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PART III

THE LAST CHANCES 1905–1914

INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this work is to describe and explain the stages of the Decline of the Russian Empire between the Crimean War and the First World War. The Empire's Fall, in revolution and civil war, lies outside its scope, though reference is made to it in the Epilogue. The Fall forms the subject of a vast literature of unequal merit in Russia, Europe and America: the Decline has received far less attention. There are excellent studies of special aspects, but few attempts to survey the whole half-century from the emancipation of the serfs to the catastrophe of 1914. The complexity of the issues, and the varying quality of the sources, forbid the historian to set himself too high an aim. I have tried to pursue accuracy and clarity rather than literary effect. If this work is of practical use to any who wish to understand the background of contemporary Russia it will have served a purpose.

Though Russian history is little known in Europe, there is no subject on which European writers, informed or less informed, are more willing to theorise. From the numerous enthusiastic champions of the various ready-made theories I can expect little patience. There are the various theories about the Slav soul, Dostoevski, the mystics and the noble mujik; and the Polish theories about the inward wickedness and "differentness" of all Russians, which only Poles are able to understand. There are numerous variations on the themes of a happy country of happy people destroyed by the wicked Bolsheviks, or of a vast torture-chamber from which the oppressed people was liberated—if a little roughly—by the glorious—or at least "progressive"—Bolsheviks. There is the version put forward by the infallible author(s) of the *Short History of the CPSU(b)*. Then there are the familiar theories about Russia's role within Europe. To some she is the generous protector and liberator of the poor little oppressed Slav peoples; to others the noble defender of Europe against the Germanic hordes; to others again the impious enemy of the noble Germanic defenders of Europe. This does not exhaust the list. Most of the ready-made theories contain bits—in most cases small bits—of truth. I hope that these bits are to be found within my account, but I am unable to support any of these theories, and both unable and unwilling to produce a rival of my own. This does not mean any general objection to theory as such, or a belief that history should be a mere list of "facts". On the contrary, theoretical analysis and generalisations are an essential part of the historian's task, and in few periods more than in the last decades of Imperial Russia. But I do not see the need for an all-embracing dogmatic explanation or for a quasi-scientific "system". That Russian history in this period is too little known is due to the difficulty of access to material, not to the need for any mysterious key for its understanding.

Most students of history have special interests within their period or subject. It may be well to state my own. Russia first interested me as a great country which in certain respects resembled, and always greatly influenced, the small countries of Eastern Europe, with which I have had some acquaintance during the last decade. Secondly, Russia interested me as a country with a revolutionary tradition of its own, which in recent times has produced the world Communist movement that to-day has made an impact on most countries of the world. Thirdly Imperial Russia, the country within which Leninism was born, provides the first example of a phenomenon which has since repeated itself elsewhere—the impact of western ideas and western economy on a backward social and political structure. The rise of an intelligentsia in rebellion against society and state, and the formation from its ranks of sects of professional revolutionaries, are less specifically Russian phenomena than historians of Russia have considered them. Of these three aspects of Russia it was the first that drew me to the study of the period, but it is the second and third that have most interested me during my work. It is the third aspect whose further study seems to me to offer the most valuable lessons for our own time.

The period falls into three sections—the reign of Alexander II (1855–81), the period of reaction (1881–1905) and the "Revolution" of 1905 and its aftermath (1905–14). Of these three the first has received more and better treatment in Western Europe than the other two. Because it is relatively well known, I have here devoted relatively less space to it. In particular, the sixties, a period of development of political ideas, have received less attention than the seventies, a period of revolutionary action. This is partly because the ideas of the sixties are in some sense a culmination of an earlier period, which cannot be treated within the limits of this work, and partly because in general this work is concerned more with action than with ideas. The second and third periods have been neglected by Western, and even by Russian, writers, with the exception of the important but restricted field of Leninist scholastics. The nine years from 1905 to 1914 are as full of important trends and events as the two preceding periods of twenty-four and twenty-six years.

The subject also falls into three sections, which may be called the structure of state and society, political movements and foreign relations. The book is therefore divided into three Parts which correspond to the three periods, and each Part into three chapters which correspond approximately to the three subdivisions of subject. Each Part has a chapter on foreign relations. Within each Part also the balance between the other two sections of the subject —structure of state and society and political movements—has been as far as possible preserved, though this may not at first sight be obvious owing to the different forms which these took within the three chronological periods. Thus in Part I the division is between the basic structure on the accession of Alexander and the reforms which he introduced; in Part II between economic and political development; in Part III between the forces set in motion in 1905–6 and the attempt made to repress and to canalise these forces after 1907. As the chronological subdivisions do not in all cases correspond to the subdivisions by subject, and as some important problems belong to more than one of the subdivisions, there has inevitably been some overlapping between the Parts. This is especially the case in foreign relations, somewhat less so in economic affairs. The following are the main examples. The section in Part I on Russian expansion in Asia is brought down to 1885 though Part I in general ends in 1881. The development of agriculture and industry after 1861 are discussed in Part II, though in general Part II begins with the reign of Alexander III. The brief discussions of the Church and of the armed forces in Part I are there taken down to the end of the century, and these questions are not again mentioned until after 1905. The Polish Question is treated in Parts I and II as a matter of foreign policy, in Part III mainly as a matter of internal policy, in the sections on The Nationalities in and after 1905. The Ukrainian problem is treated in the same manner, owing to its close relationship with the Polish. It is hoped that the reader will be helped rather than hindered by this arrangement. The special Subjects Index should also facilitate his task.

Chapter II

FROM REFORM TO ASSASSINATION

The Emancipation of the Serfs

RUSSIA'S defeat in the Crimean War exposed to the whole world the rottenness of the Russian State. Even before the war Nicholas had been partly aware of it, and in his way had striven for reform. But the European revolutions of 1848 had been a shock to him, and after that he had obstinately opposed change. In 1855 he was succeeded by Alexander II, who decided to reconsider the problem of serfdom. Apart from the person of the monarch, two further factors contributed to the change of attitude at the top. One was that the big landowners of the south, whose crops were beginning to enter into international trade and to bring good returns, were beginning to find that wage labour was more efficient than serfs. The second was the striking growth of minor outbreaks of violence by the peasants. There were 400 cases in the ten years 1845–55 and 400 more in the five years 1855–60. Two hundred and thirty serf-owners or bailiffs had been killed by peasants between 1835 and 1854, and fifty-three between 1858 and 1861.[1]

The first public indication of impending reform was a manifesto issued in 1856 by Alexander II on the conclusion of peace. In it he spoke of the need for "laws equally just for all, equally protecting for all". At the request of the Governor-General of Moscow, the Tsar made a speech to the Moscow nobility, in which he used the startling and famous phrase: "It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until the serfs begin to liberate themselves from below." The Tsar had now committed himself. But he wished the initiative to come from the nobles themselves. Their response was disappointing. A high official of the Ministry of Interior was instructed to begin discussions with them, but those whom he sounded were hostile. They especially opposed any granting of land to the liberated serfs, which was an essential part of the Tsar's intention. After months of hesitation by the nobles, the Tsar lost

[1] Sumner, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

his patience, and ordered the Minister of the Interior to produce a draft within three days. This was published on 20th November/3rd December 1857 as an Imperial Rescript addressed to the Governor-General of Lithuania.[1]

The Rescript proclaimed the liberation of landowners' peasants from personal serfdom and the principle that they should be enabled to buy land from the landlords. It directed that the details should be considered by committees of the nobility in each province. These were to be composed of two delegates elected by the nobility of each district in each province, and the chairman was to be in each case the provincial marshal of the nobility. Some time before this the Tsar had appointed a Secret State Committee to examine the whole question. One of its leading figures was General Rostovtsev, who had previously been Director of Military Schools and was the Tsar's trusted and intimate friend.

For a year after the publication of the Rescript discussions were held all over the country. Political and social issues were debated by the gentry and the educated class with greater freedom and eagerness than ever before in Russia's history. In March 1859 the Tsar appointed "drafting commissions" to examine the proposals put forward by the provincial committees. Rostovtsev was appointed Head of the Commissions, and his closest collaborators were men of enlightened views.[2] After studying the proposals, they summoned delegates from the provincial committees in two groups. The first group, representing nineteen provinces, came in the autumn of 1859, were admitted three or four at a time to the Commissions, and gave their opinions orally. The members of this group were on the whole favourable to the Government's principles. They wished the peasants to be free and to receive land. Their objections were to the manner in which the Reform was being carried out. They wished its execution to be entrusted not to the governmental bureaucracy but to local organs of self-government. The second group of delegates came in early 1860. They were more hostile to the Reform in itself, and spoke in defence of the landlords' traditional rights over the peasants. They tried to influence the Tsar against the Commissions by accusing their members of liberal sympathies.

[1] The preparations leading to the emancipation, and the personalities concerned, are described in A. A. Kornilov, *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie pri Alexandre II* (Moscow, 1909). The emancipation is treated in greater detail by the same author's *Krestyanskaya reforma* (SPB, 1905).

[2] The most important of these were the Assistant Minister of Interior, N. A. Milyutin, the Slavophile intellectual Samarin and Prince Cherkasski.

At this point Rostovtsev died and was succeeded by Panin, known as a man of reactionary sympathies. The appointment was considered to be the result of conservative pressure on the Court. But in fact it had little influence on the result. The work of the drafting commissions came to an end in October 1860, and their proposals went before the main Secret Committee and then the Council of State. The Tsar was himself present at the later sessions of both bodies, and supported the drafting commissions' plans. In the end these were only very slightly modified. Finally the Archbishop of Moscow was requested to write the text of the Imperial decree, which was published on 19th February/4th March 1861.

The essential points of the Reform were the following. All personal serfdom was abolished, and the peasants now became free citizens. The peasants were to receive land from the landlords' estates, and were to pay the landlords for it. The State advanced the money to the landlords, and recovered from the peasants fixed annual sums. These became known as "redemption payments". The land holdings received by the peasants were controlled, as before, by the village commune. The commune was in most cases collectively responsible for the payment of redemption debts and, as previously, of taxes. Finally a system of peasant self-government was set up. Each village had its assembly of householders, at the head of which was an elected official known as the "Elder" (*starosta*). Several communes together formed a "canton" (*volost*), which had its Elder and its court. The canton court was empowered to judge minor civil disputes which did not involve any person who was not a peasant. It was guided rather by peasant custom than by written law. Thus, though the peasants were emancipated from the disabilities of serfdom, justice was administered to them separately from other classes, and on different principles.

Two features of the new system call for more careful explanation—the nature of the redemption payments and the place of the village commune in the Reform.

The amount of compensation to landlords was fixed at a rate considerably higher than the prices of land prevailing at the time of the Reform. An estimate by a Russian authority in 1906 gives the following figures for three regions of Russia.[1] The sums paid to the landlords are compared with the value of the land at average land prices for 1863–72.

[1] Lositski, *Vykupnaya operatsia* (SPB, 1906), quoted by Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 88.