely succeeded in establishing firm control over the Caucasus, and it faced continual difficulties as it tried to turn its national minorities into loyal subjects. During the 1880s and 1890s, Alexander III's regime sought to 'Russify' the empire's nationalities by attempting to impose the Russian language and the Orthodox religion across the empire, but the state was never able to construct a single imperial identity that was accepted by a majority of its subjects. Russia's borderlands in both Europe and Asia were continual sources of discontent and the multi-national empire was not immune from the nationalist stresses that were consuming Europe as modernization advanced. Russia's imperial tensions were exacerbated by a foreign

policy that involved Russia in costly wars. Both Peter the Great and Catherine the Great had been able to expand Russia's power through war, and Alexander I was part of the alliance that put an end to Napoleon's power, but Russia proved unable to sustain its international military success. Defeats in the Crimea in the 1850s and by Japan in 1904–5 showed the fragility of Russian military and imperial power (Schimmelpennick van der Oye 2006, 559–69).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia was recognizably modernizing. The evident success of western states, both militarily and in their wider economic accomplishments, was undeniable. Russia's rulers understood that they had to match their rivals' industrial might if they were to be able to sustain their position among the Great Powers. Economic progress could not, however, be divorced from social change and some of the Tsarist state's political elite questioned whether the social consequences of industrialization were worth the economic advantages that it brought. The dilemma that had been bequeathed to Russia by Peter the Great continued to resonate: by 1900 it was clear that, for Russia's western competitors, an unavoidable consequence of industrial power was pressure from their evolving societies for political change. The Tsarist state, however, was determined to resist every call for political reform. Alexander II's forays into reform in the 1860s were regarded by his successors as deeply unwise and Russia's two final Tsars – Alexander III and Nicholas II – were adamant that economic change need not be accompanied by any reduction in their autocratic power. The traditional Russian establishment attempted to draw distinctions between elements of Peter the Great's legacy: while they wanted to maintain Russian military might, they did not believe that political modernization was an inevitable concomitant of the economic progress needed to sustain Russian power. The Russian state refused to countenance any form of popular engagement in national government, repeatedly rejecting calls from *zemstvo* and city council members for their political experience to be utilized on a national scale. Russia's provincial and city politicians were far from being outspoken radicals: most of them had deep roots in the noble social elite of the empire and had an innate understanding of the dynamics of Russian society. Their loyalty to the Tsarist regime was, however, increasingly tested as Alexander III and Nicholas II both rejected even the mildest calls for political reform.

At the same time, the web of social relationships that had sustained stability across the empire was gradually loosening, as Russia's farmers emerged from the constraints of serfdom and Russia's great cities absorbed millions of migrants from the countryside. The bonds that had bound Russians to their masters – whether in the villages or in far-away St. Petersburg – were disintegrating and were not being replaced with new structures to ensure the continuing political loyalty of its subjects. State and people were gradually being pulled apart from each other, and the regime's efforts to enhance its authority by its emphasis on history and tradition proved to be ineffective. During the Romanov tercentenary celebrations in 1913 the image of the Tsar as the historical embodiment of Russia reinforced the idea of the regime as archaic and anachronistic. The authority of the Tsarist state became increasingly brittle during the nineteenth century: censorship, emergency powers, and the arbitrary exercise of authority became the hallmarks of the Romanov regime. The apparent power of the Russian state was increasingly, however, simply a veneer. The roots of the much-feared apparatus of Tsarist oppression in Russian society were withering, while the state itself was encouraging a process of economic and social change that was giving birth to new and vocal challenges to authority. The last Romanovs believed that they need not engage with the modern world. Their continued assertion that Russia could stand immune from wider currents of ideas and could sustain a conservative nationalism in the face of modernity was to prove fatal. The Russian state's carapace of authoritarian rule had increasingly little substance to it.

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