INTRODUCTION

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In the aftermath of the Crimean War (1853–56), the Russian autocracy was in a parlous state. Popular discontent was mounting, the country's finances were in ruin, and the military had been bloodied. On his deathbed, Nicholas I is reputed to have told his heir that he was leaving the Empire in sorry condition, that all he had devoted his life to was in ruins. For decades the autocracy had temporized on the vital issue of serfdom, and under Nicholas little progress had been made in addressing rampant corruption. Since 1848, in the celebrated words of one Russian contemporary, Russia had been marked by "the quiet of the graveyard, rotting and stinking, both physically and morally."[1] Little wonder, then, that when Alexander Nikolaevich, who was known to be quite as conservative as his father, came to the throne as Alexander II, few expected decisive initiatives. But in fact, over the next decade or so Alexander II launched a series of reforms quite remarkable for their breadth, comprehensiveness, and daring. These measures amply merit the appellation of "Great Reforms" which history has bestowed upon them.

The present collection of essays, based largely on papers presented at a conference held at the University of Pennsylvania in May 1989, before the breakup of the Soviet Union, is the first attempt to examine within a single compass the abolition of serfdom in Russia, the many other reforms associated with that historic act, and the social and economic environment with which the reforms interacted. There have been studies of individual reforms—some by contributors to this volume—and one recent volume on the reform process.[2] But as a whole, the Great Reforms, which the American historian Geroid T. Robinson long ago called the most important episode in Russian history between the Petrine and 1917 revolutions and Terence Emmons more recently labeled the "greatest single piece of state-directed social engineering in modern European history before the twentieth century," have occupied something of an historiographical vacuum.[3]

Thus the time for a careful assessment of the Great Reforms is more than ripe. The essays in this volume offer both a map of the major landmarks and a variety of contrasting perspectives from which to view them. Some basic questions must be confronted. In general, how did *these* reforms emerge out of *that* regime? What alternatives were or might have been considered? If, as most historians seem to agree, there was no master plan to the Great Reforms, what were the implicit values and understandings shaping the legislation? What path of national development did the reforms

mark out? How were the individual reforms conceptualized, and what was their interrelationship? How deeply did the reforms get to what was fundamental in the structures of daily life, the political process, the national economy?

Russian scholarship on the reform era has, with few exceptions, been of low quality. Before the 1917 Revolution, few professional historians studied "recent history"; among those who did, Daniel Field has identified a predominant tendency which "smiled upon reform and reformers, the rule of law, and public opinion as a political force."[4] Later, Soviet scholarship was slowed by "attitudinal constraints" and ideological restrictions, which included the prevailing determinist current and emphases on a crude variant of labor history, the peasant movement, and economic change. Political and institutional history was long regarded as derivative and secondary, hardly worthy of serious attention. It is only recently that Russian scholarship has begun to pay close attention to the reform period; Abbott Gleason's introductory essay deals with this body of work.

American historical writing on the Great Reforms is also of relatively recent origin. This requires some explanation; after all, Western historians of Russian history, deeply influenced by liberal Kadet interpretations, were, unlike Soviet historiographers, prone to treat ideas and politics as autonomous spheres rather than as part of the superstructure of reality. Logically, then, the Great Reforms, which represented a landmark in political history, would attract considerable attention. Nevertheless, despite a general consensus that the Emancipation and accompanying reforms were major events, or at least represented a great missed opportunity in Russian history, little original American research was conducted on the Great Reforms before the 1960s. Instead, historians concentrated their attention on the emergence and evolution of the revolutionary movement, its organization and ideology as well as its links to the Bolsheviks. Essentially this was history designed to describe and explain the tragedy of the Russian Revolution or the failure of the liberal alternative. The Great Reforms emerge only as the primary example of this failure. Intended to provide the beginnings of societal participation in the processes of governing Russia and, implicitly, to limit the powers of the autocrat, the reforms were truncated and ultimately even aborted by the militant actions of radical revolutionaries, who drove the autocracy into repression and retreat. The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 on the very day he was purportedly to introduce constitutional limitations on his power was, according to this interpretation, a turning point in Russian history.[5]

In the 1960s the American historical profession underwent significant changes. The influence of the Annales school, the turbulent events in U.S. politics, and the expansion of higher education, which significantly democratized graduate training, brought social history to the fore and challenged the reigning liberal historical paradigm. Younger historians turned to issues of race, class, and gender and showed a new interest in conflict, mass move-

ments, dominance, and exploitation.[6] These changes were reflected in a new agenda of research in Russian history, which was complemented by occasional access to archives in the Soviet Union.

A few scholars took up the Great Reforms or related issues. In addition to studies of the politics of reform by Rieber, Emmons, and Field (discussed in this volume by Abbott Gleason), Heide W. Whelan and Theodore Taranovski took up the counterreforms,[7] and W. Bruce Lincoln, Walter Pintner, and Daniel T. Orlovsky began to study the "deep structure" of the Russian bureaucracy in the nineteenth century.[8] Throughout this period, isolated reformers continued to find their biographers. Finally, while largely rejecting the notion of a "revolutionary crisis" defining the reform era, Abbott Gleason, Richard Wortman, and Daniel R. Brower advanced the study of the revolutionary movement by carrying it into the realms of sociology, cultural history, and psychohistory.[9] The general trend of the new writing in history, however, was to bypass the Great Reforms. Interested primarily in long-term social developments, historians leapfrogged from a study of revolutionary elites and ideology to the problem of the viability of the Old Regime and questions germane to that issue: conflicts between masses and elites, the solidarity of elites, and the tensions caused by social and economic development in late Imperial Russia.

The shift in the research agenda reflected changes in political consciousness among Western historians. Whereas earlier studies had focused critically upon revolutionary groups in order to discover the intellectual origins of the Bolshevik revolution and to understand the usurpation of power, now historians largely studied mass movements and social conflicts, if not to celebrate at least to explain, in far more sympathetic terms, why the revolution happened and why it enjoyed broad-based support.

While the Great Reforms were not central to this research agenda, recent currents in historical writing have suggested new ways of looking at the period. The interest in "civil society" visible in all the American contributions to this volume reflects the popularity among Western historians of the ideas of Jurgen Habermas, who pioneered the study of the emergence of societal opinion independent of the state and freed from aristocratic tutelage. The concept has moved from Western historical science to the study of Russian history. It has been reinforced both by the current fascination with the emergence of a civil society in the era of perestroika and by its links with earlier liberal and émigré historiography, which was structured around a fundamental opposition between *obshchestvennost'* and *vlast'* (educated society and the state). A renewed interest in politics and a concern with reform as an alternative to revolution have led Western historians to question old assumptions.[10] Among economic historians, a lively discussion over "proto-industrialization" has brought to the fore the debate over whether Russian economic development can best be understood in terms of gradual change or of sharp discontinuities.

Current events pose other questions, especially about the relationship of

the Great Reforms to the revolution now under way in Russia. To many Western historians the Great Reforms are a pivotal moment in Russian history, but in the former Soviet Union—preoccupied with current reforms that are radically altering every facet of social, economic, and political life—the Great Reforms are of immediate and pressing interest. We are now also confronted with the issue of generational change. Today the *shestidesiatniki,* or people of the sixties in Russia, play a major role in pushing the country toward reform. These are people who, in their youth, were deeply affected by the early enthusiasm and later disillusionment of the Khrushchev era.[11] Similarly, *shestidesiatniki* of an earlier age carried their hopes, fears, and memories of the Great Reforms right up to the turn of the century.[12] Yet no one has studied these people as a group; we do not know what the reforms meant to them or how they applied the "lessons" of these reforms to their later lives.[13]

The contributors to this collection attend to history, not to current events. Ben Eklof and Larissa Zakharova first discussed the idea of a conference on the Great Reforms in 1983, two years before Mikhail Gorbachev acceded to power and long before it could have occurred to anyone that a collection of articles on the subject might have contemporary relevance. But it would reveal a remarkable lack of self-examination to claim that our concerns and approaches have not been shaped by the tumultuous events of recent years as well as by an evolving historiographical tradition. For example, an important legacy of the era of perestroika was to reintroduce the notions of contingency and alternative paths *(alternativy)* into Soviet historical discourse: what might have happened had circumstances been slightly different? Were there turning points, "plastic moments" at which, had different choices been made, the tragedy (and note, tragedy rather than triumph is the dominant interpretive note today) of twentieth-century Russian history might have been avoided? Similarly, Western historians, particularly those trained in the tools of social history, have been forced once again to deal with contingency. In this light, the Great Reforms take on a different hue, and the collapse of the Tsarist autocracy in 1917 is no longer seen as proof incontestable of the ultimate or inevitable failure of these reforms.[14]

Five years in the planning, the Great Reforms conference and this publication are themselves products of a specific historical moment. Fruitful collaboration between Russian and U.S. historians of the Great Reforms is not new. As an important case in point, many of the contributors to the conference and this volume, Russian and American both, were taught or assisted in their research by Professor Peter Andreevich Zaionchkovskii of Moscow University. Several of the U.S. contributors were aided in their early endeavors at research in Soviet archives by Larissa Zakharova, one of the editors of this volume and perhaps the leading authority on the politics of the reforms.

Nevertheless, the new reform era associated with Gorbachev made collaboration much easier than in the past. Certainly the publication of this collection jointly by Indiana University Press and Moscow University Press

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