The Landed Nobility, the State Council, and P. A. Stolypin (1907–11)

ALEXANDRA SHECKET KORROS

Desperate to restore some semblance of normalcy to society in the wake of the disorders of 1905, the Russian government acceded to demands for a popularly elected legislative assembly (the State Duma). The early stages of the 1905 revolution had been marked by expressions of discontent from all strata of society, including the landed nobility, the commercial and industrial classes, and the ever dissident intelligentsia. However, by the end of the year most of the newly radicalized nobles found their ardor beginning to cool in the wake of the increased peasant disorders and the Moscow armed uprising. Thus, when the tsar's special conference met to discuss the electoral law for the new Duma, the government turned to the landed nobility as a means of buffering the power of what was expected to be a radical, if not revolutionary, institution.

In order to place this "buffer" within the framework of the limited constitutional order established by the Manifesto of 17 October, the reformers of Russia's governing institutions converted the bureaucratic *Gosudarstvennyi sovet* (State Council) into an upper house, a legislative chamber with powers equal to the popularly elected Duma.[1] In contrast to the Duma, which was to represent the entire Russian population without regard for estate (*soslovie*) origins, the membership of the State Council, beyond the bureaucratic elite of which it had traditionally been composed,[2] was to be limited to representatives of the "cultured" elements of Russian society.

To this end, the bureaucratic reformers decided to allocate six representatives to each of several important interest groups—commerce and

industry, the Academy of Sciences and the universities, and the Orthodox clergy—or a total of eighteen deputies. The remaining seventy-four elected members were to come from the zemstvos (thirty-four representatives), the landowners of the nonzemstvo provinces (twenty-two), and the nobility (eighteen representatives indirectly elected by the local assemblies of nobility). By establishing high service and property qualifications for those elected by the zemstvos and landowners, the government virtually guaranteed that seventy-four of the ninety-eight elected members of the State Council would be noblemen. As a result, the Council became the institution in the new governmental structure that most strongly represented noble interests.[3]

Loosely organized though they were, the landed noble representatives in the State Council had a considerable impact upon the government's policies. It is the purpose of this article to examine this group's impact and, more generally, its political characteristics, focusing on their awareness and defense of their estate interests. Of necessity, the term "landed nobility" is here defined as the *Russian* landed nobility, for, although there were Polish landed noblemen in the State Council, their distinct national and historical identity caused them to pursue very different concerns in the upper chamber and prompted them to form their own political grouping, the Polish *kolo* (which usually supported the majority center faction).[4] The Russian landed noblemen displayed no similar propensity to form a single political group representing their common interests, but they did display common patterns of political behavior reminiscent of those of Russian noble organizations before the 1905 upheaval.

Since the reign of Catherine the Great, the Russian landed gentry had been organized into district and provincial assemblies of nobility, whose elected marshals represented and sought to reconcile the corporate interests of their estate with those of the State power. As a result of the relatively high property qualifications for election, the marshals tended to be large landowners,[5] who, because of their wealth and unpaid status, remained relatively independent of the central bureaucracy. During the closing years of the nineteenth century, the provincial assemblies, through their marshals, pressed the government to safeguard their declining estate by conferring noble status on nonnoble landowners, and they also attempted to exclude from these assemblies landless noblemen, who in large part were local bureaucrats ennobled by the Table of Ranks. In addition, the marshals increasingly emerged as champions of noble economic interests, demanding state aid for the landed nobility whose fortunes had suffered serious de-

cline since the emancipation of the serfs. By 1896 provincial marshals had begun to meet annually to coordinate these activities and to attempt to influence state policies in their favor. But despite political concessions on the local level, including the 1890 Zemstvo Statute and the creation of the land captains (*zemskie nachal'niki*), government policy continued to support the industrialization of the country and to neglect the concerns of the agricultural sector, including those of the landed nobility. As a consequence, the imperial government was regarded as generally unresponsive to their demands.

The provincial and district zemstvos were the other principal center of noble activities. Created in 1864, the zemstvos were all-estate assemblies, dominated by noble landowners. The provincial and district assemblies were responsible for supervision of schools, hospitals, road construction, etc. in rural areas. Noblemen active in zemstvo affairs were frequently thought of as more "liberal" than their counterparts in the assemblies of nobility; however, the district zemstvo was presided over by the district marshal of nobility, who also frequently served as chairman of the zemstvo board (*uprava*). Thus, at the district level, these two centers of noble activity overlapped.[6]

It is important to emphasize that only a relatively small number of the noblemen in any given district or province were actively involved in zemstvo affairs. Few could afford the money or the time to travel to the district or provincial capital to participate fully and regularly in zemstvo assemblies. As a result, only a handful of nobles dominated zemstvo affairs, often giving a zemstvo a political character shaped by the concerns of a minority of its members.

Government policies under Nicholas II strengthened hostility among both the zemstvos and the assemblies of the nobility toward the central administration. Liberals discussed constitutional limitations on bureaucratic arbitrariness, while conservatives sought means to retain exclusive estate privileges. Both sides, however, viewed the state bureaucracy as insensitive to noble needs and were even more vocal and unrestrained in their criticism of the government.

However, before 1905 the vast majority of landed noblemen stood aside from political activity, although their ostensible political leaders—the marshals through their annual meetings and the zemstvo men through their congresses—had begun to draw more closely together. In the midst of the national crisis of 1905, many noblemen who had rarely, if ever, participated in zemstvos found themselves involved in political affairs for the first time. Initially led by liberal zemstvo men, the assemblies moved to the left in a wave of support for universal

(though not direct) suffrage and constitutionalism. But after the peasant disorders in late summer 1905, the zemstvos began to return to "sanity," replacing the liberals of 1905 with leaders of much more moderate, if not conservative, persuasion.

The conservative noblemen, alarmed both by the spread of liberal ideas and by the liberals' initial success in the noble milieu, decided to establish their own organization. Early in 1906, they called a congress of provincial and district marshals, which led to the formation of the United Nobility, a political organization dedicated to the defense of noble interests. Throughout the succeeding years, the United Nobility became the principal spokesman and pressure group for the provincial nobility. It is significant that approximately one-third of the delegates to the First Congress of the United Nobility, and nine of its fifteen-member executive board (the Permanent Council), served as elected members of the State Council, and that all of these men gravitated toward the right wing of the chamber.[7]

The creation of the State Duma introduced a new element into Russian political life—the legal political party. Most of the noblemen who had been active in the moderate wing of the zemstvo congresses joined the Union of 17 October, a party committed to the principles of the October Manifesto. But the Octobrists attempted to represent the interests of both rural and urban property owners, expecting the noblemen to renounce their special estate privileges and fuse with property owners of other estates.[8] Such an expectation ran counter to the traditional attitudes of the landed nobility. Thus, the party to which more noblemen were initially attracted than any other could not represent their particular interests as an estate.

The State Council provided a forum for the articulation of these interests. All seventy-four seats that could be occupied by nobles were in fact filled by them. In choosing their representatives to the upper house, the nobility, the zemstvos, and the landowners of the west quite naturally gravitated to their traditional leaders—the marshals of the nobility and the chairmen of the zemstvo boards. At least thirty of the representatives elected to the State Council in 1906 were past or present marshals, while another six had chaired their local zemstvo boards.[9]

Although the noble delegates were numerous enough to form the second largest grouping in the chamber (second only to the appointed bureaucrats), the Russian landed nobles in the upper house did not form a single "nobles' group." Not surprisingly, the political divisions among the nobles' representatives in the State Council occurred over the same issues that had previously divided the local zemstvos and

noble assemblies: support of constitutional government as outlined in the October Manifesto, rejection of the Manifesto in favor of the old order, or, in a few cases, advocacy of further constitutional concessions.

Yet, whatever their political affiliations or inclinations, Russian noblemen of all political factions in the Council approached government in a similar manner. Noble interests frequently conflicted with bureaucratic views of state interest. But while bureaucrats were accustomed to playing an active, if not always creative, role in implementing state policy, the nobles' representatives were not; they had always looked to the autocrat to enact changes on their behalf. Thus, their conception of state service was to implement whenever possible the wishes of the central authority, while protesting only those measures which interfered with their own estate interests. This was true, by and large, even of those noblemen in the State Council who had previously participated in the Liberation Movement. These self-professed "progressives" had, for the most part, adhered to the moderate rather than liberal wing of the zemstvo congresses, resisting demands for four-tail suffrage and a constitution. Later, in the upper house, they tended to go along with their more conservative colleagues in considering the noble estate the most loyal servant of the tsar and of the state. Thus, even they were not inclined to oppose government policies as long as these policies did not directly conflict with the concerns of their estate.