Chapter 21

THE SEDIMENTARY SOCIETY

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THE GREAT HISTORIAN V. O. Kliuchevskii found the key to Russian society in the relative simplicity of its social forms in comparison with Western Europe. But in writing his magisterial history of Russia he revealed a degree of complexity that belied his disarming formula. The apparent contradiction stems from the standard of comparison. Some elements of complexity in Russian society had no counterparts in the experience of the West. Moreover, the definition of society in nineteenth-century social history may have been too confining. If we make the effort to explore the unique features of Russian history and at the same time expand the boundaries of social history, we may arrive at a more comprehensive picture of Russia's social structure on the eve of revolution.

BOUNDARIES AND BOUNDARY CROSSINGS

Social history ought to resemble a mobilization center for intellectual forces on the march rather than a field so narrowly defined that it discourages boundary crossings. At its core lie questions about the definition, function, cohesion, collective action, and interaction of human conglomérations assembled into classes, estates, elites, status, and interest groups. But social historians ought not restrict themselves to examining the activity of those groups solely within the socioeconomic sphere. The dynamics of social groups penetrate political institutions, for example, filling them with social content, profoundly affecting their formal, legal-administrative structures, and often transforming them beyond the intentions of their original architects.

To be sure, social groups are not impervious to changes in their encounters with institutions; there is always a reciprocal though rarely equal influence of one upon the other. In Imperial Russia the institutional structures outside the rulership itself, that is, the autocratic power, tended to be fragile and vulnerable to social pressures over long periods of time. Most administrative departments were short-lived or changed their functions. After a hundred years of experience with collegial rule, colleges gave way to ministries. The nature of

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the government relied more and more on their entrepreneurial skills to stimulate productivity and mobilize foreign capital. It was obliged to surrender some of its control over the economy. By the end of the century the interpenetration of capitalist entrepreneurs and the financial bureaucracy engendered ambiguous loyalties. At least in the economics ministries, it became difficult to determine whether state policies were shaping social values or vice versa. In light of the crosscurrents within the bureaucracy and external social pressures upon it, to what extent can we speak of the state as a cohesive organism with a unified outlook by the end of the imperial period?

The state had legislated for centuries to define a social organization for the peasantry, but it was dealing with an elusive substance. Konstantin Kavelin described it as "Kaluza dough," malleable enough in form but possessing its own weight, texture, mass, and resistance—above all resistance. Composed of elements that do not change readily under pressure alone, Kaluza dough can be shaped and molded but it also seeps through cracks or spills over edges or fragments, and it is a water-tight container, least of all one spread out "over the thinly settled Russian plain." The state had virtually no effect on peasant culture; it left intact peasant customary law, right down to the end of the Old Regime; it did not attempt to run the schody, the rough and ready assemblies that settled internal peasant affairs. The state fixed the amount of taxes and the number of recruits that the peasants apportioned and gathered for it. It punished disobedience and rebellion. Beyond that the state had little to do with the peasants in ordinary times; it was a kind of absentee government.

Despite the legislation that constrained peasant movements both before and after Emancipation, there were always large numbers of peasants on the move. There were wanderers and pilgrims, otkhozya seeking work, colonists, both legal and illegal. Even before the abolition of serfdom, small but significant numbers drifted into the cities and penetrated other social categories, the meshchansko, the merchant, and the working class. The government did not encourage these movements; to an extent they even feared them as signs of erosion within the peasant commune. But it could not stop them. As the government struggled to increase peasant productivity while maintaining stability, it conceded more and more to the egalitarian and collectivist features of peasant life. In the end the state appeared to have been more arbitrary than powerful, as even historians of the state school admitted. Early in his distinguished career, Paul Milutinov described the Russian state as having "an enormous influence on social organization" so that, in contrast with the West,
"Russian history was locked in by a strong state power." After the revolution, a sad and wiser man, he lamented in his postmortem of the Old Regime that on "the plasma-like quality of the people the marks of history are only weakly and fragmentarily printed." 

If social historians are bold enough to cross boundaries into institutional and legal history they should also march in the opposite direction toward culture defined in its broadest anthropological sense to include institutional norms and material artifacts as well as values, belief systems, and attitudes. The social historian has two objectives here: first to analyze the ideology of the specific reference group, that is, class, estate, elite, and so on; the second, to identify those common elements of a national culture that transcend social divisions and provide a network of shared social values. Until recently, historians of Imperial and early Soviet Russia permitted the Russian intelligentsia to speak for the nation and also, to the limited extent that they were permitted to speak at all, the non-Russian intelligentsia to speak for their separate peoples. But the voices of the inarticulate are beginning to be heard. It is becoming clear that numerous subcultures in Russian life associated first with the soslovie but also with certain regions and the religious sectarians. The formal organization of the soslovie was a creation of the state; but their soslovie culture content preceded structure and evolved autonomously. This was true of the peasantry above all. Peasant monarchism, popular religion, customary law, and the entire elusive peasant mentality frustrated and bewildered officials and intellec-
tuals alike. Perhaps the artists came closest to understanding, but they too translated the peasant culture into their own aesthetic vocabulary. The peasantry was not simply a primitive society awaiting enlightenment, but a complex culture with a self-awareness of its interests that shaped attitudes toward God, nature, authority, land use, and education.

This is not to argue that the peasants possessed a uniform, monolithic cul-
ture. There were striking regional and ethnic differences. There was, for example, a very distinctive regional culture of the north where in the counties of serfdom and large estates strong local traditions survive into the late twentieth century. Here much of the ancient, oral culture of the peasantry survived as exemplified by the byline of Onega Province; here wooden architecture flourished with its challenge to official Orthodoxy (as in the fantastic multi-domed Cathedral of the Intercession of Kizhi). The North was a great refuge of the Old Belief; it produced many of the original colonists of Siberia who, transplanted to their new homes, carried on the independent traditions of their an-
cestral origin. 

In the cities and provincial towns a variety of subcultures clustered around the merchant, mesheschastvo, and the emerging proletariat that had no sos-
lovie tradition behind it. The insular life of the merchant with its patriarchal family structure, traditional religious outlook, and conservative business methods was only beginning to break down at the end of the imperial period, and then only among a few elite families. The mesheschastvo remains a myster-
ious urban subculture, barely explored, but surprising in its association with the radical left in the revolutionary years of the twentieth century. Surprising, in the sense that its counterparts in Western Europe were associated with more movements of the radical right during the same period. The rediscovery of the worker-intellectuals and the many shades of cultural difference among the workers, distinctions of craft, skills, life-styles, introduce large and important differences of outlook and values into an urban landscape that has been far too long rendered flat and featureless.

The relationship between the subcultures of groups and soslovie and the national culture is bound to be complex. At each level one cluster of values is conscious and codified, while another cluster remains unconscious, inarticu-
late but deeply imbedded in the behavior of individuals and collectives. In exploring the dimensions of subcultures and national culture the social historian must overcome the temptation of drawing too sharp a line between high culture or "the great tradition" and popular culture or "the little tradition." In Russian society the constant interpenetration of the two kinds of cultural expression makes such a radical distinction highly arbitrary and misleading.

The social distance between the upper classes and the peasant masses was never so great in Russia as in Western Europe.

At all periods in Russian history mediators abounded between the two cul-
tures. Up to the sixteenth century the wandering minstrels (skomorokhi) medi-
ated. Peasantry terfs on rural estates and even in town houses played a remarkably consistent role in transmitting the tales and songs of peasant Rus-
sia to their young charges—from Pushkin to Vladimir Nabokov and Glinka to Stravinsky. In the nineteenth century the "natural amateur" (samorodok) could be met in all walks of life in the towns, performing for friends, occa-
sionally making a career in the theater, but always mediating between popular and high culture, between the peasants and lower-class urban masses. Critics noted the subtle gradations of mixed styles in popular music from the oral tradition throughout the accompanying folk song, the romance, the art song with folk overtones to the conservatory culture. Similarly, gradations could be found in architecture. In all forms of cultural expression the exchange of influences was reciprocal. High culture penetrated into the world of the folk

1 P. N. Milukov, Ocherki po istoriia russkoi kul'tury, 5th ed. (St. Petersburg, 1904), 1: 133–
34; Milukov, Istoriia russkoi revoliutsii (St. Petersburg, 1921), 1: 12–17.

song and epic, even into the design of the peasant wooden hut (izba). The idea that peasant culture was "horizontal" needs to be seriously reconsidered.6

Elements of Cohesion in the National Culture

Once these interactions have been clarified, the social historian faces additional tasks in evaluating the relative strength of subcultures and the national culture as a measure of social cohesion and social fragmentation. Three powerful strands in the culture of the dominant elites percolate down irregularly and unevenly into the mass of the population: the imperial idea, the ethic of social service, and the commitment to industrialization. They constitute what might be called the Petrine legacy. First, Rossiskaia imperia, the unique imperial idea, combined three interrelated imperatives: in order to be a great power, Russia had to be a multicultural power; the Russians had a civilizing mission in Asia similar to that of Western Europe but one that accepted the mingling of races; the dominant Great Russian culture had to tolerate a degree of cultural pluralism under the umbrella of Orthodoxy but occasionally outside it, as in the case of the Lutheran Baltic Germans, Jews, and some Muslim people of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The idea of the multicultural empire was rooted in the early history of the Muscovite state, the legacy of steppe politics, and the struggle for succession over the Mongol Empire. Without abandoning this tradition, Peter reoriented its main thrust to the West. Absorption of the Baltic territories and domination of Poland became cardinal principles of state policy that acquired a mass base in the nineteenth century during the surge of Great Russian nationalism that confronted the Polish rising in 1863. It acquired a popular literary veneer in the works of Dostoevsky. The belief that the loss of any significant part of the empire would precede dismemberment and drying power was widespread among the ruling elites and the nationalist right. It is difficult to estimate how deeply this attitude seeped into the popular consciousness. Yet, the opposition to a separate peace in the spring and summer of 1917 by the liberals and most of the socialist left is eloquent testimony to the persistence of the imperial idea even among self-appointed and elected representatives of the majority of the population.

The Russian civilizing mission in Asia was first popularized by the old Caucasus hands in the first half of the nineteenth century and carried on by the


eighteenth, the Georgian, Armenian nobles, and the Kazak-Kirdzhis khans in the nineteenth. In Late Imperial Russia there was never a large number of non-
Russians in the army, but in the eighteenth century Kalmyk and Russian cavalry units were used as irregular troops. In times of crisis special units were raised from the tribes (inordodzis). Caucasian tribesmen were particularly valuable.

During the Russo-Turkish War the creation of new formations increased their number to twenty-four thousand. Although concerns over internal security discouraged recruitment of draftees from Central Asia into regular army units, the most famous case of Kirdzh and Kazak entered the military and served with distinction. The Omsk Cadet Corps, for example, was an important source of Russianization and education for sons of Siberian and Central Asian khans and begs. The most famous graduate from the tribe was the distinguished explorer, naturalist, and military officer Ch. Valikhanov, son of a Kirdzh khans who sought to combine elements of European (Russian) civilization with the preservation of his own culture.6 By the turn of the twentieth century these policies had begun to fray, and then in 1905 most of them were undone under the pressure of anti-Russian urban movements led by native intelligentsia. But it is well to recall that the policy of co-opting non-Russian elites probably delayed the emergence of ethnic consciousness and then restricted it mainly to the cities with the result that autonomous movements in 1905 and again during the Russian civil war found little resonance, and then mainly outside the urban centers.

A second theme of the Petrine legacy may be called the imperative of social service. Repeated efforts by the state to reconstruct political and social institutions, a veritable tradition of reform, alternated with repression and rebellion in the political culture of Imperial Russia. Initially the Petrine concept of service was absolutely tied to the state as opposed to society. Yet there were latent possibilities for the evolution of this relationship toward broader social aims. Although Peter’s views on education were primarily practical, even technological, in orientation, he was also concerned with manners and attitudes, dress and deportment, thus opening the way for penetrating into the mentality of the educated elite of a nonmaterial culture from the West. Western thought introduced secular ideas of ethical restraint on arbitrariness to replace the weakened moral authority of the Orthodox Church. Peter’s administrative scheme also combined hierarchy and mobility. The social system of service classes and the Table of Ranks favored the social and political hegemony of the dvorianstvo, but it did not exclude other social groups from acquiring education, rank, and status.

A great political struggle over access to service and education lasted


throughout the life of the monarchy. In the nineteenth century, for example, the educational reforms of 1803–1809 oscillated between greater social openness favored by Stroganovs and a socially restrictive system of education and state service favored by the aristocracy. In the 1840s Nicholas virtually militarized the institutions of higher learning and the bureaucracy. But the Great Reforms opened up both. In the post-Reform decades conflicts continued over classical versus real schools, Sunday schools for the lower classes, technical education and the relative importance of knowledge and skill as opposed to seniority as the basis for promotion in the bureaucracy. The main result of this seesaw contest was the slow, uneven but inevitable penetration of modernist ideals, a scientific outlook, and variables social types into the bureaucratic ethos. As early as the mid-eighteenth century a “raznochintstvo intelligentsia” flourished briefly in the face of a noble reaction. 7 After the church school reforms in 1808 a steady stream of sons of clergy entered the secular world of the universities and state service. Formal schooling assumed greater importance than private tutoring among the landless nobles’ sons who began to enter state service in increasing numbers in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

By the 1860s the Russian education system was unusual if not unique in Europe. Although it may be going too far to call it, as Leskina-Sverskaia does, “democratic” and “imperious,” the university student body was, nevertheless, more critical in its attitudes toward authority and the social order and more socially variegated than anywhere else on the continent. 8 In this way Russian universities resembled those of the Third World in the second half of the twentieth century rather than the elite class institutions of nineteenth-century Europe. In the Russian lyceums and gymnasia in the universities and higher technical schools, future bureaucrats and radicals rubbed shoulders. It would be a mistake to perceive them as representing two sharply defined antagonistic camps. Only a few dared to cross the line dividing them, and there were many gradations of belief between one pole and the other. They were exposed to the ideas of the same teachers, and the professoriate itself was scarcely uniform in its ideological composition, although the spectrum of beliefs was assuredly more narrow than that of their students. Students of different or as yet unformed beliefs gathered in the scores of kruzhki that offered an informal but passionate setting for the free exchange of ideas and the reading of illegal literature.

How many bureaucrats concealed a radical past, or who at the very least harbored sympathies for ideas they had absorbed as youths? Three dramatic examples come to mind. Count S. S. Lanskoi, Alexander II’s minister of in-

7 V. P. Leskina-Sverskaia, Intelligentsia v Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XIX veka (Moscow, 1913), 249 ff.

8 M. Shrage, Otechestvennicheskaia intelligentsia Rossii v XVIII veke (Moscow, 1965).
If the service ethic was pronounced among bureaucrats, how much more deeply did it sink into the mentality of the professions? The emergence of the legal, medical, and engineering professions as autonomous bodies standing outside the bureaucratic hierarchy was a slow and gradual process that only began in the second half of the nineteenth century. But by the end of the century the professions represented an intermediate strata between the radical intelligentsia and the bureaucracy, blurring the edges of its boundaries with both groups. They shared the same social and educational origins, the same cultural and intellectual heritage. The history of their dedication to social service particularly in local government still lies buried in the massive documentation of the local and provincial zemstvos. But their political activism cloaked in moral outrage during the early months of the Revolution of 1905 demonstrated a deep commitment to social justice. The willingness of Russian professional organizations to take a strong political stance in 1905 was not confined to lawyers and teachers but included doctors and engineers as well. Their association with radical social causes provides a striking contrast with their Western European counterparts in the same period.

The third strand in the Petrine legacy was state intervention in economic development. Peter's massive and ruthless mobilization of human and material resources in order to bring Russia into the European great power system built on an earlier tradition of state intervention in the economy. His efforts were more comprehensive, purposeful, and effective. Following his death the crisis atmosphere evaporated and the forced pace diminished, but the state maintained its direct interest in and control over key sectors of the economy—in particular mining, metallurgy, and woolen cloth, all connected with the army. A parallel growth of private industry by merchants, nobles, and peasant entrepreneurs gained ground particularly under the reign of Catherine II. Yet the vigorous participation and common interest of these groups in private enterprise never overcame their profound social differences. They failed to unify in defense of their common interests, and none of them was sufficiently strong to overcome the competition from the other. Moreover, the state economic bureaucracy was unwilling to surrender the economy into private hands. A middle class that in the Western European sense unified the propertied, edu-


cated society never materialized in Russia. A capitalist economy under state tutelage did.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century tsarist officials engaged in the first of many great industrialization debates that occurred throughout modern Russian history. It was ignited by Russian domestic problems combined with transformations in the global economy. Beginning with Catherine a fiscal crisis caused by excessive printing of paper money (assignats) and the pressures of the steam and mechanical revolution in manufacturing taking place in the West seriously threatened Russia's economic well-being. The debate over industrialization centered on two questions: First, when should Russia seek to industrialize at all or remain basically an agricultural country? And second, what should be the role of the state in promoting, encouraging, and actively developing industry? A secondary economic issue, but one of cardinal political importance, questioned which government agency would preside over an industrial policy if it were to be approved and implemented. The debate was interrupted by the war of the Third Coalition against Napoleon, the wave of postwar xenophobia that attacked Western ideas and innovations and the shock of the Decembrist uprising. During most of Nicholas's reign the government adopted a policy of drift, presided over by Count E. F. Kankrin, minister of finance, who worried about the socially disruptive effects of industrialization. The state ownership of industry in the pre-Reform period declined to a small share of the total productive forces, and it was confined mainly to stagnant metallurgical and woolen industries for armaments and uniforms. Yet the state revived the building of canals, financed and built the first railway trunk line between Moscow and St. Petersburg, and maintained a supervisory role over the organization and development of private industry.

A second major industrialization debate opened up in the 1860s over similar sets of questions. By this time the supporters of a more vigorous state-directed industrial policy within the bureaucracy had substantially increased; the lesson of the Crimean defeat was too sobering to ignore. The major opponents of industrialization among the landed nobility could no longer block changes required by the financial and military stability of the state, although from their entrenched position within the bureaucracy they could delay them. But the proponents of industrialization could not agree on the means. Interest groups, centering on competing ministries of state, had independently evolved distinctive ideological positions. The economists in the Ministry of Finance favored a mixed economy in which the government and private entrepreneurs would share risks and apportion functions to achieve fiscal and budgetary stability; the engineers in the Ministry of Transportation supported state investment and

organization of the economy for developmental aims; the military bureaus also favored state control of industry mainly for strategic aims. The lack of coordination among state agencies imposed a stop-and-start pattern of industrialization, but the government persisted in its efforts to avoid falling too far behind the West. It possessed several powerful instruments to promote this progress, including the creation of a central state bank, the control over railroads, concessions, subsidies, state orders for armaments, and a gradually rising protective tariff.

Sergei Witte was able to build on the policy of his predecessors Reitern, Bunge, and Vysnegradsky in Finance and the engineers in Transportation; in his hands the various threads of fiscal, tariff, and railroad policy merged to draft a comprehensive industrial policy. Yet there is now evidence that Russia's industrial growth in the 1890s was as much a continuation of previous trends as a response to its aims and pace as a radical departure from the past. Interrupted by the Russo-Japanese War, Revolution of 1905, and depression, industrial growth revived after 1909 and expanded rapidly after 1912 until the eve of World War I. Toward the end of Witte's tenure a third industrialization debate broke out. The landed interests mobilized for the last time to decry the effects of forced industrialization on the agricultural sector. Witte fell victim to political opposition within the bureaucracy and among the provincial nobles. But his policies were carried on by his successors, and the government's commitment to industrial growth was never in serious doubt.

The industrialization of Russia carried out in an unfavorable geographical environment by a relatively poor country with underdeveloped infrastructure on the periphery of the main global trade routes was, for all its fits and starts, a remarkable achievement. The successors of Peter were not, with a few exceptions, particularly intelligent or perceptive. Yet all of them recognized in one fashion or another that Peter's vision of Russia as a great power was intrinsically linked to Russia's sustained economic growth and that, in the face of its peculiar social structure, the state had to accept prime responsibility for that undertaking. Dedication to that vision held together the most progressive elements of the bureaucracy, army, and commercial and industrial groups. Financial stability and military parity with the most advanced countries were the only guarantees against economic subjugation or political subordination in an age of imperialism. The examples of China and the Ottoman Empire were evident for all who wished to see.

So the Petrine legacy of the imperial idea, the ethic of social service, and the commitment to industrialization provided the mainstay of the dominant political culture that held the empire together as long as it did. At certain criti...
ical or symbolic moments these shared beliefs and values provided a valuable social cement binding the various groups and classes together, if only briefly. Such moments at the end of the imperial period included the Russo-Turkish War, response to the famine of 1891, the death of Lev Tolstoy, and the outbreak of the First World War. But clearly the cohesive power of these combined elements was insufficient in the long run to survive the strains of social conflict and external war.

**ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION**

The countervailing trends of social fragmentation were growing stronger within Russian society at the end of the imperial period. The particularism of the peasantry had not been overcome; its desire for the land was unsatisfied, and its integration into civic society was incomplete. The proletariat had developed a particularism of its own; it had never been accepted as a distinctive social group, never even recognized as a soslovie; it was deprived of the most fundamental right to organize. The vast splintered middle of Russian society—merchants, professionals, clerks, petty shopkeepers, and artisans had no sense of class consciousness and no ability to unify politically. The nobility was steadily losing its landed properties as well as its domination of the higher ranks in the civil and military bureaucracies. Perhaps even more ominous for the stability of the empire, the very top stratum of Russian society—Tsar Nicholas II, the imperial family, and elements of the court and church hierarchy—were turning away from the Petrine legacy. They were looking back toward the seventeenth century, resuming rituals and symbols in which to clothe the monarchy that represented a social, cultural, and psychological rejection of the modern, secular state. Older forms of social identification such as estates (soslovie), status (sotsiatnia), and rank (chin) were growing weaker among broad sections of the population, yet they had by no means disappeared. There were in fact belated attempts to revive them. More important, however, they were not entirely replaced by socioeconomic classes. Soslovie forms survived because they performed useful functions for both the state and social groups. Government officials perceived them as valuable self-regulating administrative units in preparing legislation, regulating social mobility, maintaining public order, and apportioning rights and privileges in relationship to state service. In defining the franchise in 1864 and 1870 for local bodies, zemstvos, and town dumas and in 1905 for the proposed consultative (Bulygin) duma, soslovie was employed in combination with property qualification. The uneasy coexistence

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necering, and teaching and adapted the particular outlook of their calling; the commercial-industrial entrepreneurs, the wealthiest nobles, who can be subdivided into the passive investors or rentiers with capital placed in private railroads, metallurgical industry in Urals and the south, oil, machinery and shipbuilding, and the landlords who were occupied with distilling, sugar refining, milling, and beer making; and finally the bulk of the landowners who produced grain, cattle, and some industrial crops for the market.

These were not mutually exclusive groups. But the nobles themselves recognized the difficulty of reconciling the distinctive interests and outlook that lodged at the core of each. In 1897 the Novgorod marshal of the nobility admitted that "our Russian nobility includes people of such varied religions, nation, economic and regional character that to unite them at the present time is impossible: the interests of each noble is more fully expressed by the interest of the occupation to which he belongs than to the interests of his estate (sokolov)." The same sentiment was expressed at the Sixth Congress of the Union in 1810 by N. A. Titkov in his report: "Ob otdelennom dvorianstva na pochve ekonomicheskoi." (Concerning the unity of the nobility on economic grounds.)

The social particularism of these groups is mostly dramatically demonstrated in the codelessness of a provincial landed gentry at the turn of the century. The government's commitment to industrialization and the greater bureaucratic intrusion into the countryside for administrative and fiscal reasons stimulated a strong reaction in the countryside. Drawn back to the land by a dual threat to their financial well-being and their psychological attachment to their estates, the landowners began, in Leopold Haimson's words, "to create for the first time in Russian history a provincial society." At first they accepted the liberal leadership of a minority that acted through the zemstvos to defend the rural way of life against the tax and tariff policies of the bureaucratic industrializers. Then, after the Revolution of 1905 had demonstrated the complete bankruptcy of their paternalistic patronage of the peasantry, they rejected constitutional reform. Turning in on themselves, they became increasingly isolated from the rest of the nobility and indeed from Russian society in general.

The emergence of a bureaucratic ethos based on the professionalization of the civil service did not prevent the appearance of social fissures within this group. All bureaucratic systems exhibit signs of departmental rivalries and infighting. But the absence in Imperial Russia of a cabinet system and a prime minister until the last decade of the monarchy intensified the fissiparous tendencies. Each minister enjoyed virtual autonomy under the direct authority and supervision of the Tsar. Thus the individual ministers were no longer drawn from the small elite of court aristocrats and personal favorites of the autocrat; they were, in general, professionally trained and career oriented. They gathered around them similar men whose personal and professional loyalties were greatly reinforced one another. The ministers became the core of bureaucratic interest groups.

The broader the functions of a ministry, the larger its claims of centrality in the administrative machinery, the greater its temptations to set the general tone for state policy. In late Imperial Russia major contenders for hegemony in the government were ministries of finance, interior, security services, war, and transportation. In addition to defending their own departmental turf, the ministers attempted to colonize or subordinate lesser ministries or occasionally major major ministries. The most ambitious efforts aimed at nothing less than a de facto unified government controlled by a single minister who had successfully gained ascendancy over all. Such attempts were made notably by Petru Shuvalov in the 1860s and 1870s and by Sergei Witte in the 1890s. The intensity of the bureaucratic infighting grew as the field of debate widened into the public arena. The emergence of a mass press in the 1860s, the moderation of censorship, and the growing complexity of issues, particularly in areas like economic development and educational policy, broke down the insularity of government. The wider the debates over state policy were, the greater was the tendency of government officials to argue their case in public.

The autocrat did not discourage bureaucratic infighting, unless it threatened open disruption. Interministerial rivalries kept power in the hands of the tsar. Moreover, the selection of ministers was frequently based, not on ideological considerations, but on personal contact and recommendations, service records, and evidence of loyalty to the throne. The tsar himself did not seek to create a unified government under his own leadership. It was no longer a question of his direct, personal rule. The massive flow of state documents—the complexities of administering—had grown far beyond the capacity of one man to manage, let alone understand. Thus, the tsar became an arbiter of the contrasting interests; a managerial tsar, he made no sustained effort to overcome the fragmentation at the apex of Russian politics.

At the other end of the social spectrum the growth of capitalist relations in the countryside accelerated the economic differentiation among the peasantry. But the extent and meaning of the process was, and remains, a matter of dispute. Despite its many ties to urban and even educated society, the peasantry...
remained strongly particularistic in its outlook and customs. Overall the peasant mentality remained dominated by the land question and the exclusion of larger civil and political issues, although there were regional exceptions, especially in the Baltic littoral and Siberia where peasants began to take a broader view of politics at the end of the imperial period. 27

There were exceptional reasons for the exceptions: higher literacy and the nationalities question in the Baltic; the absence of a landlord class and the influence of sectarians in Siberia. In the succession of great social crises that shattered Russian society from 1905 through the civil war, the mass of the Great Russian peasantry concentrated in the central agricultural provinces and radiating outward along their lines of migration and settlement consistently ignored the blandishments of the political parties, yet it was totally incapable of forming a party of its own. Unwilling to accept leadership from outside its ranks, it was unable to provide it from within. This was a classic example of Marx’s contemptuous description: a sack of potatoes, jumbled together but lacking any real unity.

By contrast, the factory workers undoubtedly constituted the most socially cohesive and highly conscious class in late Imperial Russia. They had no archaic past to combat; there had never been a workers’ slosovie. The older crafts’ (remesel’naia) tradition, to be sure, had a distinctive social organization dating back to Peter’s time and acquired slosovie form from 1802, but this was declining by the end of the nineteenth century. It would be an error, however, to perceive the factory workers as an undifferentiated mass of people. Differences in skill, education, and ties to the countryside created subgroups among the workers even within some of the largest plants. The more highly skilled, better educated workers, who no longer retained any ties to the countryside, flaunted their own life-style and considered themselves much superior to their less fortunate brethren who worked at unskilled manual labor for smaller wages and kept a peasant passport, send remittances to the village, and still held communal strips. These distinctions showed up dramatically in the greater willingness of the skilled worker to join unions and participate in political or revolutionary activities in the decades preceding the revolutions of 1917. 28 Yet the government did not even try—as in the case of the Stolyapin reforms with the peasantry—to take advantage of potential divisions among the working class by extending the basic rights to organize as a means of winning the top strata over to peaceful methods of social action. Faced to legalize unions and strikes in 1905 under revolutionary pressure at a moment of weakness, it diluted and virtually crippled those rights in the years of reaction that followed. Thus, for different reasons the mass great of the Russian population, the nizy in both the cities and the countryside, were forced into taking more active, coordinated, and violent social action than they might otherwise have done.

It is tempting to tidy up this picture of social fragmentation of Imperial Russia by introducing that delightfully disarming panacea known as the transitional period. The argument here is that Russia was passing through a prolonged phase of transformation between a traditional to a modern society, or some such variation of that theme. All the contradictions, anomalies, archaisms, and irregularities can thus be explained or explained away as epiphenomena that accompanied the main process of social change or its residue, survivals (perezhivaniia) of a decaying social formation. At this point, however, it is worth exploring whether the transition period was not so prolonged, incomplete, and abortive that it began to acquire qualities of its own, qualities so marked and persistent that they refused to wither. Indeed, they periodically rose to the surface again, particularly at moments of economic decline, political reaction, or social disruption. In other words, there may be conditions in which what appears to be a transition ceases in fact to become an intermediate stage between two well-defined types of society, asserts its own stubborn character, and takes on a life of its own.

The Sedimentary Society

Fresh perspectives on the nature of late Imperial Russian society might gain inspiration from some kind of synthesis between the two major Russian (and Soviet) historical schools, the juridical and the sociological. If the analytical categories of state and society now appear somewhat artificial, then perhaps the choice between the state or society as the major driving force of Russian history might also appear arbitrary. Still, it is necessary to offer more of an explanation than irregular or unpredictable interplay between the two. The problem was peculiar historical quality, one hesitates to use the term regularity, in their interrelationship. The state pursued an active interventionist course in its attempts to organize and direct the social groups. It is hardly necessary to rehearse the many major and minor instances of this intervention: Peter’s introduction of a wholly new kind of social stratification, Catherine’s attempts to create an urban society and to homogenize the administration of a multinational empire, Alexander’s emancipation of the serfs, the greatest single peaceful liberation and confiscation of noble property in modern European history, the launching of an industrial revolution from above. In witnessing these great historical moments, it is important to give equal time to what the state did not do, to the resistance it encountered, to the partial changes it affected. Unquestionably, each transformation created new social conditions, but at the same time it did not doom or obliterate the social conditions it was designed to replace. As a result of this process, what might be termed a sedi-
The sedimentary society.

In Russia, the impermanence of things prevailed on the surface, and deep continuities lay below it.

Nothing demonstrates more vividly the permanent impermanence of change in Russia than the drafting of the law codes. To turn once again to the historians of the juridical school for instruction, the law was, in their eyes, the essence of the state principle, the most powerful instrument of social control wielded by the state in its efforts to tame a restless and often rebellious population. Yet K. V. Kavelin, a leading exponent of the juridical school, presented in his Nizhnei rosskogo sudebnoi stroeniia an extended argument that the autonomous development of Muscovite legislation stemmed “directly from popular custom.” The first codification of 1649 (Ulozhenie) was simply a systematic arrangement that Kavelin called “the ancient juridical way of life” (by)—the customs of those regions that subsequently became a part of the Great Russian state. According to him these origins explained why the Ulozhenie and all subsequent Muscovite legislation possessed a “casuistic character.” That is to say, the law code did not explicitly state the juridical principles upon which the mass of legislation that had been collected and arranged within its pages was based. As social relations governed by civil law became more complex in the latter half of the seventeenth century, it likewise became more difficult to apply customary law to individual cases as in the past. At the same time, the Ulozhenie did not contain a set of abstract legal definitions upon which individual cases could be adjudicated. The confusion over the interpretation of the law did not originate with the introduction of foreign legal principles, as Slavophile publicists insisted. Instead, what was amiss was the failure to apply any fixed standing until 1905. There was no lack of effort to reform the social structure, but the nature of the reforms themselves helped frustrate their intention.

In Russia reforms demanding rapid and radical social change have almost invariably been initiated from above, not below. Reforms, most often in response to a systemic crisis that threatened the body politic, were launched without much preparation and without any consultation with the population. The idea that reform was irregular, depending on the unity and determination of the ruling elite, the resistance or indifference of the population, and the distraction of foreign wars or the sudden death of the ruler. Given the arbitrary nature of the autocracy, it was always possible to flood the country with new legislation and advance the most radical kind of innovation. But the very arbitrariness of power deprived the state of a means to make reform permanent—that is, to institutionalize the changes by means of a constitution, rule of law, or even a dominant ideology. Everything that was done could be just as easily undone or, at least, could be hidden. At the same time the lack of guidance from above meant that changes corresponded to its immediate needs. In this situation the impermanence of things prevailed on the surface, and deep continuities lay below it.
did not significantly weaken the organic, historical development of the law. That is, the law remained responsive to changes in social life. Moreover, although Peter’s legislation was characterized by a greater degree of legal precision and self-consciousness, it did not culminate in a comprehensive, systematic digest of laws. Paradoxically, the very absence of an abstract body of legal principles may well have served as the surest guarantee that much of Peter’s legislation survived him. For, as Pavlov-Silovski remarked, the persistence and vitality of Peter’s reforms after his death demonstrated the extent to which his reforms embodied and fulfilled the needs of society or at least its ruling stratum. The results would have been different if he had imposed upon society a set of alien legal norms borrowed from other societies with different historical experiences.  

If we pursue this insight of Kavelin’s it leads to a remarkable conclusion about the continuity in the relationship between law and society throughout the imperial period and into the early Soviet period. The very persistence of customary law as the basis for legal principles prevented a codification of law as understood in countries whose legal systems were founded on Roman law. The Svoz Zakonov of 1832 was much like its predecessor, the Ulozenie of 1649, a compilation of laws that had not fallen into disuse. Among other things, it clarified and systematized the slobosv system. This had its ironic side. For the code was published just a generation before the Emancipation and Great Reforms fractured the slobosv strata, leaving only a crumbling residue in place. Aside from eliminating repetition and prohibition, the code made no attempt to tamper with the letter of the law. When the codifiers encountered contradictory edicts they simply selected the most recent whether or not it was considered the best. As Richard Wortman has observed, Nicolas I’s “adopted historical and nationalist views... which banished the notion that the law had to conform to universal natural norms.”  
The monarch’s resistance to a rule of law was a long-standing defense of his monopoly of authority, but, paradoxically, it was also a means of preserving the influence of custom upon law particularly in the largely unexamined mass of petty legislation and regulations that had nothing to do with the direct exercise of power in Imperial Russian society but that profoundly affected the daily life of millions of its inhabitants. At this level, perhaps, it would be most fruitful to begin to study the ways in which customs became legal norms through the state’s acceptance of existing social realities rather than to assume that legislation reflected the abstract ideas of order and system that inspired reforming bureaucrats.

The potential usefulness of this method does not end in 1917. E. H. Carr

26 Richard Wortman, The Development of a Russian Legal Consciousness (Chicago, 1976), 43; see also Marc Radel, Michael Spockovsky, Statesmen of Imperial Russia, 38 rev. ed. (The Hague, 1969), 324.

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was perhaps the first to point out that legal principles did not fare well in the early days of the Soviet regime. Extreme suspicion of any legal system during the civil war yielded to the establishment of law codes in 1922 based mainly on the emerging property relations of the New Economic Policy. In neither period was much attention paid to “the far fetched constructions of intellectuals,” in other words to theories of either proletarian or bourgeois law. As a result, gradually prerevolutionary legal norms and practices, which themselves had already grown out of customary law, were reintroduced. One dramatic illustration of this process was the harshness of rural as compared to city courts in dealing with crimes against property and individuals; in these years the peasantry in general shared the view that sentencing was far too lenient.  In Soviet as in autocratic Russia the problem was how to instill the values of the dominant culture—these deeper layers of society that rested underneath the accumulation of superficial social and institutional forms erected from above.

Without wishing to force the sedimentary metaphor, it might be taken one step further by examining a transversal section of the accumulated social layers as they appeared at the end of the monarchy. From this perspective emerges the much larger number of layers that have accumulated within the top strata of society. This concentration may be attributed to the greater vulnerability of the elites to the three major instruments of social change: state legislation, external cultural influences, and market capitalism. The multiplication of social identities was politically debilitating in an autocratic state that was forced to make a rapid transition under the pressure of revolution in 1905 to a parliamentary or constitutional government. The fragmentation of elites was reflected in the proliferation of political parties in 1905 and afterward, their highly unstable character, and the absence of a strong political center on the eve of the revolution.

At the other end of the social spectrum, the peasantry remained relatively more homogeneous in its social organization than the elites. There were, as we have seen, regional differences; the impact of a national market and forced industrialization on the dvor, the commune, and the village was highly disruptive; the Stolypin reforms administered another blow to communal life. Yet when the revolution and civil war blew away the fragile state institutions, broke the urban-rural nexus, and wrecked the market economy, the peasantry moved everywhere in the core provinces of the empire reacted against the most recent socioeconomic trends. They plunged back into an archaic social form, redistributed the land according to the oldest customs of social justice, and emerged more homogeneous than ever before. It even absorbed much of the urban working class that fled famine and the breakdown of social services in the cities. In the case of the peasantry, the accumulated layer of social changes

that affected its fundamental values was much thinner than that of the elites. Thus, the peasantry was spared the excessive fragmentation that weakened and ultimately destroyed the elites in Russia from 1917 to 1920. To transform the peasantry itself required either a long period of gradual absorption into the cultural life and economic system dominated by the cities or a violent, coercive, and sustained attack by the state. This was the choice that the new rulers, like the old, faced in the young Soviet republic.


Chapter 22

RUSSIA’S UNREALIZED CIVIL SOCIETY

SAMUEL D. KASSOW

If the criterion of middle-class identity is the attainment of common political action, then Russia clearly failed to develop a middle class. The unitary vision of the 1905 Liberation Movement and Ribushinsky’s appeal for a new bourgeoisie to assume the mantle of national leadership failed to achieve their goals. Merchants split along regional and ethnic lines, professionals argued over authority and status, writers and intellectuals agonized over where they belonged. Would-be leaders of a new middle class found the right words but emerged with relatively few followers.

In short, those social groups occupying the shifting space between the peasantry and the tiny but still-powerful stratum of the landed nobility failed to find a common political and social identity. But if we look beyond conscious political choices toward more nuanced and complex phenomena—new ideas of space and time, new attitudes toward the role of law and the possibilities of purposeful individual action, the acceptance of new ways of conceptualizing the place of the individual and society—then we can see that a new public culture was indeed developing in Late Imperial Russia. Indeed, if we accept Eley and Blackbourn’s argument that the Kaiserreich was a “bourgeois” society or Eltmin’s “paradox of middle-class development,” then one can at least see a strong case for arguing similar developments in Russia. The rise of voluntary societies, the steady if slow development of respect for property rights, the rapid expansion of higher and secondary education, artistic patronage, the growth of professions, the ritz of a multilayered press, the emergence of the Duma as a forum for political articulation, the unleashing of the social and political assault on the tsarist state, philanthropy, new opportunities afforded by municipal government—all pointed toward the creation of what Habermas would call a “public sphere.”

But this public sphere developed in a specific context, one far removed from nineteenth-century America or even the Bismarckian Reich. A key determinant of this context was the state. The Liberation Movement had found its voice in appealing to an aroused *der Freiheit* to take its place alongside the state as the guardian of the nation’s fate, and the juxtaposition of a creative public battling an obstructionist state remained a stock theme of certain political discourse until the revolution. But in fact the supposed dichotomy between state and society was insufficient to help maintain a sense of