Introduction

No Russian statesman has ever enjoyed so meteoric a rise to the heights of power and endured as rapid and humiliating a fall as Petr Arkadevich Stolypin, prime minister and minister of internal affairs from 1906 to 1911. Nor has any other statesman ever been the object, at one and the same time, of as much uncritical adulation and unrestrained vilification. These divergent assessments have not been confined to his policies, which sought to stem the revolutionary tide of 1905 and bring about fundamental changes in Russian society and politics. There has also been much controversy about Stolypin's personality. Many of his contemporaries disdained him as a man who lusted for power, as a cold-hearted politician without scruples in pursuing his career. Allegedly lacking a vision for Russia, he merely implemented the plans and directives of the tsar or ambitious politicians in St. Petersburg. Others, however, admired him as a noble, fearless man, a leader of uncommon intelligence, selflessly devoted to public service and to the well-being of Russia.[1]

In large measure, the different assessments of Stolypin were rooted in the circumstances of his rise to power. When Stolypin joined the government and assumed the critical post of minister of internal affairs at the relatively young age of forty-four, he was a person without national stature, his administrative and political experience having been limited to service in the provinces. His most important post had been the governorship of Saratov, where he gained a reputation as a forceful administrator adroit in containing widespread unrest. Firmly committed to maintaining law and order, he also advocated reform, particularly in the countryside, where he believed that the peasants should be encouraged to abandon the commune, which he considered largely responsible for their poverty. But beyond a small circle of senior officials in St. Petersburg, Stolypin was virtually unknown. When he arrived in the capital in April of 1906, very few even within the political elite suspected that he might emerge as the dominant figure in the government, overshadowing men with decades of experience at the pinnacle of power. Nor did any-

one expect him to possess the qualities necessary to cope with the political distemper widespread after the upheavals of 1905. His rapid rise to eminence did not endear him to senior officials who had been replaced or who had never succeeded in reaching the highest positions of government.

Within weeks of his arrival in St. Petersburg, Stolypin applied the full force of governmental authority to stamp out unrest, a policy bound to provoke criticism. The left lost no time reviling him as an unprincipled and ruthless politician who would bend every effort to maintain autocratic rule in Russia. Within short order, leaders of various sectors of Russian liberalism became almost as passionate in denouncing him. But moderates, conservatives, and reactionaries initially praised the new minister as a visionary and charismatic leader who would succeed in stabilizing the country, which had teetered on the edge of chaos during the revolutionary turbulence of 1905. Abroad, in most Western countries, politicians and journalists viewed him as a remarkable statesman, with talents comparable to those of the legendary Bismarck, a man destined to revitalize Russia and restore its prestige after the ignominious defeat by the Japanese in 1904 and 1905. It was a comparison that Stolypin did not discourage. Long before he moved to St. Petersburg he frequently suggested that his views on social and economic questions were modeled on those of Bismarck. And, ironically, just as German conservatives had distrusted Bismarck, a growing number of rightists in Russia lost confidence in Stolypin soon after he became prime minister. The extremists on the right turned against Stolypin because they feared that he planned to restore order not merely by resorting to the whip but also by introducing reforms that would fundamentally alter the prevailing social and economic system. If the reactionaries were not quite as vociferous as the left in castigating Stolypin, their barbs were more effective in weakening him politically because they enjoyed access to the tsar and his entourage at court. Early in 1911 a sizable number of moderates also turned against Stolypin because of his willful behavior, leaving him with the support of only the conservatives, who represented a minority, albeit a significant minority, of the political class. By the time he was assassinated in September of that year—the eighteenth attempt on his life—the tsar's confidence in him had plunged. The prime minister now appeared to be a spent force, incapable of continuing to guide the ship of state.

The voluminous journalistic, polemical, or scholarly writings on Stolypin that have appeared over the past eighty years or so reflect all these divergent evaluations of his role as head of the Russian govern-

ment. In the Soviet Union, historians invariably echoed Lenin, who attacked Stolypin with special venom because he saw in him an astute statesman whose dual program of repression and reform might well have succeeded in undermining the revolutionary cause. Lenin denounced the prime minister as the "hangman-in-chief," or simply as a hangman, tyrant, reactionary, or "pogrom maker."[2] Soviet scholars made no attempt to write a full-scale biography of Stolypin but produced, instead, elaborately documented works to substantiate Lenin's charges.

Among Soviet academics, A. Ia. Avrekh, the most prolific historian of the Stolypin era, set the tone. He examined numerous aspects of the prime minister's tenure in office and invariably concluded that the man's sole concern was to preserve the old order. Stolypin, in Avrekh's view, constantly maneuvered between political groups, manipulated party leaders, and resorted to the most pernicious repression, all to consolidate the autocratic regime. But these efforts, no matter how ingenious, could not succeed. The situation in Russia was revolutionary, Avrekh insisted, and no strategy, tactic, or policy that the government adopted could forestall the inevitable collapse of tsarism and the triumph of socialism. Avrekh's assessment of Stolypin, accepted as dogma by almost all Soviet historians, thus served a political purpose, to buttress the Soviet leaders' claim of legitimacy for their political system.[3]

Views of Stolypin in the West have been more diversified and nuanced. Although many scholars emphasize the harshness of his police measures and contend that his goal of revitalizing the monarchical order was almost certainly unattainable, they do not deny that he was moved by a grand vision for Russia, the establishment of domestic tranquillity and the modernization of the empire.[4] And there is a corps of scholars and writers, several of them émigrés from Russia, who have portrayed Stolypin in a distinctly favorable light. They have stressed his heroic qualities, his reformist zeal, his passion for justice, and his "straightforward" patriotism. Leonid Strakhovsky, a professor of history at the University of Toronto, referred to him as "a true guardian of the constitutional regime." And almost without exception the admirers of Stolypin have seen him as the "only statesman who could have prevented revolution."[5] The warmest praise was heaped upon Stolypin by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who, in his *August 1914*, devoted some seventy-four pages to the prime minister's career and personality and another seventy to the circumstances surrounding his assassination. Stolypin, according to Solzhenitsyn, "had a constant anxious awareness of all Russia as though it were there in his breast. Unsleeping compassion,

a love that nothing could alter. But though his love was all gentleness and tenderness, when anything threatened the things that mattered to him he was as unyielding as an oak. All his life was like that." Stolypin's "actions were never at any time governed by self-interest."[6] The crudest and most unconvincing adulation of Stolypin was written by a Russian émigré in 1928, a certain F. M. Goriachkin who, in a tirade against the revolutionaries who took over Russia in 1917, hailed the prime minister for having been the "First Russian Fascist," in effect a forerunner of Mussolini.[7]

During the declining years of the Soviet Union, when intellectuals tried to grapple with the question of when Russia took a wrong turn into Communist despotism, interest in Stolypin exploded and the country was overspread by an avalanche of publications on the Stolypin era: newspaper articles, scholarly debates in learned journals, reprints of memoirs, documents (especially those bearing on the assassination), speeches by Stolypin, as well as assessments of his years in office long unavailable in the Soviet Union. Activists who admired Stolypin hurled the same words at defenders of Communism that Stolypin had hurled at revolutionaries in the Duma in the spring of 1907: "They need great upheavals; we need a great Russia."

Most recently, on July 8, 2000, President Vladimir Putin gave what has been described as a "state of the state" address to the Federal Assembly of Russia, in which he made an explicit reference to Stolypin. The thrust of Putin's speech was that Russia must be modernized through fundamental reform if it is to "survive as a nation, as a civilization." He declared himself to be in favor of a thorough democratization of the country and stressed two major goals that Stolypin had pursued, political stability and a stable economy. In elaborating on his program, Putin proposed several initiatives undertaken by Stolypin over ninety years ago, most notably the establishment of "the legal foundation for private property rights where they have not so far been established. This primarily concerns land [and] real estate." In addition, Putin hearkened back to Stolypin in insisting that Russia must have an "effective state" capable both of guaranteeing "human rights" and of serving as the driving force in enacting a wide range of reforms of the country's political, economic, and social institutions. His ultimate goal, Putin announced, was the creation of a "civil society" that would become "the government's equal partner." But Putin warned that this would be difficult because the Russian people had little experience in dealing with "the false conflicts between the values of personal freedom and the state's interests." It was at this point that he invoked Stolypin's name: "So far, we

have not always succeeded in combining patriotic responsibility for the country's future with what Stolypin once described as civil freedoms." President Putin correctly diagnosed Stolypin's most intractable problem as prime minister, the formation of a "strong state" in which the people's right to exercise their civil liberties and political rights would be guaranteed. But Putin was misguided in suggesting that in Stolypin's time there was a "false conflict" between these two goals. The conflict between them was real, and recent news accounts from Russia suggest that it continues to be one of the more troublesome issues that the political leadership of the country will have to confront.[8]

Generally, the arguments about Stolypin over the past decade have not been fundamentally different from those of the previous eighty years, but there has been a dramatic shift in the dominant attitude. Much more so than ever before, Stolypin has been heralded as a farsighted statesman whose policies were precisely the ones Russia needed to develop into a prosperous, stable, and powerful country. For example, in a scholarly article published in 1994, A. I. Glagolev criticized Soviet historians for mentioning Stolypin only in "an abusive context" and contended that the prime minister ranks with such outstanding reformers as Peter the Great, M. M. Speransky, N. S. Mordvinov, E. F. Kankrin, and P. O. Kiselev, among others.[9] In addition, in recent years Stolypin has been widely hailed in the former Soviet Union as a man who, had he lived longer and had he continued to lead the government, could have prevented the agony of revolution. Russian scholars and journalists have paid special attention to Stolypin's agrarian program, the premise of which was the conversion of Russia's peasantry into owners of private property. The absence in Imperial Russia of a large class of people with their own property, it is now frequently argued, explains the failure of the rule of law and democratic institutions to take root. Some writers have been carried away by their enthusiasm for Stolypin and have claimed that the standard of living in Russia was higher in 1913 than in the 1980s.[10]