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Twilight of Empire (1904–1914)

For the lands that would form the Soviet Union, the twentieth century began in Asia. It began during the night of January, 26/27 (February, 8/9) 1904 when a group of Japanese torpedo boats attacked the Russian Pacific Fleet at Port Arthur (Lüshun). Russia had effectively annexed this Chinese warm-water port in the late nineteenth century, to the chagrin of an increasingly self-confident Japan that was also intent on expansion in China. Negotiations between the two imperialists had led nowhere. Now weapons did the talking.

In Petersburg, which had been the capital of the Russian Empire since Peter the Great (1672–1725) had built this city in the northern swamps, the reaction was mixed. Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918) was taken aback, as no prior declaration of war had been received. Nevertheless, he was confident of victory against these Japanese "baboons." Others looked forward to what surely would be a "victorious, little war" distracting the Tsar's subjects from their many grievances.[1]

The Late Tsarist Regime

Indeed, the Tsarist regime needed all the help it could get. In the nineteenth century, a once highly successful formula for expansion had turned from a motor of imperial growth to a brake on the further development of Russia's power. The historical core of Russia, the Principality of Moscow, had not been a particularly well-resourced or strategically well-located place during its establishment in the late thirteenth century. It was surrounded by stronger competitors who

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threatened its independence. Its climate was harsh and its human resources scarce. And yet, this rural backwater rose from an insignificant trading outpost deep in the Eurasian woods to become the largest state in the world and one of the great powers of Europe. At the height of its might in the early nineteenth century, it would play a pivotal role in defeating Napoleon's armies and redefine Europe in the Congress of Vienna of 1814–1815.

It could do so, because its rulers – first the Rurikids, then the Romanovs – had mobilized the population into service classes harnessed to an increasingly strong state headed by an autocratic ruler. The service classes came in the form of legally defined estates (*soslovie,* pl.: *sosloviia*) on the one hand, and positions in a "table of ranks" on the other. The *soslovie* group defined a person's relationship to the state: Peasants tilled the land, served the landlord, and paid taxes. Some of them would be forced to serve in the autocrat's armies and die in never-ending wars. Townspeople were engaged in trade or artisanal work in the towns, servicing the state's servants in the urban military and administrative centers. They also paid taxes. The term *dvoriane* is sometimes translated as "nobles" or "gentry," but this group had fewer rights and less freedom than their peers in Europe. They did not pay taxes, relied on the exploitation of the peasantry for their livelihoods, and staffed the empire's bureaucracy and officer corps. Their internal hierarchy was legislated in the table of ranks, which defined a parallel structure for army and civil service. The highest ranks led to hereditary nobility, which served as a conduit for ambitious and talented commoners to enter state service at the highest levels. The role of the clergy, finally, was to pray, and also to serve as the Tsars' ideologists manning the state church. The economic base of this warfare state was serfdom: peasants were bound to the land to support the service elite that ran the administration and the army. This peculiar form of resource mobilization for war and imperial expansion was invented by Ivan III (1440–1505) and perfected by Peter the Great (who introduced the table of ranks in 1722). It served the Romanovs well who ran this state since 1613 and grew it into the largest continuous land empire in the world.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, this once-successful formula ran into trouble. Russia now faced competitors who had combined the exploitation of overseas empires with the new might of the dual revolutions that rocked Europe: The French Revolution provided a new model of military mobilization of entire nations, while the industrial revolution, emanating from England, added higher quantities of more lethal weaponry that could be transported more quickly over longer distances by the railways. An agricultural empire based on the exploitation of peasant serfs could not compete with these new, industrialized empires. This fact was driven home in the Crimean War (1853–1856). Only decades after its brilliant victory over Napoleon in 1812, Russia was defeated comprehensively by a coalition of France, Britain, and the Ottoman Empire.

The defeat jolted Alexander II (1818–1881) into action. The Great Reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century were meant to modernize Russia to keep it competitive in this new world of industry and mass politics. These reforms saw the end of serfdom in 1861, an introduction of local self-government (*zemstvo*, 1864; town dumas 1870), judicial reform (1864), and universal military service (1874). Under the next two tsars, Alexander III (1845–1894) and Nicholas II (1868–1918), fast-paced industrialization fundamentally altered the urban landscape from the 1890s onwards. Cities were growing creating overcrowded working-class districts adjacent to new factories billowing smoke. Literacy was on the rise and a growing number of cheap publications catered to this new, lower-class reading public.

Meanwhile, the Russian monarchy was reluctant fully to enter this new age of industrial capitalism and mass society. The tsars continued to insist on the principle of uninhibited personal power that was above the law and beyond the functioning of a routinized bureaucracy. A maze of laws remained on the books, many no longer reflecting the needs of the economy and the growing urban society. They had to be circumvented constantly by imperial decree. This situation enhanced the authority of the tsar, who could make these exceptions, but it also put an incredible amount of negative power into the hands of civil servants at all levels who could refuse to forward an issue to the next level. Only requests that reached the ministers, who reported directly to the tsar, had a chance of being heard unless, that is, direct connections in the court itself could be mobilized. Administrative arbitrariness thus combined with unpredictability; bureaucratic inefficiency combined with corruption. The fact that every minister reported separately, and without consultation with his colleagues, to the sovereign encouraged competition between them, enabled the perpetuation of contradictory policies, and promoted back-stabbing and intrigue. The political system was also top-heavy and much of the country was under-governed by the comparative standards of the time. Strikingly for a country known as a police state, there were fewer police per population than in the Great Britain or France. Russia was big, as the saying went, and the tsar far away.

Indeed, the empire was huge. The Tsars' domains stretched from the Baltic and the Arctic Sea in the north to the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Caspian in the South, from the Bering and Okhotsk seas in the east to central Europe in the west. Its 8.7 million square miles covered parts of Europe and Asia, altogether nearly one-sixth of the globe and more than 128 million inhabitants (125.6 million in its first census of 1897 plus 2.6 million in Finland), making it the third most populous country in the world (after China and India). And it included much more than just "Russian,", or even eastern Slav areas. From the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century the Tsarist empire had gobbled up Poland, acquired Finland from Sweden and Bessarabia from the Ottoman Empire, subdued the Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus, won

Central Asia in the "Great Game" with Great Britain, and expanded into what used to be Chinese possessions in the far east. By 1904, it bordered Norway and Sweden in the north, in the west Germany and Austria-Hungary, in the south the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Afghanistan and China, and in the south-east it even had a small border with Korea. Japan was only a short stretch of water away from Russian Sakhalin. This was an enormous empire in which large distances and ever poor communications added to the problems of the political system.

To make things worse, the man, who since November 1894 ruled over this complex inefficiency, was not up to the task. With Nicholas II, the empire was stuck with a pathetic autocrat ruling within an archaic political system that he was unable and unwilling to adjust to the realities of industrial war and the emerging mass society. The last Tsar was a textbook example of the dangers of dynastic and autocratic rule. Mild mannered, soft spoken, and slim, he could never live up to the example of his loud, large, and self-confident late father, Alexander III, against whom he constantly measured himself. In a meritocratic political system he would have never been put in charge. He would not have volunteered for a role he did not desire and nobody would have chosen a man for the top job who seemed to change his opinions the moment one advisor left and another one walked through the door. A strong sense of duty, however, kept him from the only reasonable course of action: to resign and go hunting, letting someone else handle the affairs of state. Even a better man, however, would have had his work cut out. What transpired after January 26, 1904, was not a "successful little war" of a European great power against some inferior Asiatics, as had been the hope of the Tsar's more arrogant (and more racist) servants. Instead what Russia faced was a dress rehearsal for modern war leading to revolution.

The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905)

The fighting was terrible and in the course of the conflict some 400,000 of the Tsar's subjects lost their lives. The Russian armed forces suffered defeat after defeat: Port Arthur fell in December 1904; the battle of Mukden was lost in February and March 1905; the Baltic Fleet, which had hurried around the world to relieve its Pacific sister, was annihilated in May. The empire was beaten at sea, but also on land. Both sides sent their soldiers into suicidal frontal attacks on entrenched positions defended by barbed wire enclosures and machine guns.

Contemporary descriptions of such battles are reminiscent of the killing fields at World War I's Western Front, where German, French, British, and US troops would confront the terror of the modern battlefield. This similarity is significant. While older histories have seen the 1914 to 1918 war as the birth pangs of the twentieth century, more recently the 1904 to 1905 war has received more attention. As the history of the twentieth century becomes less and less

Eurocentric, historians have started to understand the Russo-Japanese war as the first major conflict of this terrible epoch: "World War Zero," as one pithy formulation has it. In this foundational carnage, the Russian army faced defeat despite numerical superiority (as it would later, in World War). Incompetently led, poorly equipped, and suffering from the logistical problems of long lines of communication, the Tsar's army bled and bled.[2]

The unbelievable carnage of this war; the humiliation of being beaten by an Asian foe, who, somewhat annoyingly, accepted all extant rules of war making (proving that there was nothing European about "civilized warfare"); and the clearly inept political and military leadership of this catastrophe all stirred opposition in Russian society. Critics of autocracy had multiplied since the middle of the nineteenth century; they were joined by others unhappy about their living conditions, their working lives, their access to land, or the status of their national group within the Tsarist multinational empire. In the context of the debacle of the war against Japan, the opposition of a variety of groups first grew, then merged, and then exploded.

Forces of Discontent

First was "liberal society," whose campaign for political reforms heated up considerably in the context of the war. Its backbone was the class of professionals – lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, engineers, teachers, journalists, academics – which had been growing since the nineteenth century as an unintended outcome of Alexander II's reforms. Their outlook was European, like their training, which they had often received abroad. For them, Russia was hopelessly backward and needed to "modernize", that is, be dragged out of its stinking sheepskin coat and become more like Western Europe. The peasants needed to be washed, taught to read and write, and educated in the ways of the world. Superstition had to be replaced by enlightenment, the wooden spoon and the communal bowl by more hygienic eating implements, drunkenness by sobriety, and sloth by discipline. Healthcare, education, and transport had to become state of the art, and the political system needed to listen to its people, or at least to the voices of experts and professionals. Liberal society also included some industrialists and other businessmen who elsewhere would have been considered a bourgeoisie. While some of them were critical of autocracy, others wanted a more efficient government and a predictable legal system, but were otherwise content with the state of affairs.

Partially overlapping with "liberal society" was the most Russian of social groups – "the intelligentsia." Historians have struggled to define its essence. Was it a social stratum, emerging from the most peculiar of the estate categories, the "people of various ranks" (*raznochintsy* which included a variety of people who

had fallen between the original service classes)? Was it the result of rising education levels and the expansion of university education? Or was it an "imagined community," defined by those who understood themselves as intellectuals and critics of the established order? It was all of the above and its boundaries were therefore constantly challenged, redrawn, and negotiated. Membership of this group did require a certain level of education; most university students understood themselves as *intelligenty*, as did many doctors or lawyers. At the same time, not all were recognized as such, either by themselves or others. Many did come from the people of various ranks, but neither were all *raznochintsy* also *intelligenty* nor vice versa. A critical attitude to the regime and to the social and economic realities of contemporary life was another essential attribute, but it alone did not make an *intelligent* either. Worker-revolutionaries, too, were critical of the existing regime that was estranged from "the people." They adopted many of the practices, rituals, and even language of the intelligentsia but saw themselves as "conscious workers," not intellectuals.

One of the late Tsarist intelligentsia's foundational moments was one of fundamental alienation from the "common people." During the "crazy summer of 1874" thousands of university students "went to the people." Enthused about the supposed revolutionary potential of the peasantry they had read about in books, they hoped to stir the lower orders into rebellion. What they found in the Russian villages, however, were not the naive socialists of their imagination, but hard headed and often hard hearted patriarchs. Freed from serfdom only in 1861, most Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian peasants seemed to live in a different century. Their agricultural practices were unproductive and often archaic with no or only very little mechanization. Village life could be violent, and power was in the hand of older men, who could make decisions over the life of "their" youth and womenfolk alike.

When confronted with the radicals who had come "to the people," peasants were more likely to ridicule, beat, or denounce the idealistic city youth with the strange ideas than to make common cause with them. In a country still made up largely of villagers, this experience was sobering. Several reactions are recorded. One path was to take the notion of "going to the people" seriously and join them, going native. This group must have been successful enough, as we no longer hear about them in later accounts. A larger number compensated for their fundamental impotence by taking up that ultimate "weapon of the weak" – terrorism. After 1874 a frightening wave of revolutionary violence engulfed the country. Governors, ministers, police chiefs – and in 1881, the biggest prize of all, Tsar Alexander II himself – fell victim to bombs thrown, shots fired, or daggers drawn. Terrorism would continue to score its dubious successes all the way to 1918 (when Lenin managed to escape an attempt). The state reacted with increasingly heavy-handed policing, which only helped in the recruitment of new "revolutionary martyrs."

A third path after 1874 was to turn away from the peasants and find a better revolutionary subject. Here Marxism came to the rescue; the *Communist Manifesto* was published in Russian in 1869 and *Kapital* in 1872. They would deeply influence Vladimir Il'ich Ulianov (1870–1924), whose brother Alexander was hanged as a terrorist in 1887 after a botched attempt on the life of Tsar Alexander III. As "Lenin," Ulianov would lead the maximalist faction of Russian Social Democracy, the Bolsheviks, to victory in October 1917. But Marxism influenced a much wider field of political radicals, most prominently the more moderate Mensheviks under Iulii Osipovich Martov (1873–1923). The new doctrine promised that industrial development, driven by competition between countries, was the future of humanity. Agrarian societies had to industrialize or perish. Peasants would become workers. Within industrial capitalism a polarization would occur between a few owners of the "means of production" and the majority who had "nothing to lose but their chains." Marxists saw themselves as "materialists" and scoffed at other "idealist" brands of revolution making. In Russia, however, there were Marxists before there was a working class, an idealist situation if there ever was one. The paradox of Marxist revolutionaries attempting to take power in an agrarian land would continue to haunt them once they succeeded in 1917.

Before they could do so, however, the revolutionary subject they relied upon had, first, to come into existence: the proletariat. Luckily, it did, and for reasons quite compatible with Marxist theory: the Romanov Empire was a great power; a great power needed to be able to win wars; winning wars depended on the latest military technology; this technology in turn depended on industrial production of trains, tracks, guns, rifles, shells, and ammunition; hence, Russia needed to industrialize or perish, despite serious misgivings among its leadership and the broader imperial elite, spooked as it was by what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had called the "specter of communism" (an oppositional working class, the European experience suggested, was an inevitable byproduct of industrialism). With state funding coming to the aid, the empire industrialized with a vengeance from the 1890s onwards. In the final decade of the nineteenth and the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century, Russian industry grew at a faster rate than not only Germany and Great Britain, but also than the rising capitalist power across the Atlantic: the United States.[3]

The result of this spurt was a growing, highly centralized working class particularly in St. Petersburg, but also in the oil-rich Baku, Ukraine's Donbass, or in the old capital Moscow, which became a center of the textile industry. Pay was low, workdays were long, regulation sketchy, and life hard. From the very start, therefore, a group of worker revolutionaries interacted with the radical intelligentsia but also remained distinct from it. They were a minority among the new proletarians, but their influence grew. Many more were disgruntled with their living and working conditions, but grumbled that were their "little father Tsar" to know about their plight, he would help them against the often foreign employers.

The restlessness of the working class communicated itself to the countryside, where the overwhelming majority of the population still lived (even as late as 1914, only 18% of the population resided in cities). Most of the new proletarians remained connected to their village of origin. As "peasant-workers" they moved between the city and the countryside, where they would return to help with the harvest, to participate in holiday festivities, or to marry. Strikers were routinely exiled to their rural homes, further strengthening the stream of radical thought from the city. Thus, the unhappy mood in proletarian quarters also circulated through the peasant huts, where it mingled with centuries-old resentments of the toilers of the soil against those who owned land without tilling it. Throughout 1905 the land-hungry peasantry revolted in many regions. Their brothers in uniform also mutinied during this revolutionary year, but were later mobilized to put down peasant rebellions. This basic loyalty to the regime of conscripted peasants has been explained by their perception that the regime's crisis was over, and rebellion thus dangerous. This assessment, by those serving in the armed forces, of the continued strength of the regime set the first Russian revolution apart from its replay in 1917.

Finally, minorities at the periphery of this multinational empire joined the melee. Non-Russians made up well over half of the empire's population – overwhelmingly Slavs, such as Ukrainians, Poles, or Belarusians, but also Finns, Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians, various peoples of the Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus, Tatars, Uzbeks, Kazakhs and other Central Asians, even Iranians and Eskimos. This multiculturalism was not new. Ever since it had begun to expand beyond the lands around Moscow under Ivan III, but in earnest since Ivan IV's (1530–1584) conquest of Kazan in 1552 and the subsequent incorporation of Siberia from 1580, the Russian Empire had to contend with non-Russian peoples. Not only did the empire constantly incorporate non-Russian ethnicities but the tsars also coopted foreign elites into running their state. The result was not a nation state but a multinational empire, held together with force, but also with special concessions, legally prescribed exclusions and privileges for a plethora of peoples.

The fact that the Russian Empire was not ethnically Russian was so central to the life of the Romanov realms that the language that ran this empire even developed a special word to describe it. In Russian, there are two words for "Russian" – *Russkii* and *Rossiiskii*. The former describes the ethnos, the latter the empire. Hence, you can meet an ethnically Russian peasant (*russkii muzhik*) in this imperial Russian state (*Rossiiskoe gosudarstvo*). But you cannot have an imperial *Rossiiskii muzhik* or an ethnically *Russkoe gosudarstvo*, which both would be contradictions in terms.

In the nineteenth century, the sophisticated legal and ideological apparatus holding this empire together came under strain as nationalism became a serious ideological alternative to autocracy. This infiltration of nationalism went both

ways: on the one hand, the Russian state became more *Russkii* – which annoyed some of the recently acquired nationalities. Finns and Poles had thought of themselves as constituting specially privileged peoples connected to the empire through the person of the Emperor. Now they found their languages and customs under assault by Russification. On the other hand in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia began to behave much more like a European colonial power than as the elite-coopting land empire of old. Non-Russian minorities now grew restless. In particular the relatively recently acquired Poles and Finns, the Baltic and Trans-Caucasian peoples, but also longer-term subjects of the empire like the Ukrainians bristled under Russian rule. In the context of the war with Japan, the unhappiness increased. The end of 1904 saw demonstrations against conscription in Ukraine and Poland (ruled by the Russian emperor as King of Poland since 1815 and a formal part of the empire since 1867).

Revolution

Then came January 9, 1905: "Bloody Sunday." A strike wave had been building since late the previous year and had grown to a de facto general strike in the capital. It paralyzed industrial production, plunged the city into darkness, stopped public transport, and brought life in theaters and restaurants to a halt. On that morning tens of thousands of workers began marching from several assembly points into the center of the capital. Some 100,000 strikers and onlookers, including many women and children, congregated in Palace Square, where they hoped to present a petition to their sovereign and hear their "little father tsar" address his people. Instead, they were greeted, without warning, by bullets; 299 were seriously wounded and at least 130 killed. The Tsar declared martial law.

If the Russo-Japanese war had made the crisis of autocracy acute, Bloody Sunday served as the trigger for revolution. The disparate social groups who had earlier protested, struck, rioted, petitioned, or written pamphlets to voice their discontent with autocracy now merged into one revolutionary movement and their actions into an anti-Tsarist explosion. Worker and professor, professional and peasant, student and soldier, industrialist and intellectual, woman and man, Russian and Chechen, Pole and Jew – all wanted change and they wanted it fast. Workers and professionals were striking, students and professors protesting, and entrepreneurs offered financial assistance to the opposition. Peasants were burning estates. Soldiers were rioting, unwilling to be machine gunned in the killing fields of the war against Japan. There were strikes, armed clashes, and full-blown uprisings in the borderlands: in Finland, the Baltic provinces, Poland, Ukraine, and the Trans-Caucasus. In Moscow, the Tsar's uncle, Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich, a well-known reactionary, became the latest victim of a left-wing terrorist bomb.

Confronted with such broad and deep opposition, the Tsar had only two options: to move in troops to quell the unrest, or to drop his usual dismissal of any constraints on his power and make concessions. The first option turned out not to be an option after all: Because of the war in the east, there were too few soldiers available to repress a revolution of this size. Hence, the only course of action was to buckle to popular pressure. First, the Tsar ended the war and made peace with Japan, signing the Treaty of Portsmouth in late August (early September according to the Western calendar). Russia removed its troops from Manchuria, handed over its mines and the South Manchuria Railway, lost Port Arthur and the southern part of the Island of Sakhalin and recognized Korea as part of the Japanese sphere of interest. The empire contracted to 8.4 million square miles, its size at the outbreak of World War I.

More important were internal modifications. They came in the form of the "October Manifesto," an imperial edict issued on October 17 (October 30). It promised inviolability of the person, the freedoms of speech, conscience, assembly and association, universal (male) suffrage, and an elected body representative of all classes of the population (the Duma), which would have the right to discuss and develop legislation. By international standards of the time these were not very radical proposals but, in the Russian case, they amounted to an end to the repressive policies of the late Tsarist police state, at least some checks on autocratic power, and an unleashing of the political and creative energies of society.

For the national minorities, the Manifesto marked a return to a more traditional, pragmatic nationality policy, which coopted elites and left national cultures alone. The freedoms of communication, conscience, speech, and assembly, which the Manifesto promised, and the end of advance censorship, gave the national movements more room to maneuver, to express themselves in the language of their choice. What followed has been described as "springtime of the peoples."[4] Most active were the Poles, the peoples of the Trans-Caucasus, and of the Baltic, especially Estonians and Latvians. Their restlessness pointed to things that came later in the century. Another aspect of the national awakening of 1905 would prove to have an afterlife: inter-ethnic violence, most prominently a wave of terrible anti-Semitic pogroms in the so-called "pale of settlement" for Jews in the Empire's western regions. The pogrom in Kyiv went on for three long days.

Dual Polarization

The October Manifesto was a stroke of Machiavellian genius. Written by Count Sergei Iulevich Witte (1849–1915), one of the most gifted statesmen of the late Tsarist Empire, it served to split the revolutionary movement. The better off,

more "respectable" and "liberal" opposition received what it had hoped for: the rule of law, the end of censorship, and an elected representative body. They were inclined, therefore, to close ranks with the civil service and the autocratic state that after all also protected their property from thieves and revolutionaries (but during the chaos of revolution were unable to do so). Mutinous soldiers, rioting peasants, unruly national minorities, and striking workers, meanwhile, were left alone to deal with the wrath of the counter-revolution. With peace in the East, troops became available to quell the unrest. Punitive expeditions put down peasant and national rebellions and strikes were broken by military force. Thousands were executed in these "pacifications."

Soon, counter-revolution also extended to the liberal gains of 1905. Civil liberties were again curtailed and the Duma's rights carefully circumscribed. As these steps did not prevent the new legislature from attempting further political and social reform, the Tsar dissolved it after less than three months in 1906. After new elections, the second Duma of 1907 again ran into the obstructionism of a government never committed to sharing power with a popularly elected legislature. After dissolving the Duma again, the emperor introduced a new electoral law that skewed the vote towards the wealthy and against national minorities. But even the resulting, much more conservative, third and fourth Dumas found it hard to work with a government that never saw the parliament as more than as a consultative body. This stubborn refusal to share power frustrated even staunch supporters of the monarchy. "Respectable society" thus again became alienated from the regime, without ever feeling comfortable again rubbing shoulders with the increasingly aggressive plebeian revolutionaries. Thus, a "dual polarization" – between the regime and "society," and between "society" and "the people" – characterized the last years of peace. It re-emerged in 1917.[5]

Some historians, therefore, have constructed a straight line from the dual polarization after 1905 to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917: given the failed liberal revolution, more radical upheaval was inevitable. And indeed, many of the revolutionaries in 1917 could draw on their experience of 1905, the "dress rehearsal," in Lenin's words.[6] They could also mobilize an original organizational form of revolutionary governance: the councils of workers' deputies, or "soviets" (Russ.: *sovety*), institutions of revolutionary democracy that emerged in 1905 to coordinate strikes and other revolutionary action. While they had precursors in one of the mythical moments of European radicalism – the Paris Commune of 1871 – they were a genuinely Russian invention of working-class self-organization. They served as elected and directly accountable representations for workers of several enterprises, or even an entire city. Dissolved at the end of 1905, they have inspired proponents of "revolutionary democracy" ever since, despite the fact that the Bolshevik dictatorship would, somewhat misleadingly, take over the term as a designation of a fundamentally undemocratic regime. The idea and the practice of "council democracy" forms a bridge between 1905 and 1917, a

model readily available once the Tsarist regime broke down under the strains of war. The reformed Petrograd Soviet in particular played a leading role in the events that led to the Bolshevik insurrection.

Another school of history writing has gained in prominence in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In explaining the revolutions of 1917, it puts more weight on the unsettling effects of World War I. While nobody denies that the late Tsarist empire was riven with conflicts, these historians tend to emphasize more positive developments, indicating that Russia might have been on the way to a more west-European model of political, social, and economic development, had the war not intervened. The revolutions of 1917, then, were not inevitable, but maybe the result of a bit of bad luck, as already the first émigré historians teaching at US universities had professed. Much of the recent historiography on Russia in World War I, likewise, stresses the destructive force of the war on the one hand, and its "creative" aspects on the other: the building of a modern warfare state (see Chapter 2).

Where one comes down in such debates about alternative pasts or their impossibility is more a matter of philosophy and politics than of historical record: Is everything that happens over-determined or are there chance and choice in history? Was the Bolshevik revolution a legitimate popular response or an illegitimate coup? There are no definitive, empirically verifiable answers to such questions.

Contradictions

What cannot be doubted, though, is that in the few years between the end of the 1905 Revolution and the outbreak of World War I, the Russian Empire was a cauldron of intense contradictions. The principle of autocracy asserted itself side-by side with a pseudo parliament, the State Duma. Despite all efforts by the tsar and his ministers to destroy it as a political force of consequence, it remained a center of debate, the focal point of a multiparty system, enabling a wide field of legislative activity and political discourse. It showed that the peoples of the Russian Empire were not genetically prone to one-man rule but longed for freedom of expression and self-determination as much as anybody. The Duma's very existence was crucial in the next revolutionary crisis, as we will see in Chapter 2. At the same time, the Duma remained emasculated, both by an electoral law which under-represented the vast majority of the Tsar's subjects, and by the tsar's continued claim to absolute power.

The political absurdity of "parliamentary autocracy" also contributed to the many fissures within late Tsarist society. The October Manifesto had not united reactionaries with the liberal wing of professionals and intelligentsia; at the same time, however, its minor concessions had estranged the latter from more plebeian

revolutionaries with their angry slogans and crude disregard for the sacred laws of private property. The clear expectation that revolution would not only come, but would also be successful, which radical students had shared widely before and during 1905, had given way to confusion, and also to reorientation towards other, less heroic but not less taxing life goals. A collection of essays of 1909 tried to distill these new "signposts" (*vekhi*) for the intelligentsia. Students should stop masturbating (both literally and figuratively), it counseled, respect their elders, and devote themselves to their studies. A proper intellectual, in the estimation of this contentious publication, was not somebody who dreamed of revolution, but a hard-working professional with a disciplined mind and detailed knowledge of his or her chosen specialty.[7]

Meanwhile, working-class activism continued. A new strike wave started in 1912. Even at its height, in 1914, however, less than a third of the number of workers were involved than had been in 1905. The strike wave was largely concentrated in the capital's metal-working industry. Elsewhere, the working class was more likely to be engaged in organizing self-help societies than fighting management. Much of industrial action, moreover, was about pay and conditions, not revolution. Even political strikes were usually not anticapitalist, but focused on the abuses of power inherent in the Tsarist political system, concerns similar to those of liberal critics of the regime. Once war broke out, the strikes evaporated into thin air.

Public Sphere

As a growing number of historians have shown, then, the polarizations in late Tsarism were much less pronounced than the older literature would have us believe. Social divisions were deep and real, but they were transcended by broadly shared dreams and aspirations, circulating in the growing public sphere of print media, film, and popular entertainment. During the decades "when Russia learned to read," workers often aspired to the same kind of "respectability" as their social betters and urban culture was more a meeting ground for diverse life forms than a clash of segregated class cultures.[8] The countryside was increasingly drawn into the new nexus of markets for goods and dreams, and villagers, too, participated in these new forms of exchange and consumption, although to a lesser degree than city folk. Film made its debut in Russia well before the revolution, and the Russian film industry developed its own distinctive style of often melodramatic entertainment.

Social identities were complex. The old estate categories – nobles, clergymen, peasants, townspeople, Cossacks, etc. – had defined a person's rights and duties vis-à-vis the service state. They made less and less sense in the more complex world that had come into existence in the nineteenth century. They were

overlaid by professional, class, lifestyle, and sexual identifiers. Social mobility was such that it was hard to describe a particular person with only one category, despite the attempts of Marxist analysts, both then and later, to allocate every person to a neat box. The most successful press-tsar of the late years of this empire, Ivan Sytin (1851–1934), was by legal estate a "peasant," by social origin the son of a country clerk, and to Marxists would certainly have been "bourgeois." His newspapers catered to a wide range of readers, from rural folk to city slickers. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks, whose revolution ruined his business, awarded him a personal pension in recognition of his efforts to spread enlightenment among the masses.

Thanks to men like Sytin, but also thanks to the vast and complex intelligentsia serving an expanding reading public, and despite continuing censorship and police harassment, the Tsar's subjects could read a greater diversity of books, journals, broadsheets, and watch more varied movies than they would for decades after the Bolshevik takeover. Despite everything, this was a much more liberal, and a far more diverse society than anything that would come in the period from 1917 to at least 1985, if not 1991. Revolutionaries were locked up, to be sure, but in confinement they could not only catch up on reading Marx and Engels, but also consort with other radicals of various stripes. Many would remember their prison stints later as their "university." The faction that came to power at the end of 1917 would make sure that their own prisons did not create such favorable conditions for oppositional thought. The Bolsheviks also made every effort to disrupt links to the outside world, resulting in an intellectual, economic, and social isolation unheard of in Russian history. Before 1914, it was not only radicals who had links to foreign countries, where often their leaders sat to plot future revolution. Scholars, too, were integrated into international networks, as were professionals of all kinds. The Russian economy was thoroughly enmeshed in global markets and the Russian state in international treaty systems. In many ways, then, the late Tsarist empire was a much more "normal" country than the victorious revolutionaries made it out to have been.

The growing public sphere also took an increasing role in the provision of welfare to the population. Voluntary associations began to take responsibility for the poor. By 1905, a confusing mixture of local government, religious, and secular philanthropic societies, provided, usually underfunded and ineffective help, to the sick, the poor, the unemployed, and the elderly. Employers, both state and private, increasingly covered their workers for accident, sickness, and invalidity, often directly offering aid through clinics or hospitals attached to the workplaces. Workers joined mutual-aid societies to lessen their risks. Between a quarter to a third of peasant households were members of agricultural cooperatives. They provided loans, served as savings banks, and helped access markets in a more efficient manner than individual peasants could. The central state, too, expanded its welfare functions beyond the workhouses, almshouses, and

orphanages it had run since the late eighteenth century. The year 1912 was a key year in this beginning transformation of poor relief into rights-based welfare provision. New legislation now granted universal pension rights to disabled soldiers and war widows, as well as food allowances for families of servicemen. In parallel, the Health and Accident Insurance Law covered workers in many industries in European Russia and the Trans-Caucasus. Siberia and Central Asia remained outside this legislation.

A Warning

It was this country of contradictions, deep divisions, but also a high cultural and social diversity that went to war again in 1914, nine years after the debacle of the Russo-Japanese war. It is impossible to know whether or not it could have avoided the kind of destructive political and social revolution it later witnessed, had it somehow avoided being drawn into World War I. What we do know, however, is that the likelihood of political breakdown and eventually civil war was heightened by the strains of war. It was a war that had triggered the revolution of 1905; and it would be the new war that would lead to the next set of revolutions a decade later. As we will see in the next two chapters, it was war and civil war that deeply shaped the new empire that would emerge, bleeding and exhausted, by the early 1920s.

The risks of war were laid out in impressive clarity in a 1914 memorandum Petr Nikolaevich Durnovo (1848–1915) sent to Nicholas II several months before the start of hostilities.[9] In this brief, the one-time Minister for the Interior argued the case for peace. What he called "the ever-memorable period of troubles in 1905–1906" was bound to repeat itself. "This war," he wrote, "cannot turn out to be a mere triumphal march to Berlin. Both military disasters – partial ones, let us hope – and all kinds of shortcomings in our supply are inevitable." Severe repression of the opposition would be necessary. Even in the event of victory, he predicted "agrarian troubles … as a result of agitation for compensating the soldiers with additional land allotments" as well as "labor troubles during the transition from the probably increased wages of war time to normal schedules." However, he thought that with the army victorious, "the putting down of the Socialist movement will not offer any insurmountable obstacles." It had not so, after all, in 1905–1906.

This, then, was Durnovo's best case scenario: a war full of military setbacks but overall victorious; severe internal strife, which would be put down with an iron fist. The worst case was what later transpired:

> The defeated army, having lost its most dependable men, and carried away by the tide of primitive peasant desire for land, will find itself too demoralized to serve as

> a bulwark of law and order. The legislative institutions and the intellectual opposition parties, lacking real authority in the eyes of the people, will be powerless to stem the popular tide, aroused by themselves, and Russia will be flung into hopeless anarchy, the issue of which cannot be foreseen.

Durnovo turned out to be right and his warning has been quoted ever since. A war was indeed imminent, and it could not be contained.

After Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, was murdered with his wife by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo on June 15/28, 1914, Austria-Hungary, backed by a diplomatic "blank check" from Germany, declared war on Serbia on July 15/28. This declaration of war triggered a whole series of events that would quickly bring all major powers into what became World War I. Tsarist Russia, backing Serbia, entered the war on the side of France and Britain against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Why did the Tsar not listen to Durnovo? Part of the answer is political. Nicholas II would have known that Durnovo was a long-term opponent of any alliance with Great Britain and an advocate of a rapprochement with Germany. Much of his memorandum was indeed a review of the foreign policy of Russia since 1904, a series of diplomatic missteps in the view of its author. The Tsar might thus be excused for disregarding this now-famous note: read in the context it was written, it becomes less the clear-sighted prophecy it turned out in hindsight. Instead, a critical reader at the time would have seen it as attempting to bolster one policy position by using the threat of revolutionary apocalypse. After all, had not the Tsar survived the last revolution, by successfully implementing a policy of divide and rule, appease and suppress?

Moreover, the Tsar seems to have convinced himself that this time things would be different. In a war against Germany he would have the people on his side. Anti-German sentiment would be strong enough to mobilize popular patriotism, in effect overcoming rather than exacerbating social and political divisions. Clearly, Russia's great power status was at stake, and outside of some radical circles the people would understand this basic fact. While war was risky, as the empire was not ready for it, the risk was military rather than revolutionary. And this military risk was balanced by the political risk of losing the status of being one of the major players in European politics – the main reason that the many painful reforms of the nineteenth century had been forced upon the autocracy in the first place. Much, then, was at stake.

In the end, the Tsar followed Durnovo insofar as he tried to avoid war rather than provoking it. Russian actions during the July crisis were not intended to bring about a military showdown. Rather, a partial mobilization on July 16/29 was supposed to delay the conflict by convincing Vienna that St. Petersburg meant business but also to appease Germany by not mobilizing close to its border. The Tsar hoped that direct communication with his cousin, German

emperor Wilhelm II, could avoid war. The Kaiser, however, informed his royal relation that it was Russia, not Germany, that could decide about war and peace, effectively daring Nicholas to give up any pretense to great power status if he wanted to avoid hostilities. This slight finally forced the Tsar's hand. On 17/30 July17/30, Nicholas II ordered general mobilization. It took effect on 18/31 July18/31. On July 19/ August 1, Germany took it as a pretext to declare war, casting itself a victim of alleged Russian aggression. Two days later, Germany declared war on Russia's ally France. World War I had begun.

Notes

1 Both reactions reported in *The Memoirs of Count Witte. A portrait of the twilight years of tsarism by the man who built modern Russia*, ed. Sidney Harcave (Armonk, NY, and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), 369 ("victorious"), 385 ("baboons").
2 John W. Steinberg, "Was the Russo-Japanese War World War Zero?" *The Russian Review* 67 (2008): 1–7.
3 Like many other Marxist texts, the Communist Manifesto, with its threat of the "specter of communism" can be accessed at the *Marxist Internet Archive*: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ (last accessed December 27, 2017).
4 Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).
5 Leopold Haimson, "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905–1917 (Part One)." *Slavic Review* 23, no. 4 (1964): 619–42; part two: ibid., 24, no. 1 (1965): 1–22; id., "'The Problem of Political and Social Stability in Urban Russia on the Eve of War and Revolution' Revisited." *Slavic Review* 59, no. 4 (2000): 848–75.
6 V. I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism: an Infantile Disorder," (1920), https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ (last accessed December 27, 2017).
7 Anon. *Vekhi. Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii* (Moscow: Avalon, 1909).
8 Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read. Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
9 The Durnovo memorandum is available in a variety of source collections on Russian history. Several copies are available online, including the edition from which the quotations in this chapter are taken: http://www.archive.org/stream/documentsofrussi027937mbp#page/n17/mode/2up (last accessed December 27, 2017).

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