

RUSSIA IN REVOLUTION

S. A. SMITH

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An Empire in Crisis, 1890 to 1928

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As ever, the book is dedicated to Phil Jakes.

S.A.S.

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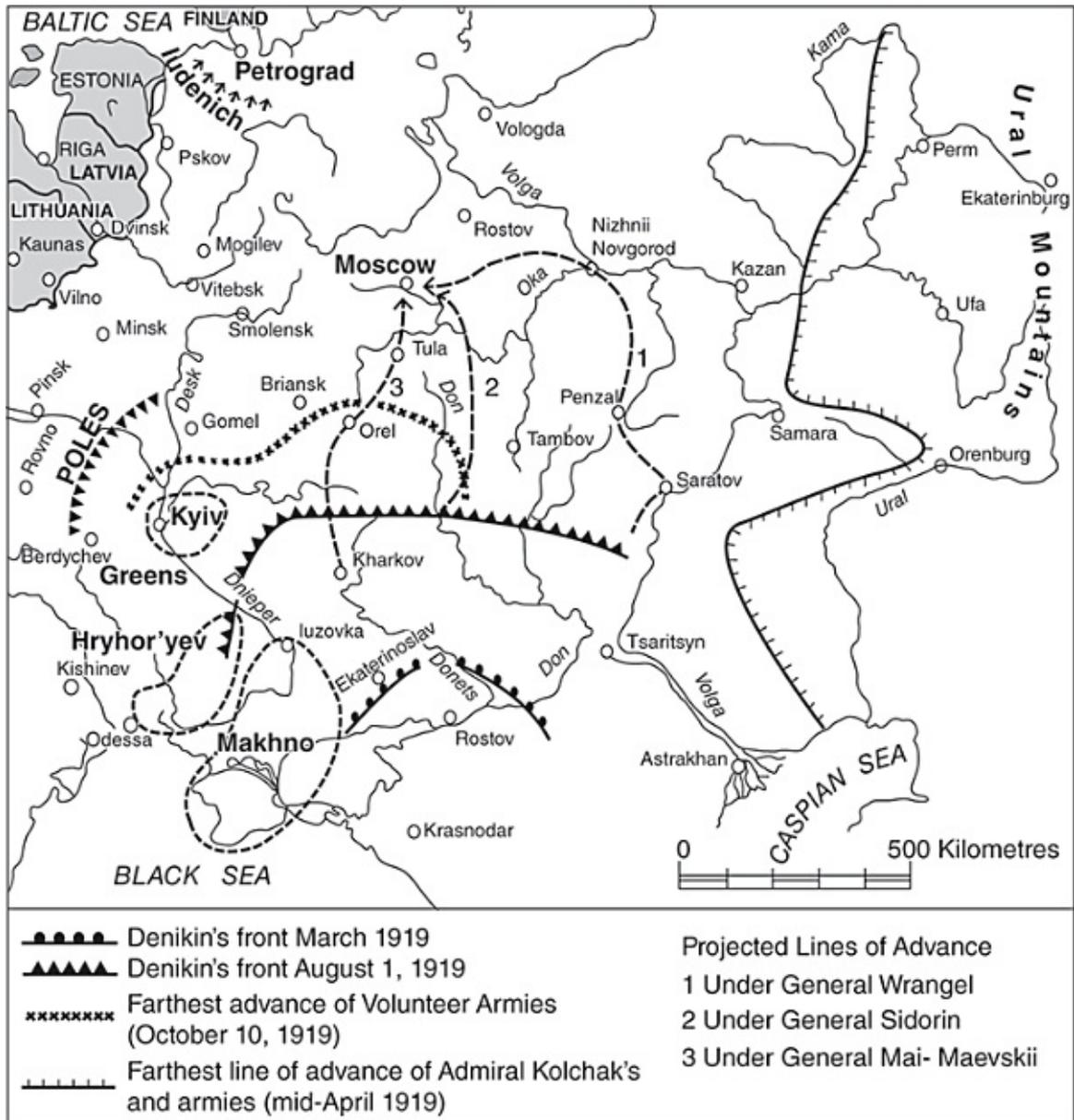
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INTRODUCTION

‘The Revolution was a grand thing!’ continued Monsieur Pierre, betraying by this desperate and provocative proposition his extreme youth.

‘What? Revolution and regicide a grand thing?’

‘I am not speaking of regicide, I am speaking about ideas.’

‘Yes: ideas of robbery, murder, and regicide’, again interjected an ironical voice.

‘Those were extremes, no doubt, but they are not what is most important. What is important are the rights of man, emancipation from prejudices, and equality of citizenship.’

— Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

As Tolstoy wonderfully captures in the opening scene of his masterpiece *War and Peace*, the historical significance of the French Revolution was bitterly contested throughout the nineteenth century and indeed for most of the twentieth. In 1978 the French historian François Furet boldly declared that the ‘French Revolution is Over’, a judgement which is questionable, but which made the point that a historical event that once excited lethal passion had ceased to divide contemporary politics or be the object of deep psychological investments. It is doubtful that one can say the same of the Russian Revolution in its centenary anniversary year, even though the regime that it brought into existence has been defunct for more than a quarter of a century. The challenge that the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 posed to global capitalism still reverberates (albeit faintly) and, more pertinently, so does its challenge to the contemporary western conception of politics as a field bounded by ideas of free markets, human rights, and democratic government. Furet observed that writing the history of the French Revolution was not like writing the history of the Frankish invasions of the fifth century: ‘What the historian writes about the French Revolution is assigned a meaning and a label even before he starts working: the writing is taken as his *opinion*, a form of judgement that is not required when dealing with the Merovingians ... As soon as the historian states that opinion, the matter is settled; he is labelled a royalist, a liberal or a Jacobin.’¹ Of course, there is no such thing as history writing that is devoid of political resonance: historical interpretation always entails commitments, and history writing is itself part of history and so subject to constant revision. While few today would evaluate the Russian Revolution in the same spirit as Pierre Bezukhov evaluated the French Revolution in *War and Peace*, it is worth reminding ourselves that in 1945 many would have defended the October Revolution in an analogous way, seeing it as giving rise to a state which, despite its faults, had made a massive contribution to the defeat of fascism. So Furet is right to suggest that there are certain historical events and personages that evoke particular passion, where the writing of their history is a peculiarly political enterprise. And the Russian

Revolution, one hundred years on, is still such an event. Because of that, I have tried in this book to write as dispassionately as possible about the crisis of the tsarist autocracy, the failure of parliamentary democracy in 1917, and about the Bolshevik rise to power. I have sought to avoid moralizing and to write with sympathy about those to whom I feel some aversion and, conversely, to write critically of those to whom I am more positively disposed. But for the reader who would like to pin a label on me at the outset—and a reader certainly has the right to know where an author stands—I suggest they start with the conclusion.

This book is written primarily for the reader coming new to the subject, although I hope that, as a synthesis of recent research by Russian and western scholars, and as an attempt to question some familiar interpretations, it will have something of interest to say to my academic colleagues. The book offers a comprehensive account of the main events, developments, and personalities in the former Russian empire from the late nineteenth century through to the onset of the First Five-Year Plan and forced collectivization in 1928/9, when Stalin unleashed a ‘revolution from above’ on the Soviet people. It seeks to answer the big questions that interest school students, undergraduates, and the general reader who enjoys learning about the past. Why did the tsarist autocracy fail? Why did the attempt to establish parliamentary democracy after the February Revolution of 1917 also fail? How did a small extreme socialist party manage to seize power and to sustain itself through a ferocious civil war (1918–21)? How did Stalin rise to power? Why did he unleash brutal collectivization and crash industrialization on the Soviet people at the end of the 1920s? At the most fundamental level the book aims to offer some insight into the nature of power: how the determination to continue to rule in the old way can lead to the collapse of an entire social order or how those seeking to create a better society become corrupted by their determination to hold on to power at any price. These are all hoary issues, but since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 a mass of new source-material has become available that sheds much fresh light on the political and social history of this period. Over the past quarter of a century historians in Russia and the West have begun to use this material to reexamine old questions, to raise new ones, and to rethink some entrenched categories. The book seeks to reflect this archivally based scholarship and to give the general reader a sense of how scholarly understanding of the Russian Revolution has changed over recent decades. At the same time, it reflects the fact that the Russian Revolution continues to be a subject on which historians’ interpretations differ greatly. Its main purpose, however, is to offer the general reader a wide-ranging account of the collapse of the tsarist autocracy and the rise of a Bolshevik party, but one that pays more attention than was possible prior to 1991 to such matters as the imperial and national dimensions of the Revolution, to the complexity of forces involved in the civil war, to the attempts by moderate socialist and anarchist parties to resist the Bolshevik monopolization of power, to peasant and worker resistance to the Bolshevik regime, to the massive economic privation and suffering wrought by the Revolution, to the conflict between Church and state, and to the economic and social contradictions of the Soviet Union under the New Economic Policy of the 1920s.

Revolutions are about the breakdown of states, the competition between rival contenders for power, and the ultimate reconstitution of a new state power. For that reason, the backbone of the narrative is political, and it ranges back to the time of the

Great Reforms of Alexander II in the 1860s and forward into the high Stalinism of the 1930s. The choice of a longish time-frame is motivated by the fact that the book seeks to emphasize some important continuities across the revolutionary divide of 1917. Fundamentally, developments are analysed in terms of the interplay between external pressures (geopolitics and rivalry within the international state system) and internal pressures that derived from the undermining of social hierarchies by rapid economic modernization. Revolutions are not created by revolutionaries, who at most help to erode the legitimacy of the existing regime by suggesting that a better world is possible. So less attention is devoted to the political activities and arguments of revolutionaries prior to 1917 than in some standard histories. As Lenin himself well knew, it is only when the existing order is in deep crisis that revolutionaries can break out of political isolation and seek to mobilize popular forces to bring the old order to its knees. For virtually all the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century, it was not a crisis of the capitalist system, but imperialist war that pushed old orders into crisis, so war figures large in my account.

For shorthand I have referred to ‘Russia’ up to now, but the book follows recent research in looking at the Revolution in a Eurasian perspective, paying much more attention to Central Asia, the Caucasus, Siberia, and the Far East than would once have been the case. Empire and the rise of nationalism are key themes of the recent historiography of the Revolution that are integrated in this account. The history of the Revolution is set squarely in the context of the disintegration and ultimate reintegration of empire. Fighting for their survival, the Bolsheviks lost control of most areas outside the Russian heartland between 1918 and 1920, including Ukraine, the Caucasus, the Baltic regions, and Central Asia. Eventually, by appealing to nationalism and anti-colonialism, they managed to put the empire back together again—with some exceptions (Poland, Finland, the Baltic littoral, the western parts of Ukraine and Belorussia, and Bessarabia). Although power in Russia was always highly centralized in the capitals—all the major events recounted in this text took place in St Petersburg or in Moscow after the capital moved there in 1918—but recent research on the Russian provinces has brought out how the Revolution was shaped by local ecological, socio-economic, and ethnic structures, and how conflicts in the countryside and provincial towns influenced its outcome. I have tried to give a sense of the diversity of the Revolution by choosing examples from the remote provinces in order to challenge an understanding of the Revolution that is circumscribed by too great a concentration on the events in the capitals. Finally, since the 1970s much of the most innovative work on the history of late-imperial and revolutionary Russia has been done by social and, more recently, cultural historians and this is incorporated into the present account.

Revolutions aspire not only to create a new state but also to overturn and transform social and economic relations. They differ from military coups or seizures of power by dictators and political cabals because the breakdown of state authority is total, and this breakdown opens up a space for mass mobilization. Politics, in other words, is taken out of the hands of elites and functioning institutions and brought into the streets and the fields. The activities and aspirations of peasants, workers, soldiers, non-Russian ethnic groups, women, and young people in toppling the old order and in seeking to make a new one are central to the story this book tells. Millions in 1905 and 1917

organized to oppose oppression and to achieve justice, equality, political rights, and an end to war. A history of revolution must, then, be a history of a whole society in turmoil. So while political events form the backbone of this account, it pays much attention to the economic, social, and cultural changes that shaped political developments and to the ways in which different social groups were activated by and responded to those developments. The peasantry, the great majority of the population, is still too often marginalized in accounts of the Revolution, yet they were its primary agents and victims. They suffered under tsarism, they rose up against the old rural order in 1905 and 1917, they appeared to realize their age-old dream in 1917–18, only to find themselves bearing the main cost of socio-economic modernization. Yet they also displayed a striking capacity to thwart the schemes of governments until Stalin unleashed violent collectivization at the end of the 1920s. A social-historical perspective on the Revolution sets a benchmark against which the actions of reformers and revolutionaries can be judged, allowing us to assess the extent to which they responded to pressing economic and social problems and the adequacy and effectiveness of their responses. Ultimately, it is only by looking at how far the social and economic order was transformed that we can measure the scale of the Revolution, which was highly uneven in its effects.

Finally, in the past quarter of a century there has been an efflorescence of cultural history, and this book seeks to incorporate some of its findings, showing the impact of economic change on ingrained cultural patterns, the critical importance of generational conflict within the Revolution, and the efforts of the Bolsheviks to carry through what they called ‘cultural revolution’. As bastard children of the Enlightenment, they understood the Revolution through the lens of civilizational progress, believing in the capacity of science to bring about freedom from scarcity and in the capacity of rational forms of thought and social organization to liberate the ‘backward masses’ from religion and superstition. The Bolshevik state was the first in history to seek to create an atheist society and their assault on the Church is a project about which we now know much more. The book, therefore, pays attention to the ways radical cultural innovation clashed with the inherited beliefs and dispositions of different groups of the population, especially in the sphere of religion. Paradoxically, the regime would consolidate itself only by compromising with, and even appropriating, beliefs and practices that it initially excoriated.

The centenary of the two revolutions of 1917 occurs at a time when there is little sympathy for revolution in the advanced capitalist or even in the developing world. Talk of ‘revolution’ has not entirely disappeared, but it is, in the words of Arno Mayer, ‘the celebration of essentially bloodless revolutions for human rights, private property, and market capitalism’.² One might now add that even revolutions of this kind—the ‘colour’ revolutions in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus, or the revolutions of the Arab Spring—have hardly been good copy for those who would effect radical political and social change through mass mobilization and violent means. This has affected the way that historians write about revolutions in the past.³ In the West historians are more likely to see 1917 as the initiation of a cycle of violence that led to the horrors of Stalinism than as a flawed attempt to create a better world. They are more likely to see the mobilization of peasants, soldiers, and workers as motivated by

irrationality and aggression than by outrage at injustice or a yearning to be free. Looked at across the massive growth of capitalism that has taken place in the last hundred years, the October Revolution seems as though it led Russia up a historical cul-de-sac: from capitalism to socialism and back to capitalism again. Looked at from the vantage point of Vladimir Putin's Russia, it may seem as though the Russian Revolution barely made a dent on Russia's political culture. So why study the Russian Revolution a century on? First, because it offered by far the most radical challenge to the existing order up to that time, with the Bolsheviks committed to replacing what they saw as a society based on exploitation, inequality, and war with a classless and stateless society they called communism. If Bolshevik-style communism has little appeal in the twenty-first century, it is too early to conclude that its implications for the future are entirely exhausted. Just as the English Revolution put paid to the principle of divine right of kings and the French Revolution to the idea of an aristocracy of birth, the Russian Revolution's challenge to the idea that there is something natural or inevitable about social hierarchy and socio-economic inequality may yet prove to be its legacy. Capitalism may have seen off state socialism, but it has yet to adapt to that challenge. Secondly, Russia remains a considerable power today and if we are to understand the combination of anxiety and ambition that motivates much Russian foreign policy we need to know its history. The era of state socialism proved to be short if judged in a long-term historical perspective, but the impact of the Soviet Union on the turbulent history of the twentieth century was immense, most obviously in respect of the Second World War and the Cold War. Finally, we *can* learn lessons from history, and there is a great deal to learn from the history of the Russian Revolution about how the thirst for power, the enthusiasm for violence, and contempt for law and ethics can corrupt projects that begin with the finest ideals.

* * *

This is a book intended mainly for the general reader so I have tried to keep endnotes to a minimum, signalling the sources of quotations and statistics, but otherwise lightly referencing the key texts on a particular theme. The endnotes mainly indicate the works on which I have relied, and from which I have benefited, and indicate some of the more specialist literature to the interested reader.

In referring to domestic events, old-style dates are used up to 31 January 1918, when the Bolsheviks introduced the Gregorian calendar. Dates then jumped forward thirteen days to 14 February 1918, bringing the Russian calendar into line with that of the modern world. However, international events are dated according to the Gregorian calendar (mainly in relation to the First World War). Most Russian names have been transliterated according to the revised Library of Congress system, except for well-known names such as Witte, Zinoviev, or Trotsky. All Russian measurements have been converted into metric units.

1

ROOTS OF REVOLUTION, 1880S–1905

The collapse of the tsarist regime in February 1917 was ultimately rooted in a systemic crisis brought about by economic and social modernization, a crisis that was massively exacerbated by the First World War.¹ From the 1860s, and especially from the 1890s, the autocracy strove to keep its place among the major European powers by industrializing the country and by modernizing its armed forces, even though it knew that economic change would release social forces that threatened political stability. Time, however, was not on its side. From the late nineteenth century the major industrial powers—Germany, the USA, Britain, and France—were rapidly expanding their geopolitical and economic might, threatening to reduce Russia to second-rate status. As Russia’s extremely backward society underwent brisk economic, social, and cultural change, new social and political forces were unleashed that eroded the social base of the autocracy. Industrialization, urbanization, and rural to urban migration gave rise to new social classes, notably industrial workers, commercial and industrial capitalists, and the professional middle classes, which did not fit into the traditional system of social estates that was dominated by the landed nobility. These emerging social classes demanded that the autocracy treat them as citizens, not as subjects, by granting them civil and political rights. It was these demands, raised in the context of a war with Japan, that led to the outbreak of a massive social and political revolution in 1905. In that year a liberal movement based in the middle classes, a militant labour movement, and a colossal peasant movement against the landed gentry, built up such momentum that Nicholas II was compelled to concede significant political reform in the October Manifesto. Once order was restored, however, the tsar reneged on his promise of a constitutional monarchy.

Anticipating the next chapter, we may note that the years between 1907 and 1914, sometimes called the ‘Years of Reaction’, were characterized by a stalemate between the new parliament, known as the *duma*, and the government, and a retreat from political reform. At the same time, the regime came under fire from groups that had traditionally been its social support, namely, the nobility and the Orthodox Church. However, these same years also saw the growth of a civil society, evident in the expansion of the press, the proliferation of voluntary societies, and in a new consumer culture. So despite the dampening of hopes for political reform, there were reasons to think that in the years up to 1914 Russia might be moving away from revolution, as

the countryside quietened, as industry revived after 1910, and as Russia's armed forces were strengthened. The international environment, however, was menacing, and the problems of managing a multinational empire were becoming increasingly acute. If the First World War had not broken out in July 1914, it is possible that the gulf between the common people and the privileged classes, and between the *duma* and the government, might gradually have been bridged. But the war put paid to any such hopes. The demands of 'total war' strained the industrial and agrarian economies and widened the gap between the common people and the privileged classes. It was the combination of utter frustration with the tsar on the part of political elites together with mounting dissatisfaction with food shortages and the burdens of war on the part of the common people that would trigger the February Revolution and bring about the overthrow of the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty.

The great nineteenth-century historian Vasilii Kliuchevskii once remarked that the fundamental characteristic of Russia's history was colonization on a boundless and inhospitable plain.² Lacking natural frontiers, Russia's landlocked plains, backward economy, and poverty-stricken peasantry made it vulnerable to invasion, as the Poles demonstrated in the seventeenth century, the Swedes in the eighteenth, and the French in the nineteenth. Each invasion was repelled, but at ever greater cost in terms of mobilizing human and material resources, with the result that an ever more powerful and imperial autocratic state was forged. While Russian colonists moved through the steppe and tundra as far as the Pacific, the dynastic-autocratic state steadily expanded south into Ukraine and the Caucasus, while to the north victory over Sweden led to the incorporation of the Baltic territories. In the course of the nineteenth century Poland and Central Asia were also swallowed up. Into the middle of the nineteenth century, with few resources, the autocracy managed to rule its unwieldy continental empire largely by co-opting non-Russian elites, but the imperial ambition of the rising European powers during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, impelled by the grab for territory, raw material, and markets, and underpinned by heavy industry, railways, steamships, and telegraphs, threatened Russia's borderlands and put immense strain on traditional techniques of imperial rule. Britain, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, and Russia strove through alliances to maintain the fiction of a balance of power, but great-power relations in the decade up to 1914 became 'an inherently risky game that included significant elements of bluff and gambling and ... that largely revolved around calculations about the power of rivals and their willingness and ability to back up their claims with force'.³

After defeating Napoleon in 1812, Russia had enjoyed international pre-eminence in Europe, but this was shattered by the Crimean War (1853–6) when France and Britain intervened on the side of the Ottoman empire to thwart Russia's expansion into the Mediterranean. Following the Treaty of Paris, which denied Russia the right to a navy or land fortifications on the Black Sea, Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, second son of Nicholas I, reflected: 'We cannot deceive ourselves any longer. We are both weaker and poorer than the first-class powers, and furthermore poorer not only in material resources but also in mental resources, especially in matters of administration.'⁴ Defeat, however, precipitated the launch of a far-reaching programme of reforms under Alexander II (1855–81), the most significant of which

was the abolition of serfdom in 1861. This was supplemented by judicial reforms, which included establishing justices of the peace and limited trial by jury, along with military reforms, which included the introduction of universal conscription, the overhaul of military administration, and the setting up of cadet—junker—schools. Crucially important was the establishment of local government institutions known as ‘zemstvos’ and municipal dumas in the towns. Had these reforms been carried forward, the chances of revolution in 1905 would have been much diminished. But in 1881 Alexander was assassinated by a member of the terrorist People’s Will organization, and his son, Alexander III, reversed the liberalizing drive of his father.

The reforms of Alexander II had done little to stem Russia’s declining fortunes in the international arena. Following the severe defeat of Turkey in the war of 1877–8, Russia’s gains in the Black Sea and on the Bulgarian and Caucasus fronts were whittled down by the Congress of Berlin in 1878 when Chancellor Otto von Bismarck reduced the territory of independent Bulgaria, created with Russian help, and granted Austria-Hungary, Russia’s chief rival for influence in the Balkans, the right to administer the Ottoman provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. These concessions enraged pan-Slav opinion in Russia, which clamoured to seize Constantinople, former bastion of Orthodox Christianity, and control of the straits between the Black Sea and the Dardanelles. Bismarck’s orchestration of the Congress underlined the threat now posed to Russian expansion by a recently unified and economically powerful Germany. Russia’s continuing concern about the threat posed by Germany led in 1894 to the alliance with France, which stipulated that if one of the parties in the rival Triple Alliance (comprising Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) should attack France or Russia, the other would go its defence. France would remain Russia’s principal ally down to 1917, providing her with extensive financial and military assistance in the interim.

When war came, however, it came not from the west but from the east. On 8 February 1904 the Japanese navy launched a surprise attack on the Russian fleet moored outside Port Arthur in Manchuria. From the 1850s Russia had been steadily encroaching on the territory of China, as the Qing dynasty declined; the founding of Vladivostok in 1860 was a sign of Russia’s intention to establish its hegemony in the Far East, something that the British viewed with alarm. Japan, which had embarked on its own course of modernization at roughly the same time as Russia under Alexander II, had made great strides in industrialization and in creating a national conscript army and a centralized bureaucracy, and increasingly it looked for raw materials, markets, and prestige to Korea and Manchuria. In 1891 Finance Minister Sergei Witte, with the backing of the future tsar, Nicholas II, inaugurated the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway, partly as a means to encourage resettlement of peasants from the overcrowded black-earth provinces of central Russia and partly to consolidate Russian control of the Far East. Following China’s defeat by Japan in the war of 1894–5, Russia pressured the Qing government to allow it to build the Chinese Eastern railway as a shortcut for the Trans-Siberian railway through northern inner Manchuria via Harbin to Vladivostok. In 1898, Russia began to build a southern spur of the railway from Harbin through the Liaodong peninsula to the warm-water naval base that it had begun to create at Lüshun, known as Port Arthur. Russia’s expansion into Manchuria coincided with Japan’s seizure of Korea, following its victory in the Sino-Japanese

war, and brought the two imperial powers into conflict. In 1898 the Naval Ministry demanded 200 million rubles on top of its annual budget of almost 60 million (the budget of the Ministry of Agriculture was just 40.7 million rubles in 1900) in order to ensure the superiority of its Pacific Fleet over the Japanese navy.⁵ But the Japanese did not intend idly to stand by. In February 1904 they attacked Port Arthur, eventually forcing the Russians to send another fleet to China which, after an epic 18,000-mile voyage, was obliterated at the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905. Public disgust at the humiliating series of defeats served to harden opposition to the regime at a time when there was mounting clamour for political and social reform.

Like all empires, the Russian empire was a vast conglomeration of different ethnicities—well over one hundred—and religious confessions. The 1897 census showed that although Russians considered themselves the dominant political, religious, and cultural force in the empire, they were in fact a minority demographically (if one excludes Ukrainians and Belorussians), making up only 44 per cent of the population of 122.6 million inhabitants.⁶ The empire was ruled on the principle of difference, with the Russian as well as non-Russian peoples defined in terms of social estate (*soslovie*), religion, and—for non-Russians—the hard-to-translate category of *inorodtsy*, ‘persons of other origin’, a category originally applied only to the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of Siberia but gradually extended to all non-Slav peoples.⁷ The heterogeneity of the empire was evident too, in the complex criss-crossing of ethnic, religious, and social divisions. Ukrainians, for example, were divided between Ukrainian and Russian speakers, between the Uniate (Greek Catholic) and Orthodox faiths, and between those under Russian rule and those under Austrian rule in Galicia (where they were known as Ruthenes).⁸ In addition, in the nine majority-Ukrainian provinces there were Jewish, Polish, German, and Tatar minorities.

Historically, as this dynastic-aristocratic empire expanded across Kliuchevskii’s ‘boundless and inhospitable plain’, it ensured domestic stability by incorporating non-Russian elites as co-rulers of the borderlands, by tolerating a panoply of administrative and judicial forms, and by respecting religious diversity (notably with respect to Islam).⁹ As the borderlands of the empire came under pressure from rival powers—Ukraine literally means ‘borderland’—concerns about security intensified. Increasingly, the existence of different modes of internal governance was perceived as a problem. From the 1880s especially, this spurred the state into undertaking greater centralization and uniformization of administration. One dimension of this policy of homogenization was the policy (or, more accurately, the policies) of Russification. After putting down the Polish uprising of 1863, a drive to impose Russian language and culture got under way, which was especially vigorous in the western borderlands and the Baltic littoral. In 1881 the use of Ukrainian was banned in schools and in 1888 in all official institutions. Enforcement of the Russian language and of the Orthodox faith was designed to integrate Ukrainians, Belorussians, Lithuanians, and others into the dominant Russian culture. Poles and Jews, however, were seen as the groups most antipathetic to Russian values, and were most subject to discriminatory legislation, right down to 1917. At the same time, there was recognition in parts of government that if Russification were pushed too hard in areas such as education or employment, it

might produce a backlash. In other regions, Russification took a less aggressive form: in the Volga–Urals region, for example, it entailed fragmenting a pan-Muslim identity by increasing the prestige of Russian language, culture and institutions yet fell far short of cultural assimilation.¹⁰ In Central Asia, however, the mode of rule remained unambiguously colonial. A series of harsh military campaigns between the mid-1860s and the mid-1880s swallowed up lands as far south as Fergana, although the khanates of Bukhara and Khiva were allowed to preserve a modicum of independence as Russian protectorates. In the Caucasus, too, brutal wars of conquest of the mountain peoples and growing official hostility to Islam also produced a classically colonial form of rule, with officials stressing the need for the ‘Russian element’ to spearhead the colonization of peoples perceived to be less ‘civilized’.¹¹

Despite such conquest, because of the variation in forms of rule over the non-Russian peoples, historians are no longer inclined to see the tsarist empire as a ‘prison house of nations’, as Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, future leader of the October Revolution, styled it. They tend instead to emphasize modes of accommodation with non-Russians, as well as modes of repression.¹² This principle of differentiation allowed the tsarist government considerable flexibility in its mode of rule, assigning different groups different privileges and obligations. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a perceptible shift towards seeing empire in national rather than dynastic terms, with ethnic categories tending to squeeze out estate and confessional categories. Indeed the 1897 census for the first time tentatively deployed the politically sensitive category of ‘nationality’.¹³ The official preference was still to use the legal category of *inorodtsy*, but that term had come to resonate with a sentiment of cultural otherness and also, at least in the eye of the self-defined ‘Russian element’, with a sense of threat to the integrity of the state. By the twentieth century, therefore, the empire had become an unstable compound of a dynastic-aristocratic empire (what Kappeler calls a ‘Hausmacht’), a nationalizing state, and a colonial regime (the last most evident in Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus).¹⁴ Nevertheless down to 1917 it continued to define itself as *rossiiskaia*, as a state containing all the peoples of the Russian lands, rather than as *rusaskaia*, that is, as ethnically Russian.¹⁵

Nationalism was on the rise in Russia’s borderlands, and would emerge in the course of the 1905 Revolution as another destabilizing factor threatening the continuance of autocracy. The nationalist challenge was in part a response to policies of Russification—especially in Ukraine and Poland. More fundamentally, it was a response to modernization, a highly mediated expression of the emergence in the non-Russian areas of urbanized, educated elites responding to modern communications and the expansion of the market and political constraints. At root it expressed the growing conviction of urban (and some rural) intellectuals and of elements of the middle classes that non-Russian peoples possessed the right, by virtue of common history, language, cultural practices, or religion, to separate from their alien rulers and create a state having its own autonomy and territory that represented their ethnic community. Nevertheless non-Russian nationalisms were not a prime factor weakening the Russian empire until the First World War.¹⁶

Autocracy and Orthodoxy

Nicholas II came to the throne in 1894 (see [Figure 1.1](#)). He was an aloof, quiet man whose world centred on his wife and family. His diaries contain little about affairs of state, mainly comprising laconic remarks on family life, his physical fitness, hunting, or the weather.¹⁷ Nicholas believed that autocratic power had been bestowed upon him by God and he was resolute in resisting efforts to circumscribe that power by law or constitution. Even after the October Manifesto, which appeared to establish a constitutional monarchy, had been promulgated, Article One of the Fundamental Laws of 1906 declared, 'The Emperor of All Russia is an autocratic and unrestricted monarch. To obey his supreme authority, not only out of fear but out of conscience, God Himself commands.'¹⁸ Nicholas looked on himself as a father whose duty it was to protect his people. Hostile to educated society, he looked to resacralize the monarchy, imagining himself as bound in a mystical union with the Russian people through faith and a common history. Increasingly he looked for spiritual guidance to holy men, such as Grigorii Rasputin, a faith healer revered by the common people, who from 1906 exercised extraordinary influence in court circles. He was hostile to bureaucracy as a principle of government, and his ministers, who no longer came primarily from the higher nobility or army backgrounds, found it hard to gain his attention. The entire system depended on having a strong leader to coordinate its operations, yet Nicholas did not even have a personal secretariat that could prioritize the issues with which he had to deal.



Figure 1.1 Nicholas II, Alexandra, and their family.

Despite its panoply of military and administrative power, the tsarist state was essentially weak, although certainly not ineffective. Central government had limited material and human resources at its disposal, its tax base was narrow, its administration was understaffed, and it was impaired by overlapping jurisdictions, vaguely defined areas of competence, corruption, and rank inefficiency. Through the course of the nineteenth century, but especially under Alexander II in the 1860s, there was recognition that if the autocracy were to compete successfully with rival powers and cope with the ever growing demands on government, the reform and strengthening of administrative structures was vital. Special commissions were set up to discuss administrative incapacity, lack of coordination between ministries, and corruption, and these generated mountains of paperwork. But projects and laws were drafted, only to be shelved. Nicholas II's two most outstanding ministers, Sergei Witte, Minister of Finance, and Pëtr Stolypin, Minister of the Interior, both recognized that administrative reform was necessary. Witte believed that an autocracy governed by the rule of law and by formal administrative procedure could achieve economic modernization and maintain social stability. And after the 1905 Revolution, Stolypin hoped to see the monarch retain his authority while working with the new duma, confidently declaring that it had parted from the 'old police order of things'.¹⁹