

IS RUSSIA EUROPEAN? TAKING A DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The question of Russia's relationship with Europe has long been vexed and emotive. For some, the Russians are the barbarians at the gates, Asian intruders at a western feast. Converted to Christianity through Byzantium, they never had the benefit of Roman law and Catholic culture. Succumbing to the Tartar invasion of the thirteenth century, for two hundred years they were virtually cut off from western commercial and intellectual currents. They barely felt the impact of either the Renaissance or the Reformation. They remained largely immune to the Enlightenment and their autocratic political system was unaffected by the constitutional development triggered by 1789 and 1848. The revolution of 1917 set Russia on a path which again diverged sharply from the West. The three-quarters of a century of Communist rule which followed forged a society, a system, a culture fundamentally at odds with that of contemporary western Europe.

For others, Russia forms an integral part of Europe. The Russians are one of the family of white Caucasian nations living to the west of the Urals. They share with the west of the continent a common Christian heritage which in the world perspective is of far greater significance than denominational differences. For all Russia's periods of intellectual isolation, the culture of Pushkin and Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Turgenev, Pasternak and Solzhenytsin is unmistakably European. Though uneven and fluctuating, Russia's commercial links as well as her military and diplomatic entanglements with her western neighbours have played a vital role in her development. It defies common sense to treat as anything other than European a state and a people of the East European Plain whose fate has been so intimately bound up with that of the rest of the continent.

The difficulties in the way of arriving at any consensus on the subject are manifold. Part of the problem lies in the ill-defined concept 'European'. What is common to Spain, Norway and Sicily, Warsaw, Athens and Belgrade? Even if consideration is restricted to the Great Powers of the modern era, much depends on whether the term denotes a civilization centred on Paris and London, or on Berlin

and Vienna. And different light is thrown on the question according to the criteria – economic, political, social or cultural taken to be central. Moreover, any comparison over time is confronted by the inherent difficulty of comparing two complex entities each undergoing constant change. Yet the question of Russia's kinship is one that will not go away. It has long been a major concern of Russia's own intellectual elite and the expansion of the European Union up to parts of the Russian border poses it afresh. Differing answers to it have coloured and continue to colour the way in which Russia is seen from outside. Moreover, provided it is recognized that the relationship has passed through continuous ebb and flow, Russia seeming at one moment to be moving more in line with western developments, and at another sharply diverging, the comparison provides a fruitful agenda for analysis.

Of few periods is this more true than the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Was Russia being caught up in the dramatic changes overcoming the continent and shedding her distinctive features? Or were the differences between her and her western neighbours actually deepening? Radicals and conservatives of the period argued passionately over the evidence. Soviet historians, anxious to assert the universal significance of the revolution of 1917, vehemently stressed the common ground between the two. Western historians have been divided over the question. Some have been impressed by the convergence between late tsarist Russia and western European societies in the century before World War I, and have regarded 1917 as an historical aberration. Others, more impressed by the deep roots of the Russian revolution, have been inclined to regard tsarist society as a world of its own. Yet others have seen the last decades of tsarism in terms of a structural crisis which foreshadowed those characteristic of contemporary underdeveloped countries.

What, then, was the common ground between Russia and the West in the reign of Nicholas I, who succeeded his brother Alexander I in 1825 and ruled until 1855? Like her major continental rivals, Russia was ruled by a monarch claiming divine sanction. Like his Habsburg and Hohenzollern counterparts, the incumbent Romanov was personally responsible for questions of war and peace and his primary concern was with foreign policy, international diplomacy and the prestige and status of his realm. The Romanovs were bound by close family ties to the royal houses of the West. Both Alexander and Nicholas took German princesses for brides, and indeed by their time the Romanovs had precious little native Russian blood in their veins. In Russia the church was more directly subordinated to the state than in the West. But there was nothing unique in the church furnishing the ideological sanction and rhetoric of the regime, nor in the regime using its secular power to uphold the dominance of the official church. Nicholas's Minister of Education Uvarov, self-consciously sought to shore up the ideological ramparts of the monarchy with the doctrine of so-called 'official nationality', celebrating the peculiarly Russian national virtues of autocracy and orthodoxy.

The culture and life-style of Russia's largely noble elite was by Nicholas's time

a variation on a European theme. A small number of the most privileged young Russians continued to pursue the eighteenth-century tradition of travelling to the West for higher education. Of greater significance were the six universities, modelled on western patterns and initially staffed in large part by western scholars, established by the end of Alexander I's reign. The universities generated the core of a reading public hungry for western-style literature, history and philosophy. Polite society had not fully abandoned the eighteenth-century preference for French over Russian, but at the same time a native literature expressed in secularized Russian was taking shape. The history of Karamzjn, the poetry of Pushkin, the fiction of Gogol reflected the growing maturity of a distinctively Russian yet unmistakably European high culture. As in most European countries, this elite was responding to the powerful cosmopolitan cultural currents emanating primarily from France, Germany and Britain while simultaneously becoming increasingly conscious of its own national identity. By the 1830s Russia's relationship to and place in Europe was among the most vigorously debated of the 'cursed questions' concerning Russia's future which preoccupied the small coteries of Russian intellectuals. It was characteristic that both the 'Slavophiles', who stressed what was distinctive in Russia, and the 'Westerners', who looked to development along western lines, drew much of their intellectual armoury from the Enlightenment, the philosophic idealism and the romantic nationalism of the West.

The problems confronting the tsar had much in common with those of his western counterparts. Like his brother-monarchs from Prussia to Naples, he was beginning to experience pressure for limitations upon his autocratic power. Nicholas's reign opened in December 1825 with a quixotic challenge from a group of officers seeking to impose constitutional limitations upon the Crown. Although the 'Decembrists' were easily quelled, and the following three decades saw no comparable organized challenge, Nicholas remained acutely suspicious of the slightest criticism of his regime. And, despite vigorous censorship both of western-imported literature and of native public comment, the current of social and political criticism gathered momentum. The demand for civil liberties, political participation and above all the abolition of serfdom were covertly pressed in public lectures and the 'thick journals' of Moscow and St Petersburg. The more radical idealists looked beyond liberal goals of constitutional government and security under the law and eagerly seized upon the ideals of the early French socialists. In 1849 the regime moved to disband an amorphous but far-flung network of radical discussion circles made up predominantly of civil servants, junior officers, teachers and students – dubbed 'the Petrashevtsy' after a flamboyant leading figure.

Like his western confreres, Nicholas was confronted by increasing national aspirations among the more advanced minorities subject to his rule. The tsar's empire was made up of a complex mosaic of different national and ethnic groups. He sought to bend them to his will with the aid of active proselytizing by the established church and the promotion of Russian culture and language. He found him-

self able, with considerable effort, to consolidate his authority over the more primitive peoples in the empire, and indeed to expand his realm to the south and east. But there were ominous rumblings in the Ukraine and White Russia. In 1831, six years after he ascended the throne, Nicholas faced a full-scale rebellion by the most nationally conscious of the minorities, the Poles. It required large-scale mobilization of Russian forces to crush the rising.

The presence of a restive Polish minority was a problem the tsar shared with the monarchies of Prussia and Austria, and was but one thread in the network of international relations which bound Russia to the West. Russia's crucial role in the defeat of the Napoleonic armies had furnished Alexander I with a leading position at the peace of Vienna. He had provided the inspiration behind the Holy Alliance, founded in 1815 to combat attacks upon both the domestic and international status quo on the continent. He had lent active support to conservative regimes during the 1820s, and the help he gave the Habsburg monarchy constituted the cornerstone of European diplomacy for the following four decades. This was borne out as domestic tension in western and central Europe mounted during the 1840s. In 1849 it was with assistance from Russian forces that Habsburg rule over Hungary was restored, and St Petersburg's conservative influence was a significant factor in dashing the aspirations of liberals and radicals in Germany.

Yet, for all the common ground between Russia and the other Great Powers, the first half of the nineteenth century saw the gap between the two steadily widen. At the outset of Nicholas's reign, tsarism had been one absolute monarchy among many. By the end of it, a measure of public participation in government policymaking had spread eastward across much of the continent. The Prussian monarchy had been compelled to accept a representative assembly and in Austria the period of neo-absolutism and constitutional experiment had begun. The franchise, the budgetary and legislative powers of these assemblies might be limited, but a forum for public discussion had been created, and the context for a more articulate, institutionalized civil society established. In Russia there was still no national consultative assembly of any kind. The tsar's personal will remained the sole source of legislation and in Nicholas's last years active steps were taken to discourage even the most informal airing of social and political issues. Censorship was intensified, the university curriculum narrowed to exclude the teaching of subjects regarded as potentially seditious, such as philosophy, and every effort was made to forestall the emergence of unofficial, independent organizations.

That Russian absolutism outlived its western counterparts owed less to any qualities peculiar to the tsar's regime than to the acute economic and political weakness of the social groups which might have established effective checks upon it. At the base of the Russian social pyramid, as elsewhere, was the great mass of the rural population. By the end of the reign, rather over half of the peasantry was bound to state land and subject to heavy taxation. It was the object of a series of piecemeal reforms undertaken by Nicholas's Minister of State Domains, Kiselev.

The impact of these reforms, designed to improve the peasants' conditions, curb the arbitrary authority exercised by state officials, and raise peasants' productivity, was limited. But the concern shown by them was in marked contrast to the state's treatment of the 22 million peasants owned by members of the nobility. Whereas central Europe had seen the abolition of serfdom during the course of Nicholas's reign, no such relief had met the Russian peasants. Even before the revolutions of 1848 had precipitated emancipation in Austria and completed the process in Prussia and elsewhere, the legal condition of Russian peasants was markedly inferior to that of the peasants of central Europe. During the eighteenth century, even though some feature of western serfdom had been eroded, the system had been extended over newly incorporated areas of the Russian Empire and intensified. Providing for the nobility with payments in labour, rent or kind, while eking out a living on land set aside for their use, the private serfs were beyond the reach of the state. They were subject to the whim of their noble masters, who had the power to trade them, to inflict corporal punishment, to exile them to Siberia, or commit them to the army. And serfs were explicitly denied the right of appeal over the heads of their masters.

Moreover, the institutional arrangements of the Russian peasantry set them apart from their western equivalents. Peasant affairs over most of the empire were organized through the village commune. It was the commune, run by the village elders under the supervision of the rural police, which apportioned taxation payments to the state and rent and labour dues to the landowner, administered justice, and furnished conscripts for the army. To ensure that each household was in a position to meet its obligations, the practice had spread whereby the commune periodically redistributed strips of land among the households. The result was both to inhibit consolidation, experimentation and accumulation and to foster a collectivist mentality in which concepts of private landownership played no part. The distinctive culture and ethos of the peasantry was further guaranteed by their tenuous contact with the world outside the village. The most important channel was the church, but the 'black' clergy of the parish were ill-educated themselves, differing only in degree from their generally illiterate parishioners. Inarticulate, atomized in tens of thousands of scattered villages, peasant protest was restricted to endemic but generally isolated and short-lived violent protest, primarily against private landlords.

The serf status of 80 per cent of the population conditioned the relationship between the landed nobility and the autocracy. As in the West, the nobility constituted the most privileged social stratum. They had long escaped legal compulsion to serve the tsar, though many continued to spend several years in either the army or the civil administration, and promotion through the Table of Ranks established by Peter the Great remained the route to ennoblement for commoners. They provided the tsar's immediate entourage, and dominated the senior posts in both civil and military service. They enjoyed a range of legal privileges enshrined in Cather-

ine II's Charter to the Nobility (1785), they were exempt from taxation, and they enjoyed the sole right of serf-owning. Yet their organized political impact was slight. Political consciousness among provincial noblemen was undeveloped. The regional diversity and highly stratified distribution of wealth among the nobility inhibited a strong sense of corporate interest. The practice of dividing estates among several heirs worked against the establishment of noble families with strong local ties comparable to those in Britain, Prussia, or pre-revolutionary France, and the provincial assemblies established by Catherine II were ill-attended. The close correlation between major landownership and senior posts in the tsar's service blunted the leadership that might have been expected from the most prominent families. In any case, the combination of tax exemption and dependence on government forces to keep the serf in place limited the motivation for a noble challenge to the autocracy. The tsar could not flout the interests of the nobility, as the assassination of Nicholas's father Paul I in 1801 had gruesomely demonstrated. But the monarchy had little to fear from a Russian 'Fronde'.

If the landed nobility was ill-equipped to challenge the autocracy, Russia's urban classes were in no position to do. By the time of Nicholas's death, the relative weakness of Russia's urban middle class was becoming one of the most distinctive features of her social structure, while the minuscule industrial labour force bore no comparison with that of France or Prussia, let alone Britain. The serf-based economy had since the early eighteenth century developed very much more slowly than those of its Great Power rivals. Serfdom impeded mobility and enterprise, and agricultural methods remained primitive. In most regions of the empire, yields remained far below those of Germany and France. The limited rural market, further handicapped by vast distances and poor communications, severely inhibited the development of commerce and manufacture.

The economy was not, however, stagnant. The military-oriented industries founded on forced labour early in the eighteenth century gradually gave way to more diversified manufacture based on hired labour (generally serfs still sending payments back to their villages). Domestic demand slowly rose as increasing numbers of peasants entered handicraft production and petty commerce, in response to the demand by government and nobility for cash payments. Foreign trade responded to the opportunities opened up by a growing market for Russian grain. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the urban population had, according to the most generous estimate, reached 8 per cent, and it crept up to some 10 or 11 per cent by the end of Nicholas's reign. But this limited urban growth was not accompanied by the emergence of a dynamic and articulate bourgeoisie comparable to those making increasing impact in the West. Many of the most wealthy merchants and industrialists were to be found in the capital. Yet these potential leaders of Russia's 'third estate' were made acutely conscious of their dependence on government favour and contracts. They were unable even to persuade the government to help them break the stranglehold on foreign trade enjoyed by foreign compa-

nies. A high proportion of the merchants in the textile-dominated Moscow region belonged to the inward-looking tradition of the schismatic Old Believers. As the ranks of the merchant guilds swelled in the early nineteenth century, many of the newcomers were petty entrepreneurs from the peasantry still closely tied to the village. So, numerically small and culturally backward, Russia's middle class was but a shadow of its counterparts to the west.

It is against this background, then, that the survival of untrammelled autocracy in Russia is to be understood. Far from possessing unique qualities of coherence and dynamism, Nicholas's regime was exercised through a legal system and administrative machine that was much less sophisticated than those of the West. This is not to deny that in both respects Nicholas's reign saw significant developments. In the 1830s the most distinguished minister of the early nineteenth century, Speransky, completed a massive *Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire*. Although little was done to reform the cumbersome and almost universally maligned judicial system, Speransky's work provided at least a starting point for the creation of a legal profession and for increasing both popular and official respect for the letter of the law. Significant changes also overcame Russia's civil service in the course of the reign. The total number of officials almost trebled in the first half of the century, while the ratio of officials to total population almost doubled. Moreover, in the central ministries, the level of literacy and training rose appreciably as an extended period of formal education became a necessary condition for a successful civil service career. At the centre, too, the previous pattern of frequent interchange between military and civilian posts gave way to one of much more professional specialization.

When attention is switched from the central to the provincial civil service, however, the relatively low level of training, specialization and numbers stands out in sharp relief. At Nicholas's death just over half the provincial civil servants had no more than elementary education. Moreover, the limited resources at the tsar's disposal ensured that expenditure on the administration did not keep pace with its growth. Pay at the lower levels was so inadequate that it was assumed that public servants would take advantage of their fragment of public power to augment their income. The overall increase in the size of the bureaucracy looks much less impressive in the light of western trends where the ratio of civil servants to population stood three or four times higher than in Russia. And the central ministries expressed intense frustration at their inability to control provincial officials effectively, to elicit meaningful reports, ensure the implementation of policy, stem the flow of unproductive paper-work and overcome deep-rooted corruption. The notorious police of Nicholas's 'Third Section' were the latest in a long line of officials outside the regular hierarchy charged with overseeing the tsar's servants. Yet initiatives from the centre continually disappeared into the sands of provincial inertia, maladministration and poverty.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the range of activities undertaken by the

state failed to match that of its western counterparts. The role of the state in fostering economic development was very modest. Nicholas's Finance Minister, Kankrin (1823-44), was adamantly opposed to industrialization. He adhered to a highly restrictive fiscal policy and while he was willing to shore up indebted members of the nobility he proved extremely reluctant to provide state loans for investment in industry. In a number of fields, it is true, Nicholas's reign did witness considerable socio-economic progress: the laying of the first railway lines, centred upon Moscow; a slow fall in the death rate and slight rise in GNP per head; greater attention to technical and commercial education; and an overall increase in the number of students in every thousand of the population from one to six. But the rate of change bore no comparison to the dynamic changes overcoming her Great Power rivals. In virtually every sphere – in mass literacy, in health provision, in communications – the disparity was rapidly growing.

During the last years of Nicholas's reign, Russia's relative political, social and economic backwardness was brought home in the most indisputable fashion: military defeat. The tsar underestimated the concern felt by Britain, France and her traditional ally Austria over Russia's growing influence in the Balkans. In western eyes, the steady decline of Turkish power raised the spectre of Russia gaining control over Constantinople. In 1853, war broke out between Turkey and Russia over the tsar's insistence upon his right to protect the sultan's orthodox subjects. Britain and France came to Turkey's aid, and Russia paid the price of relative backwardness. She proved unable to defeat the western powers despite the fact that they were operating from distant bases. The administration of the war effort was bedevilled by corruption and incompetence, wretched communications hampered efforts at every turn, the training and weaponry of the army proved hopelessly anachronistic, and the wooden sailing vessels were annihilated by the steam-powered warships of the enemy. Despite the massive proportion of the budget lavished on the military, Russia was humiliated on her own doorstep. The diplomatic repercussions of Russia's defeat and alienation from Austria were to change the face of central Europe.

The domestic repercussions were to initiate the most dramatic period of change and reform the empire had hitherto undergone. The centrepiece of the 'Great Reforms' of Alexander II's reign (1861) was the abolition of serfdom. Alexander's predecessors had often contemplated this step. The moral case against serfdom had been widely accepted during Nicholas's reign. So too had the belief that serfdom constituted a major source of instability in the empire. Nicholas himself had been persuaded that in the long run emancipation was the only cure for the chronic incidence of peasant rebellion against noble landlords, which had risen gradually throughout the first half of the century. Moreover the view had steadily gained currency, both within the administration and in the 'thick journals', that serfdom was a major restraint on economic development, cramping the mobility, the productivity and the potential market of the peasantry. The Crimean War pro-

vided the catalyst. The notion that Russia's military might enabled her to afford chronic peasant unrest and growing economic backwardness became untenable. Peasant disturbances had significantly disrupted the war effort in the course of 1855, and the connection between economic development and military power had been made all too plain on the battlefields of the Crimea and in the desperate straits of the Treasury. Furthermore, the case for following the western example of reducing the costly standing army by building a reserve of trained men became incontrovertible. Yet as long as serfdom remained, so did the objection that it was not safe to return hundreds of thousands of trained ex-serfs to the countryside.

Powerful though the pressure for emancipation had become, five years elapsed between the Peace of Paris in 1856 and the Emancipation Edict of February 1861. For one thing, noble resistance remained strong. Only a minority were persuaded of the economic advantages of freely hired labour and were willing to forgo their traditional rights over their peasants. Conservative senior officials sagely agreed with Alexander that emancipation was desirable and must come eventually, but regretfully shook their heads at the insoluble problems involved. The critical question was the distribution of land. There was a deeply held belief among the peasantry that the land should rightfully belong not to private owners but to those who worked it. The nobles, on the other hand, regarded all the land worked by their peasants as part of their own property. The logical outcome of one view was that, along with their personal freedom, the peasantry would at the very least be granted the allotments which they were currently using for their own subsistence. The logical outcome of the other position, by contrast, was landless emancipation.

The objections to either strategy were seemingly insuperable. To deprive the peasantry of land appeared a recipe both for disastrous economic disruption and massive peasant resistance. To deprive the nobility, the mainstay of the regime, of a substantial proportion of their property as well as their free labour was unthinkable. So intractable did the problem appear that for the first two years of his reign Alexander himself oscillated uneasily between support for the efforts of officials in the Ministry of the Interior committed to emancipation, and acceptance of the warnings of the secret committee established to consider the issue. Only by the autumn of 1857 had the Ministry of the Interior evolved the outlines of a solution which the tsar was persuaded to back. The guiding principle adopted was that on emancipation the peasants were to retain use of an area of land more or less equivalent to their current allotments, but that they were to pay for it through redemption dues spread over a period of forty-nine years. These payments were to be made to the state, which meanwhile would have compensated the nobility.

Once the government was publicly committed to a reform along these lines, it was borne in upon the nobility that to reverse the decision would be to run the risk of large-scale peasant rebellion. Their energies were directed instead towards ensuring that the detailed terms were as favourable to them as possible. The government, conscious that no reform could be effected without noble acquiescence, had

been compelled to enter into dialogue with them. The nobility took advantage of the provincial committees established for the purpose and the general loosening of the framework of public life to press their claims.

Moreover, the implications of emancipation affected areas of social life far beyond the immediate seigneurial relationship. Proposals for a whole range of reforms were publicly debated and quickly gathered momentum. Administratively, the most innovative reform of the emancipation era was the introduction of a new structure for local government. An important impetus for this reform was pressure from the provincial nobility. In part, they were concerned to compensate for the loss of influence over local affairs suffered by their estate through emancipation. But they were also seizing the opportunity to express their frustration with the caprice and inadequacy of provincial administration. At the same time, the slackening of censorship after the Crimean War had given voice to a more socially diverse public opinion, which concentrated attention on local government reform. Even without pressure from outside, senior government officials in St Petersburg and governors in the provinces were themselves moving in the same direction. They had long been exasperated by the incompetence of the local bureaucracy.

The financial difficulties in which the government found itself after the Crimean War ruled out a straightforward extension of the existing administration to take on new duties. Instead, a solution was sought through the establishment, outside the regular bureaucracy, of elective councils with responsibilities for some aspects of local government. A statute of 1864 duly established the *zemstvos*, elective bodies at provincial and district level. They were empowered to improve a range of local facilities from transport, credit, and insurance to education and health care, and were granted limited tax-raising powers to help fund these activities. A small permanent board was to oversee the teachers, medical workers, veterinary surgeons and other specialists whom the more dynamic *zemstvos* soon began to employ. True, the chairmen of *zemstvo* assemblies were to be state appointees and the franchise, while providing minority representation for urban and peasant proprietors, ensured the domination of wealthier members of the nobility. Moreover, in practice the regime would freely intervene to limit the scope of *zemstvo* activity and the freedom of speech within *zemstvo* assemblies. Nevertheless, the *zemstvos* and their rather less effective urban equivalents, the city *dumas* created under a statute of 1870, constituted a remarkable innovation. The autocracy had established administrative institutions which enjoyed a measure of autonomy and derived their authority and legitimacy in part from elections. The framework had been created for a very substantial increase in the range of public services, and for a significant measure of public participation in the running of these agencies.

Of comparable significance was a series of statutes approved in 1864 effecting far-reaching reform of the legal system. Explicitly modelled on advanced western practice, the reform sought to refound Russian justice on entirely new principles. The law was to be overseen by an independent judiciary which would be separate

from the administrative bureaucracy and whose members could not be removed except for misconduct. Juries were to adjudicate serious criminal cases, elected justices of the peace were to hear minor criminal and civil cases, and trials were henceforth to be held in public. At the same time, the appeals procedure was streamlined, court practice was refined, and the crudest forms of punishment were abolished. The new system took time to implement and was hedged in with clauses designed to preserve leeway for the authorities. An official accused of breaking the law could only be prosecuted with the consent of his superior. The government retained the right to take administrative measures outside the regular courts where it deemed necessary. Ministers were quick to express outrage when the courts exercised their independence and defied government wishes, and over the following decades the principles of the statutes of 1864 were freely transgressed. Nevertheless, the reform marked a giant stride in the direction of security under the law.

Two further major reforms affected censorship and education. A statute of 1865 laid down that, for the first time, it was for the courts to decide when the press had broken the law, and prepublication censorship was significantly reduced. Administrative powers independent of the courts were retained to deal with journals which the regime regarded as particularly dangerous, and these powers too would be freely used in the following decades. All the same, the legal constraints on free speech were loosened and brought much more closely into line with those in the West.

The freer atmosphere of the early years of Alexander II's reign also affected higher education. Disciplines forbidden under Nicholas, including philosophy, were reintroduced at university level. Despite the misgivings of conservative ministers appalled at the sustained student unrest of the emancipation period, the universities were granted a significantly greater degree of autonomy in running their own affairs. Here, too, the government retained reserve powers to intervene when it felt necessary. But the clock could never be turned back to pre-reform days, and the academic community would remain a vibrant sounding-board for the country's social and political problems.

The abolition of serfdom and the other 'Great Reforms' of Alexander's early years profoundly affected Russian society. Emancipation itself provided the context for a gradual but sustained acceleration in the rate of economic growth. Economic change brought with it major shifts in the social structure and in the fortunes of different social orders. These shifts conditioned the way in which Russian society reacted to the more open framework of public life.

In the short run, the stimulus given to the economy by emancipation seemed limited. Agriculture was briefly disrupted and the combination of a drop in military orders after the Crimean War, a severe financial crisis in 1858, and a fall in cotton imports during the American Civil War triggered a manufacturing recession which lasted until the mid-1860s. Nevertheless, as emancipation took effect, it slowly removed many of the constrictions which had handicapped the economy,

hastening the replacement of forced labour by wage labour and the spread of market relations. Conditions became more conducive to entrepreneurial initiative, capital accumulation, the division of labour, technological innovation, and industrialization. The yield on peasant land slowly rose and a minority of landlords commanded sufficient capital to adapt successfully to farming methods based on hired labour and greater mechanization, thus contributing to a very sharp increase in Russia's grain exports. The peasantry was drawn steadily into the money economy, thereby raising consumer demand and stimulating both handicraft production in the villages and light industries, notably textiles and sugar.

Moreover, the government became more and more firmly convinced of the need to encourage manufacture. The lesson of the Crimean disaster, underlined by Prussia's subsequent military triumphs, impelled officials in the Ministry of War to urge that Russia develop strategic railways and reduce her dependence on imported arms. The Ministry of Finance, headed from 1862 to 1878 by the liberal economist Reutern, became equally convinced that only by significant industrial expansion could the regime's chronic budgetary problems be solved. Reutern rationalized the administration of the Treasury, improved banking and credit facilities, and began to make large loans available, particularly to industrialists willing to undertake railway construction. During Alexander II's reign Russian industrialists were still largely dependent on foreign raw materials and machinery. But from the late 1860s the metal and machine industries benefited from a strong rise in orders, and the stimulus spread to the textile and other light industries. The quickening pace of commercial life during Alexander's reign was reflected in a five-fold increase in joint-stock companies and a twenty-fold expansion of the railway network.

The striking rate of growth should not obscure the fact that the absolute level of industrial activity was still very low. At the end of the reign output of coal, steel and pig-iron trailed far behind that of France, let alone Germany and Britain. Russia's economy remained overwhelmingly agrarian and, because of the slow rise in agricultural productivity, its per capita income fell further behind that of most western countries. The country's industrial output would continue to fall further and further behind that of Germany. Nevertheless, Russia was at least entering the lists of major industrial producers and closing the gap between herself and second-ranking producers such as France. And by the 1880s the economy was poised for a dramatic breakthrough. Headed by Vyshnegradsky in 1887-92 and by Witte in 1892-1903, the Ministry of Finance began to co-ordinate its tariff, fiscal and investment policies to attract foreign loans for a massive development of the railway network. A major stimulus in the industrialization of most European countries, railways held out particular promise to an economy uniquely handicapped by vast distances and poor communications. They linked the empire's far-flung mineral resources with each other and the centres of population; they enormously increased the volume of both domestic and foreign trade; and their construction generated a massive new demand for coal, steel, iron and manufactures.

The social repercussions of emancipation and accelerated economic change gave rise to a heterogeneous range of pressures upon the regime for further reform. For the landed nobility, the impact of emancipation was deeply disturbing. The loss of seigneurial rights, of the traditional source of their wealth and authority, induced among many noblemen a reappraisal of their role which amounted to a crisis of identity. Moreover, although the tsar had made abundantly clear his wish that the terms of emancipation should damage their position as little as possible, the compensation granted them was not sufficient to prevent a steady decline in noble landownership during the decades following 1861. A growing proportion of the nobility lost their ties with the land altogether. This was reflected in the loosening of what had traditionally been a strong correlation between landownership and civil and military office, especially at the highest levels. The privileged position of the nobility seemed threatened both by the growing professionalization of the bureaucracy and the far-reaching military reforms of the 1870s. Among those who remained attached to the land, the result was a new wariness in their attitude towards the government. They developed a sense of embattlement and, gradually, a new consciousness of a specific 'gentry' interest. And as the level of education and sophistication among provincial noblemen gradually rose, so too did their ability to articulate their interests.

Building on the experience of the dialogue initiated by Alexander II over the method by which to abolish serfdom, they became more assertive and articulate in pressing their claims. Their spokesmen took advantage of the legal and institutional changes of the Great Reforms to express their anxieties. From the 1860s onwards, a major theme of conservative sections of the press was the duty of the state to uphold the position of the landed nobility, to provide financial support for estates in difficulty, and to continue to look to them to staff the upper reaches of the imperial service. At the same time, noble dissatisfaction with the extent of government help coloured the relationship between the newly-formed *zemstvos* and the government. It might have been expected that harmony would have prevailed between the two, since the great majority of landowners were staunchly loyal to the tsar and had no thought of utilizing the *zemstvos* to curb his power. However, the rumbling dissatisfaction among the more conservatively-minded majority, together with their dilatory attitude towards involvement in the work of the *zemstvos*, enabled a minority of more active, liberal-minded and politically assertive noble deputies to take the leadership of several *zemstvos*. In the hands of this liberal leadership, the economic dissatisfaction of landowners became interwoven with the very different causes of complaint of an emergent civil society.

Along with the development of the urban economy, the education system and public services the period following the Great Reforms saw a rapid broadening of the ranks of educated, urban-oriented society outside officialdom. The quickening pace of trade and industry provided new opportunities for industrialists and entrepreneurs, and generated a need for managers, engineers and clerks of every de-

scription. The legal reform led to a sustained growth in the number and sophistication of those engaged in the legal professions. The expansion of the reading public, and the easier conditions for publication, saw a dramatic development of the world of publishing and in the number of journalists and writers. The expansion of higher education meant an increase in the size of the academic community and a substantial rise in the number of students. It was in a handful of major cities, headed by St Petersburg and Moscow, that this expansion of the middle classes was concentrated. But in the provinces, too, new strata of professionals were adding weight and numbers to ‘society’. As the public services mounted by the *zemstvos* in the provinces developed, so did the staff of specialists they employed – teachers, doctors, midwives, economic statisticians, agricultural experts. This so-called ‘third element’, distinct from landowners and peasants, constituted the core of a provincial complement to the middle class emerging in the major cities.

The predominant attitude of the educated public towards the regime was hostile. Rather than satisfying demands for greater freedom, the era of the Great Reforms had fed the appetite of ‘progressive’ sections of the public. It had sparked an upsurge in civic involvement, epitomized by the so-called Sunday school movement, a voluntary campaign launched in 1859 on a wave of public enthusiasm for providing workers and their children with basic literacy and numeracy. As the aspirations of the various professions, of students, of philanthropists, of the ‘third element’ rose, so did their exasperation at continuing official inefficiency, corruption, and oppression. Repeated infringements of the principles underlying the reforms generated intense frustration. Interference with the courts was resented by a legal profession self-consciously modelling itself upon western practice. The authorities’ attempts to crush recurrent student protest and disturbances by imposing rigorous discipline alienated students and staff alike. Censorship remained the cause of endemic friction with the press and publishing industry. And as *zemstvo* activity gathered pace, the ‘third element’ and those noble deputies sympathetic to their work came up against sustained moves by the government to constrain their autonomy and room for manoeuvre.

As different strata of the educated public became conscious of belonging to a substantial and articulate body of opinion critical of the regime, ‘society’s’ self-confidence grew. Even the more moderate newspapers took officialdom to task for one offence or another. And, although the most radical journalists could be silenced, ministers found themselves gradually having to take at least some account of public opinion. Nowhere was this more dramatically shown than in the field of foreign affairs. During the 1870s, the government found it ever more difficult to resist pressure by Panslavist publicists to assert Russia’s influence in the Balkans. Worse still was the public reaction to the outcome of Russia’s war with Turkey in 1877-8. The terms which Russia attempted to impose on the defeated Ottoman Empire alarmed the other Great Powers and at the Congress of Berlin they forced her to yield many of the fruits of victory. The widespread and open protest at this

climb-down, at the failure to achieve the liberation of fellow Slavs from under the Ottoman yoke, dealt a severe blow to the prestige and self-confidence of the regime. The passions inflamed by foreign affairs lent a certain leverage to domestic critics of the social, economic and political ills of the empire. The autocracy was faced with the emergence of a markedly more vigorous and independent public opinion.

For the peasantry, the financial terms of emancipation were a bitter disappointment. They were much harsher than in most parts of central Europe, with the partial exception of Prussia, and ensured that many traces of serfdom lingered long after 1861. Worst off were the private serfs. Although in principle they were to retain allotments equivalent to those they had used before emancipation, in practice the amount of land they retained was significantly smaller, especially in the fertile black-earth regions of the south; there they surrendered almost a quarter of their holdings. In order to compensate the nobility for the labour and services they were losing, the land values on which redemption payments were based were inflated – grossly so in the less fertile provinces where the peasants broadly retained their preemancipation allotments. Moreover, it was left to the landowner's discretion to decide when his ex-serfs should pass from the initial status of 'temporary obligation' to outright purchasers of the land. Where redemption did go into effect immediately, the peasantry soon found their allotments inadequate, and their dependence on the nobility was perpetuated by the need to secure access to the pasture, forest and water supplies which often remained in the hands of the landlords.

To make matters worse, pressure on the land was constantly increased by a massive population explosion. During the second half of the nineteenth century the empire's population grew on average 1.5 per cent a year, the total rising from 74 million at emancipation to 126 million in 1897. The result was to force up the price of both renting and buying land. Peasants found themselves compelled to subsidize their incomes by working on noble estates for pitiful wages. It is difficult to generalize about the overall direction of peasant living standards in the post-emancipation period. Yields did gradually increase, the amount of land cultivated grew rapidly, and peasant handicraft in the village expanded. Yet peasant life-expectancy rose very slowly, they proved chronically unable (or unwilling) to meet tax and redemption dues in full, and the high incidence of regional harvest failure (the most notorious being in 1891) created acute rural poverty.

Within individual villages there was a greater differentiation between rich and poor peasant families than in the past. Advantaged households might briefly establish a privileged position within their own commune and rent land from the nobility on their own behalf. But post-emancipation conditions in the countryside precluded the emergence of satisfied and socially conservative strata of peasants comparable to those of France or parts of Germany. It was extremely difficult for the wealthier households that emerged to consolidate their scattered strips or to introduce new methods and seeds. The combination of collective responsibility, peri-

odic land redistribution, a heavy fiscal burden, and a primitive form of farming acutely vulnerable to harvest failure had a constant levelling effect. The overwhelming majority of peasants remained 'middle peasants' directly dependent on their own labour for their livelihood.

Whatever the overall trend in peasant living standards, then, the peasants' sense of injustice and resentment against the emancipation settlement, the burden of redemption dues, and taxation was intense. The gradual spread of market relations did little to undermine their age-old conviction that the land ought to belong to those who worked it. In some respects the slow rise in literacy served to reinforce that conviction, as did such contact as they had with urban and educated society, and the ideas propagated by young radicals and democratically-minded members of the 'third element'.

Yet the Great Reforms opened no avenue through which the peasants could voice their aspirations equivalent to that opened for sections of the educated public. The administrative arrangements adopted at emancipation kept the peasants largely isolated from the world outside. The commune, saddled with responsibility for all peasant obligations, was empowered with a wide range of sanctions over its individual members. Under the crude tutelage of the rural police, the village was left to regulate its own affairs and to administer justice according to customary rather than state law. Even over the local activities of the *zemstvo*, consultation with the peasantry was little more than a formality. *Zemstvo* assemblies met only for a few days once a year; peasant deputies were always outnumbered by their noble colleagues; and they proved extremely reluctant to take any active part in debate. So far as national issues and direct communication with government was concerned, there was no mechanism at all for peasant participation.

Peasant discontent, therefore, continued to be expressed through traditional forms of protest. In 1861 the news that they would have to pay for their allotments was met with angry disbelief, passive and in some areas violent resistance, and recurrent expectations of a 'real' emancipation still to come. From the mid-1860s the number of peasant disturbances declined and remained relatively low until the 1890s. But the uneasy calm was broken by occasional major outbreaks of disorder, notably in Kiev province between 1875 and 1878. Deprived though they were of legal channels to express their discontent, peasant restiveness was widely recognized and formed the backcloth to the politics of the post-emancipation decades.

So far as the urban poor and the small but growing ranks of industrial workers were concerned, they too gained no legal means to press their claims. In the early 1860s, at the height of the reform era, proposals were advanced to regulate the conditions of urban labour. But these were aborted, and the regime continued to treat workers as peasants temporarily absent from their communes. A high proportion of the industrial workforce did indeed retain close links with the countryside. Many left their families in the village, returned for the harvest, and retired there in old age. Yet the fond belief that Russia could avoid what was seen as the western curse

of a rootless urban proletariat, or that the rural tie constituted an inoculation against radicalism, proved an illusion. Urban and industrial conditions were as grim as anything seen in the early stages of industrial development in the West. Housing provision was crude, the rate of accidents high, wages pitifully low, discipline harsh and humiliating, and job security non-existent. Moreover, by the 1870s, and even more clearly in the 1880s, some of the distinctive features of the Russian proletariat were emerging. Large-scale manufacture tended to be concentrated in a few industrial areas, and the plants themselves tended to be very much larger on average than at an equivalent phase in western development. This facilitated both the development of a consciousness of common grievances, and an ability to give vent to these grievances. The first major strike, by cotton spinners in St Petersburg, took place in 1870; there was a significant increase in the number of strikes at the end of the 1870s; and the scale of industrial protest grew ominously from the mid-1880s. Denied the right to engage in collective bargaining, and lacking the moderating influence exerted in the West by traditional craft organizations or a reformist 'labour aristocracy', their militancy soon outran that of their western counterparts. Although even by the end of the 1890s the number of workers in mines and factories had not reached 2 million and constituted less than 5 per cent of the working population, official anxiety over the threat they posed to public order was growing.

It is in the context of mounting criticism of the regime from 'society', and of rumbling discontent lower down the social scale, that the dramatic impact of the so-called 'revolutionary intelligentsia' is to be understood. Drawn from the ranks of the relatively privileged sections of society, the radical intelligentsia took their opposition beyond that of liberal critics to the point of outright rejection of the regime and the whole social structure of imperial Russia. In part their radicalism derived from their own frustration.

The early years of Alexander's reign had aroused expectations which were rudely disappointed. Petty and not so petty intervention by the authorities against student activism, the impediments of censorship, the limited employment opportunities outside dreary and corrupt state service, the myriad legal restrictions subjecting women to the authority of their husbands and fathers drove a significant minority of the young educated elite towards radical politics. During the late 1850s and the 1860s, the works of Herzen, Chernyshevsky, Lavrov and other leading revolutionary thinkers, and a gathering stream of 'Aesopian' articles published legally as well as illegal pamphlets and newspapers helped to create a powerful radical subculture. Deprived of any other lever with which to achieve change, the radicals began to identify their own frustration with the predicament of the peasantry. They developed a full-blown vision of a revolutionary transformation in which Russia would be reborn on the basis of free, decentralized, democratic and egalitarian peasant socialism. Alive to the western socialist critique of capitalism, the 'populists' looked for a distinctive Russian path which would avoid the horrors of proletarianization and pass straight to socialism.

During the early 1870s, several thousand young idealists sought to make contact with the peasantry. Most famously, in the summer of 1874 they 'went to the people', determined to repay the debt they felt educated society owed the toilers and to enlighten the peasants about the possibility of transforming the status quo. They were quickly lost in the vast peasant sea; the police rapidly descended upon them; and when they did manage to make contact with peasants they were often met with suspicion and even hostility. Mass arrests and successive trials brought the radicals wide publicity, and in 1876 they created the first relatively stable underground organization, 'Land and Liberty', to coordinate further efforts. Some of the more militant revolutionary populists stumbled upon the desperate tactic of terror. Initially their goal was often revenge for the indignities inflicted upon imprisoned colleagues. But the sensation which their attacks caused led some to conclude that far-reaching political change and at best even revolution could be precipitated by a sustained campaign of terror directed at key members of the regime. In 1879 a relatively tightly-knit organization taking as its name 'The People's Will' emerged from within 'Land and Liberty', and devoted its energies to assassinating the tsar himself.

At the end of the 1870s, therefore, just when its authority had been shaken by the furore over the humiliation at the Congress of Berlin, the regime faced a combination of noble discontent, an increasingly assertive and critical public opinion, intermittent unrest in the countryside, unnerving outbreaks of industrial strife, and a sustained terror campaign. Although there was no consensus among ministers and senior officials on how to react, the tsar lent towards those who urged that repression must be accompanied by measured concessions. An important factor in swaying his judgement was the way in which differences between conservative and progressively-minded advisers were interwoven with differences over his irregular private life. Ever since 1864 he had spent as much time as possible with his mistress, Catherine Dolgorukaya. This increasingly public scandal had deeply affronted the tsarevich, who took his mother's side, and the family rift had divided high society. In 1880 when the Empress died, Alexander II hastily contracted a morganatic marriage with Catherine and installed her in the Winter Palace. Traditionalist hostility to Catherine forged a bond between her and more progressively-minded ministers who favoured a flexible response to the complex of pressures bearing in upon the government. In failing health and with a growing sense of embattlement, Alexander II hesitantly sided with this alliance. For a brief interlude, political reform appeared on the government's agenda.

In 1880 the tsar appointed General Loris-Melikov to manage what he saw as a severe crisis for his regime. Loris-Melikov's view was that while the government must act vigorously to suppress all revolutionary activity, its stability could only be secured by widening the basis of positive support for the regime. To that end he introduced a number of reforms and proposed the creation of machinery for a measure of consultation on national issues, with representatives of 'society' drawn

from the *zemstvos* and municipal *dumas*. In themselves, the proposals amounted to very much less than a commitment to constitutional government. But the implication that unvarnished autocracy was no longer sustainable was clear to all, and both opponents and supporters of Loris-Melikov saw the issue as a momentous and possibly irrevocable step along the path trodden by western constitutional monarchies.

On 1 March 1881 the tsar consented to the first, tentative moves in that direction. That same day he was assassinated by The People's Will. The assassination triggered a sharp about-turn in government policy. Alexander II's hesitant concessions were vigorously repudiated and the principle of autocracy firmly reasserted. The government was purged of reformers and office entrusted to staunch conservatives. During the 1880s the regime made plain its determination not only to halt any further movement in the direction of public participation but to crush expressions of dissent and remove earlier constraints on the autocracy. Emergency regulations empowered the government to declare virtual martial law at will. New restrictions upon the *zemstvos* were introduced. New steps were taken to discipline the universities, reduce the number of non-noble students, and intensify censorship. In 1889 a new tier of provincial officials, the 'land captains', were entrusted with both administrative and judicial powers to tighten the administration's direct supervision of the peasantry. Police sections specializing in the prevention and exposure of underground political activity were developed. The new tsar maintained autocracy, and was to bequeath it intact to his son Nicholas II on his death in 1894.

An important ingredient in the regime's determination to resist pressure for political change of any kind was the personality of Alexander III. The contrast between him and his father was sharp, and had been heightened by conflict over Alexander II's relationship with Catherine Dolgorukaya. Alexander III's attitude towards Loris-Melikov and his fellow-reformers was coloured by the support they received from Catherine. As the tsarevich he had gathered around him a circle of reactionary figures whose leading light was Pobedonostsev, his boyhood tutor and, since 1866, procurator of the Holy Synod, the lay official in charge of church affairs. On coming to power, the new tsar was guided in part by simple determination to reverse all his father had done and to model himself upon his idolized grandfather, Nicholas I.

Moreover, resolute reassertion of autocracy was strongly encouraged by conservative opinion within the army, the church and above all the landed nobility. In the aftermath of the assassination it quickly became clear that the most assertive calls for reform from the *zemstvos* had reflected the views of only a minority of the nobility. *Zemstvo* elections following the crisis saw liberal candidates badly mauled. From the start, they had been disproportionately prominent in *zemstvo* gatherings. The broad correlation between liberal leanings, higher education and civic activism had ensured that it was they rather than their more numerous con-

servative gentry colleagues who took most part in *zemstvo* assemblies and on the executive boards. For most of the landed nobility, the prospect of a severe threat to the authority of the government held no appeal. Disgruntled though they might be by their economic decline, they were too conscious of potential peasant unrest, and of the interdependence between tsarism and their own privileges, to view political instability with equanimity. The 'third element', with their democratic and even socialist tendencies, were regarded with suspicion and hostility. The last thing the landed nobility wanted was for meddling 'dogooders' to upset the Russian status quo. The new tsar was inundated with noble protestations of loyalty and support.

There is, then, little mystery to the conservative goals of Alexander III's regime. More complex is the explanation for its success in resisting pressure for reform which in the eyes of Loris-Melikov and many had seemed irresistible. One necessary condition for the new lease of life lent to the autocracy was the avoidance of potentially damaging encounters with the other Great Powers. Urged by his finance ministers that the Treasury could not stand the strain of war, Alexander III came to terms with the humiliation of the Congress of Berlin, signed a new alliance with Germany and Austria, and took care to avoid confrontation with the latter in the Balkans. When tension with the Central Powers began to increase in the late 1880s, he moved to shore up Russia's position through peaceful diplomacy, forging an alliance with France which was underpinned by large-scale French loans. It was not until his son rashly took on Japan in 1904 that the regime would once again suffer the dire domestic consequences of unsuccessful foreign engagements.

More fundamentally, Alexander's resolute reaction exposed the limited muscle behind the demands for reform which had so impressed Loris-Melikov. Members of the professions, the more liberal newspapers, the academic community, the 'third element' continued, of course, to yearn for public participation in government and for the extension of civil liberties. Criticism of the regime did not suddenly cease. The rapid expansion of the press and its increasing commercial viability enabled journalists hostile to the government to evade many of the censors' efforts. Concern to present the country in the most favourable light to foreign investors gave the government cause to mollify if it could not silence such critics. Major famine in 1891 acutely embarrassed the regime and gave new momentum to 'enlightened public opinion'. But on their own the liberally-inclined middle-class strata lacked political weight. The division between them and commercial-industrial sectors of the bourgeoisie was profound.

For the most part the moneyed classes were politically passive. For one thing, they were themselves sharply divided along regional, ethnic and religious lines. The magnates of the capital and the Old Believers of Moscow viewed each other with suspicion, and the leading figures of the new industries in the south, where much of the most vigorous industrial growth was taking place, were far removed

from the political centre. Moreover, beneath a thin layer of sophisticated industrialists, the rank and file of the merchantry remained culturally backward and, as their performance in most of the urban *dumas* showed, politically deferential. In any case, resistance to working-class agitation for improved conditions formed a bond between the regime and employers which would grow stronger as time passed. Russia's emergent liberal spokesmen lacked an economically powerful constituency.

Nor was adequate compensation provided by pressure for change from lower down the social scale. Under Alexander III the incidence of peasant and working-class protest was not sufficient to force reform back onto the agenda. Tension in the countryside remained real enough, but the regime faced no major crisis there until the turn of the century. As for working-class militancy, although it intensified markedly during the 1880s, it was neither co-ordinated nor sustained. As long as the regime maintained order at home and peace abroad, liberal opposition was relatively easy to rebuff.

The revolutionary intelligentsia, too, found its leverage limited by its failure to attract any wide measure of support. In the 1870s there was some sympathy for the young radicals within educated society and their successors would continue to receive financial and other help from privileged sympathizers. But the resort to terror had itself been in part an admission of their failure to achieve rapport with or effect any organization among the peasantry. During the 1870s the populists had found urban workers more responsive to radical blandishments, and the following decade saw the beginning of a far-reaching reappraisal of the potential for revolution. While recruitment to the radical subculture continued unabated during the 1880s, the increasingly efficient police successfully headed off renewed plots on the life of the tsar. A growing number of radicals began to question not only the tactics of The People's Will but the whole strategy of the populists. The more ready response among urban workers to socialist propaganda, the visible growth of industry and spread of capitalism, and the sheer failure to ignite the peasantry drew increasing attention to the revolutionary prognosis hitherto thought applicable only to the West: that of Karl Marx. From the early 1880s Plekhanov, a populist leader who had rejected The People's Will, spearheaded a sustained assault on the basic populist assumption that Russia could avoid capitalism. He denied the socialist potential of the peasant commune and pointed to the industrial proletariat as the class destined to take the lead in overthrowing tsarism and, in due course, to construct socialism.

By the end of Alexander III's reign, therefore, Russia's political structure had fallen even further out of line with those of the other Great Powers. Instead of accepting the limitations of ruling within the law, and of at least formal consultation with if not responsibility to an elected assembly, government in Russia remained autocratic. Not that the reality of the tsar's control over affairs measured up to

tsarist rhetoric. Many of Alexander's cherished goals – to withdraw the judiciary's quasi-autonomy, to cut back the activities of the *zemstvos*, to halt the decline in gentry landownership and the dilution of noble predominance in the upper reaches of the bureaucracy – proved unattainable. Not least among the obstacles to his 'counter-reforms' was opposition from within the increasingly specialized and professional upper reaches of the bureaucracy itself. The more complex and sophisticated became the apparatus of the state, the more narrow became the options open to the tsar. For much of the time his role was that of adjudicating increasingly severe conflicts between one hierarchy and another, between the ministry of internal affairs and those of finance and justice, between the civil service and the military. Under Nicholas II (1894-1917), the unity and coherence of the regime, supposedly guaranteed by the concentration of authority in the person of the tsar, would be progressively eroded.

Moreover, however jealously the autocracy guarded its prerogatives, it could not prevent the rapid evolution of Russian society. As economic development accelerated, so social polarization – between landlords and peasants, employers and workers – intensified. Until the end of the century the regime managed to deny Russia's social classes even minimal freedom to organize and articulate their aspirations. But in doing so, it only exacerbated social tension. Any chance that the conflicting interests of different social and national groups could be mediated through legal channels was ruled out. Gentry frustration and alarm at social instability laid the foundations for the rigidly reactionary noble front of the early twentieth century. Frustration among the professional middle classes yielded Europe's most radical liberal movement. Peasant discontent gathered momentum to the point where, given the chance, it swept away private ownership in land altogether. Russia's working class, lacking any legal framework within which to protect its interests and improve its conditions, provided the kernel of the most militant revolutionary movement the continent had seen. The radical intelligentsia sustained a tradition of revolutionary analysis, underground organization and political propaganda without parallel in the West. Despite the growing cultural, economic and administrative similarities she shared with her rivals, tsarist Russia was impelled down a road of her own. The sequel, born of World War I, was outright repudiation of the western European model. The nation-state, capitalism, imperialism, liberalism and parliamentary government – all were explicitly rejected when the Russian Empire was swept away and in its place was founded the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

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