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# The Soviet Union

## A Short History

MARK EDELE



WILEY Blackwell



# The Soviet Union

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Mark Edele

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*For Jane Hansen*





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# Preface

This book tells the story of the Soviet Union's making, evolution, and breakdown. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was the successor to the Romanov Empire, which had broken apart in war and revolution. It became the predecessor of 15 nation states in a region, which once encapsulated my generation's hopes for democratic change in Eastern Europe. Today, it is a hotbed of authoritarianism, crony-capitalism, and war, although democrats still hold their ground. The history of the Soviet Union has been told numerous times, in some very good and some not-so brilliant tomes. Historians have conceived this history as the story of Russia and the Russians, as a tale of the rise and fall of a specific form of modernity, as the instantiation and failure of an ideological project, or as a repressive empire, a "prison house of nations" in the catchy formulation of a 1958 publication that adapted Lenin's description of the Tsarist state for its successor.<sup>1</sup>

This book focuses on three themes: welfare, warfare, and empire. The Soviet Union was a socialist state with the aspiration to build a better, fairer, and more prosperous society than capitalism could. It inspired generations of leftists all over the world and disappointed as many of them over the decades. It promised a superior level of welfare but seldom delivered it. Instead, its second major trait often won out: The USSR was also a police state, which devoted much of its resources to preparation and execution of warfare. A nightmare to liberals and conservatives in the West, it served as a warning to anybody contemplating an alternative to capitalism. Finally, while this country was dominated by Russia and the Russians, it was not identical to them. The Soviet Union was a multinational state, an "empire of nations,"<sup>2</sup> or, indeed, a Red Empire. Following much recent writing, then, this book tries to escape the narrative of Russia = USSR = Russia. Such a Russocentric tale marginalizes all the non-Russian societies and current nation states. It thus obscures, rather than aids, our understanding of the contemporary world in its historical context.

This book is organized chronologically. Part I, *The First Age of Violence*, chronicles the years 1904 to 1924, when the Romanov Empire was unmade in two wars and two revolutions, and then reconstituted as a Bolshevik empire in an immensely destructive civil war. Chapter 1 covers the twilight of the old empire from the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 to the outbreak of World War I a decade later. These were years of political upheaval, with a first revolution in 1905/1906 forcing the Tsar to grant major political concessions without giving up on his claim to autocratic power. They were also years of rapid cultural, social, and economic transformation, providing the contradictions that would explode in the subsequent period, but also containing the possibility for alternative, less dictatorial historical paths.

Chapter 2 chronicles the empire's World War I, all the way through to the German defeat in the west in November 1918. After initial successes against their German, Austrian, and Ottoman foes in 1914, the Tsar's armies increasingly struggled with the demands of modern war. 1915 became a year of military catastrophe when, during the Great Retreat, Russian forces abandoned large swathes of the Romanov's western lands, destroying the country and deporting populations as they went. After a partial stabilization in 1916, political catastrophe followed in 1917. The Tsar was deposed in a first revolution in February, which began the breakdown of the empire. Russia itself was ruled by an uneasy alliance of a caretaker government staffed by liberals with the socialist Petrograd Soviet overseeing its actions. Meanwhile, other regions – Finland, Ukraine, Central Asia, and the Trans-Caucasus – became increasingly autonomous from the imperial center in Petrograd. While the periphery thus started to break away, in the capital, the refusal of the Provisional Government to end the war, the ongoing economic crisis, and the relentless agitation for a more radical revolution by Vladimir Lenin's radical communists (the Bolsheviks) pushed the Petrograd Soviet further and further to the left. In October, the Provisional Government was thoroughly discredited and moderate socialists had lost support among the revolutionary masses of Petrograd. Lenin's men now took power in the name of the Soviet. This second revolution accelerated the imperial breakdown amidst the world war. The further fragmentation of the Tsar's domains would become the major story of 1918. Bolshevik Russia was increasingly restricted to the old heartland around Moscow. The rest of the old empire was ruled either by German occupation troops or their local puppets, by non-Russian politicians, or by competing Russian governments. Once the defeated Germans retreated from Ukraine and the Baltics after their defeat in November 1918, the Russian Empire thus was no more. The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, then, was only one moment in a larger process of military and revolutionary dissolution of the old empire.

However, the Bolshevik revolution was also a beginning, as chapter 3 shows. It tells the story of how and why the Bolsheviks managed to re-gather most of

the old empire under the Red flag. This process was violent: a civil war. We can distinguish several steps, easily summarized by year. 1919 was the year of a struggle between “Reds” and “Whites” – labels deriving from the French Revolution, which can easily mislead, as we shall see. Not only were some of the “Whites” socialists flying the red flag; but in Ukraine and elsewhere, the civil war also had ethnic and national components. From early 1920, the reconquest of the empire continued with the military acquisitions of the Transcaucasian republics, the brutal pacification of Central Asia, a hard-fought war against the new Polish state, and bloody counter-insurgencies against peasant and military rebels in the Bolshevik heartland. By 1923, the new empire was more or less complete, although in some areas fighting continued. The new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was enshrined in the constitution of 1924. It covered much of the old Romanov Empire, except Finland, the Baltic Republics, and Poland.

Part II, *The Interwar Years*, contains only one chapter, which focuses on how the new empire was consolidated during the 1920s. As fighting ended at different moments in different parts of the empire, there is some chronological overlap with the previous chapter. The short “decade” from 1921 to 1928 was a period of economic recovery from the prolonged fighting. State building, strengthening of the dictatorship, and the formalization of the legal and constitutional structure of the new empire were the orders of the day. Yet, the new Bolshevik rulers engaged in fierce political fights about both the further direction of the country and the composition of its leadership team. By 1928, Stalin’s faction had won and proceeded to push the country into its second period of upheaval.

Part III, *The Second Age of Violence*, comprises two chapters, covering the years from 1928 to 1949, a period of renewed internal and external warfare. Chapter 5 shows how Stalin and his men transformed the exhausted empire into a warfare state ready for the next engagement. This transformation came in the form of two extremely violent “revolutions from above” (1928 to 1932 and 1937 to 1938), separated by three years of relative calm in most areas. Chapter 6 then turns to World War II, which began in Asia in 1937, in Europe in 1939, and in the Pacific in 1941. The chapter contains an analysis of the extent and nature of Soviet participation in these interconnected wars: from a defensive posture at its Asian frontier in 1937 to 1939, to aggression in Europe in 1939 to 1941 (when the regathering of the old empire was completed), to catastrophe when the Germans attacked on June 22, 1941, the starting point of the “Great Patriotic War” of the Soviet Union. Once the initiative had been regained in the Battles of Moscow (Winter 1941) and Stalingrad (1942–1943), the Red Army returned to the offensive and won the war in Europe before turning east to help defeat Japan in the summer of 1945. Fighting against local guerilla forces continued along the new and expanded western frontier of the empire well into the 1940s, with a final round of deportations in 1949 marking something of an end point.

In neighboring China, too, the war only ended with the victory of the communists in the civil war in 1949.

Part IV, *From Warfare to Welfare*, is made up of two chapters analyzing how the Soviet Union recovered from the prolonged periods of violence that had shaped its form, character, and content. Chapter 7 describes the years of post-war normalization. Its chronological boundaries overlap with both the previous and the following chapters. The narrative starts with the completed liberation of Soviet territory in 1944, covers the years between the war's end in 1945 and Stalin's death in 1953, as well as the early post-Stalin years when collective leadership of the dictator's closest underlings ran the empire. It ends with Nikita Khrushchev's 1957 victory in what in effect was a prolonged succession struggle. Stalin tried to reconstruct the prewar dictatorial structure at home after the war was won, and he consolidated his empire abroad by surrounding it with nominally independent states in Europe. In Asia, he attempted to continue the pre-1941 tactic of encouraging proxy wars as a means of securing the Soviet Union's "eastern front." This attempt backfired in the Korean War (1950–1953), which threatened to lead to a direct confrontation with the United States. After Stalin's death this war was quickly brought to an end and the dictator's deputies put in place a variety of reforms they had long considered but had not been able to implement as long as the dictator was alive. Now, first attempts were made to dismantle his warfare state and normalize life within the new empire. The political liberalization of the 1950s, however, constantly threatened to undermine the very empire Stalin had built – the foundation of the security of the Soviet project.

Eventually, then, efforts were made to build a socialist welfare state to reward the population for the years of exhausting warfare. The contradictions, dead ends, but also successes of this process are covered in Chapter 8. It begins the years of mature socialism with the pension reform in 1956 and ends it with the start of economic and political reform (*perestroika*) in 1985. It thus covers most of the years Khrushchev was First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1953–1964, until 1957 as part of a leadership team, from then on his own) as well as those of the successors Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982, from 1966 with Stalin's title of "General Secretary"), Iurii Andropov (1982–1984), and Konstantin Chernenko (1984–1985).

The final two chapters, forming Part V, deal with *Imperial Discontent*. From 1985, the new General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, made a concerted attempt to end the Cold War, dismantle the empire of satellites in Europe, and decisively to demobilize the remnants of the Stalinist warfare state. The goal was to finally shift to building a democratic, socialist welfare state within the borders of the Soviet Union. This attempt failed spectacularly. Reform led to crisis, crisis to breakdown, and in 1991 the Union broke apart along national lines. We are still living with the fallout of this momentous event, which created a whole new

## Preface

world of nation states with roots deep in the first and second epochs of violence, but no longer held together by an empire. A short final Chapter 10 serves as an afterword. It sketches the trials and tribulations of the successor states, their struggles with and against democracy, capitalism, authoritarianism, and war.

This book is the result of explaining Soviet history for over a decade to undergraduate students, first at the University of Western Australia, then at the University of Melbourne. My teaching during these years was supported by immensely influential histories written by Geoffrey Hosking, Ronald G. Suny, Alec Nove, and Stephen Lovell, which are listed at the end of this preface together with other useful overviews. Kevin McDermott's "war-revolution model," served as a conceptual starting point and Joshua A. Sanborn's path-breaking *Imperial Apocalypse* inspired the early chapters, with profound implications for the rest of the narrative. The influence of Richard Pipes will be obvious to anybody who has read his classic book on how the Russian Empire was unmade but reborn as the Soviet Union. My views of the pivotal Stalin and his world are informed by Oleg Khlevniuk's and Sheila Fitzpatrick's masterful books. For demographic information I relied heavily on *Naselenie Rossii v xx veke. Istoricheskie ocherki*, 3 vols (Moscow: Rosspen, 2000–2011), as well as the census data now available online at <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/pril.php>. For the 1937 census I consulted V. B. Zhiromskaia, I. N. Kiselev, and Iu. A. Poliakov, *Polveka pod grifom "sekretno": vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1937 goda* (Moscow: Nauka, 1996), and V. B. Zhiromskaia and Iu. A. Poliakov, *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1937 goda: obshchie itogi. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2007). David Stahel, Josh Sanborn, and Ben Mercer read and commented on parts of the manuscript, Elizabeth Galton and Yuri Shapoval on a full draft. Debra McDougall worked persistently on making the penultimate product more readable. Caroline Maxwell ([elmindexing.co.uk](http://elmindexing.co.uk)) took on the task of indexing at short notice and with admirable efficiency. Parts of Chapter 2 were first presented as the Inaugural Hansen Lecture at the University of Melbourne in October 2017. A companion essay to the lecture was published in the *Australian Book Review* (October 2017): 10–15.

That I could step back, reassess, and consolidate what I have learned over a decade was due to an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship (FT140101100). Several chapters were drafted while I was an Academic Visitor at The Australian National University in Semester 2, 2016. I would like to thank the School of History and in particular its Head, Nicholas Brown, for being so welcoming and for providing office space and library privileges, and ANU Apartments for accommodating our changing plans in the delightful Judith Wright Court. Turner School made our daughter Anna welcome and soothed her longing for her North Fremantle friends. A first draft of the manuscript was finished while on a research trip to Kyiv, Ukraine, at the end of 2016. The final

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revisions were made during my first half year as Hansen Chair at the University of Melbourne in 2017. Una McLivenna's invitation to lecture on Russia and the Soviet Union in a team-taught course on the history of empires helped to finalize the early chapters.

A book like this volume is a serious effort in compression. Decisions need to be made about what to include, and more importantly, what to exclude. I attempted to highlight scholarly controversies without transforming what is essentially a narrative interpretation into a historiographical discussion. I also tried to strike a balance between historicism and writing a history of the present, which explains a part of the world we live in. For reasons of space I was not able to document my intellectual debts in my usual "Germanic" fashion. The footnotes in this volume only document direct quotations and the bibliographies at the end of each chapter are reading lists for an English-language audience, not a list of all works consulted. They do not include Russian, Ukrainian, German, or French literature and are by necessity incomplete. Updates on these reading lists will be posted periodically on [www.markedele.com](http://www.markedele.com), which also includes links to maps and a page with annotated links to primary sources in English, Russian, and other languages, for readers who want to study aspects of this history in more depth. Wherever possible, I quoted from English translations and if available from free online sources. Dates are according to the Julian calendar until February 1918, when Russia adopted the Gregorian calendar then already used in the West. In cases where events are of international interest, both the Julian and the Gregorian date are given, with the earlier date denoting the old style, the later the new style.

## Notes

- 1 *The Soviet Empire: Prison House of Nations and Races: A Study in Genocide, Discrimination, and Abuse of Power* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1958).
- 2 Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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## Part I

# The First Age of Violence



# Twilight of Empire (1904–1914)

For the lands that would form the Soviet Union, the twentieth century began in Asia. It began during the night of January, 26/27 (February, 8/9) 1904 when a group of Japanese torpedo boats attacked the Russian Pacific Fleet at Port Arthur (Lüshun). Russia had effectively annexed this Chinese warm-water port in the late nineteenth century, to the chagrin of an increasingly self-confident Japan that was also intent on expansion in China. Negotiations between the two imperialists had led nowhere. Now weapons did the talking.

In Petersburg, which had been the capital of the Russian Empire since Peter the Great (1672–1725) had built this city in the northern swamps, the reaction was mixed. Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918) was taken aback, as no prior declaration of war had been received. Nevertheless, he was confident of victory against these Japanese “baboons.” Others looked forward to what surely would be a “victorious, little war” distracting the Tsar’s subjects from their many grievances.<sup>1</sup>

## The Late Tsarist Regime

Indeed, the Tsarist regime needed all the help it could get. In the nineteenth century, a once highly successful formula for expansion had turned from a motor of imperial growth to a brake on the further development of Russia’s power. The historical core of Russia, the Principality of Moscow, had not been a particularly well-resourced or strategically well-located place during its establishment in the late thirteenth century. It was surrounded by stronger competitors who

threatened its independence. Its climate was harsh and its human resources scarce. And yet, this rural backwater rose from an insignificant trading outpost deep in the Eurasian woods to become the largest state in the world and one of the great powers of Europe. At the height of its might in the early nineteenth century, it would play a pivotal role in defeating Napoleon's armies and redefine Europe in the Congress of Vienna of 1814–1815.

It could do so, because its rulers – first the Rurikids, then the Romanovs – had mobilized the population into service classes harnessed to an increasingly strong state headed by an autocratic ruler. The service classes came in the form of legally defined estates (*soslovie*, pl.: *sosloviia*) on the one hand, and positions in a “table of ranks” on the other. The *soslovie* group defined a person's relationship to the state: Peasants tilled the land, served the landlord, and paid taxes. Some of them would be forced to serve in the autocrat's armies and die in never-ending wars. Townspeople were engaged in trade or artisanal work in the towns, servicing the state's servants in the urban military and administrative centers. They also paid taxes. The term *dvoriane* is sometimes translated as “nobles” or “gentry,” but this group had fewer rights and less freedom than their peers in Europe. They did not pay taxes, relied on the exploitation of the peasantry for their livelihoods, and staffed the empire's bureaucracy and officer corps. Their internal hierarchy was legislated in the table of ranks, which defined a parallel structure for army and civil service. The highest ranks led to hereditary nobility, which served as a conduit for ambitious and talented commoners to enter state service at the highest levels. The role of the clergy, finally, was to pray, and also to serve as the Tsars' ideologists manning the state church. The economic base of this warfare state was serfdom: peasants were bound to the land to support the service elite that ran the administration and the army. This peculiar form of resource mobilization for war and imperial expansion was invented by Ivan III (1440–1505) and perfected by Peter the Great (who introduced the table of ranks in 1722). It served the Romanovs well who ran this state since 1613 and grew it into the largest continuous land empire in the world.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, this once-successful formula ran into trouble. Russia now faced competitors who had combined the exploitation of overseas empires with the new might of the dual revolutions that rocked Europe: The French Revolution provided a new model of military mobilization of entire nations, while the industrial revolution, emanating from England, added higher quantities of more lethal weaponry that could be transported more quickly over longer distances by the railways. An agricultural empire based on the exploitation of peasant serfs could not compete with these new, industrialized empires. This fact was driven home in the Crimean War (1853–1856). Only decades after its brilliant victory over Napoleon in 1812, Russia was defeated comprehensively by a coalition of France, Britain, and the Ottoman Empire.

The defeat jolted Alexander II (1818–1881) into action. The Great Reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century were meant to modernize Russia to keep it competitive in this new world of industry and mass politics. These reforms saw the end of serfdom in 1861, an introduction of local self-government (*zemstvo*, 1864; town dumas 1870), judicial reform (1864), and universal military service (1874). Under the next two tsars, Alexander III (1845–1894) and Nicholas II (1868–1918), fast-paced industrialization fundamentally altered the urban landscape from the 1890s onwards. Cities were growing creating overcrowded working-class districts adjacent to new factories billowing smoke. Literacy was on the rise and a growing number of cheap publications catered to this new, lower-class reading public.

Meanwhile, the Russian monarchy was reluctant fully to enter this new age of industrial capitalism and mass society. The tsars continued to insist on the principle of uninhibited personal power that was above the law and beyond the functioning of a routinized bureaucracy. A maze of laws remained on the books, many no longer reflecting the needs of the economy and the growing urban society. They had to be circumvented constantly by imperial decree. This situation enhanced the authority of the tsar, who could make these exceptions, but it also put an incredible amount of negative power into the hands of civil servants at all levels who could refuse to forward an issue to the next level. Only requests that reached the ministers, who reported directly to the tsar, had a chance of being heard unless, that is, direct connections in the court itself could be mobilized. Administrative arbitrariness thus combined with unpredictability; bureaucratic inefficiency combined with corruption. The fact that every minister reported separately, and without consultation with his colleagues, to the sovereign encouraged competition between them, enabled the perpetuation of contradictory policies, and promoted back-stabbing and intrigue. The political system was also top-heavy and much of the country was under-governed by the comparative standards of the time. Strikingly for a country known as a police state, there were fewer police per population than in the Great Britain or France. Russia was big, as the saying went, and the tsar far away.

Indeed, the empire was huge. The Tsars' domains stretched from the Baltic and the Arctic Sea in the north to the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Caspian in the South, from the Bering and Okhotsk seas in the east to central Europe in the west. Its 8.7 million square miles covered parts of Europe and Asia, altogether nearly one-sixth of the globe and more than 128 million inhabitants (125.6 million in its first census of 1897 plus 2.6 million in Finland), making it the third most populous country in the world (after China and India). And it included much more than just "Russian," or even eastern Slav areas. From the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century the Tsarist empire had gobbled up Poland, acquired Finland from Sweden and Bessarabia from the Ottoman Empire, subdued the Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus, won

Central Asia in the “Great Game” with Great Britain, and expanded into what used to be Chinese possessions in the far east. By 1904, it bordered Norway and Sweden in the north, in the west Germany and Austria-Hungary, in the south the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Afghanistan and China, and in the south-east it even had a small border with Korea. Japan was only a short stretch of water away from Russian Sakhalin. This was an enormous empire in which large distances and ever poor communications added to the problems of the political system.

To make things worse, the man, who since November 1894 ruled over this complex inefficiency, was not up to the task. With Nicholas II, the empire was stuck with a pathetic autocrat ruling within an archaic political system that he was unable and unwilling to adjust to the realities of industrial war and the emerging mass society. The last Tsar was a textbook example of the dangers of dynastic and autocratic rule. Mild mannered, soft spoken, and slim, he could never live up to the example of his loud, large, and self-confident late father, Alexander III, against whom he constantly measured himself. In a meritocratic political system he would have never been put in charge. He would not have volunteered for a role he did not desire and nobody would have chosen a man for the top job who seemed to change his opinions the moment one advisor left and another one walked through the door. A strong sense of duty, however, kept him from the only reasonable course of action: to resign and go hunting, letting someone else handle the affairs of state. Even a better man, however, would have had his work cut out. What transpired after January 26, 1904, was not a “successful little war” of a European great power against some inferior Asiatics, as had been the hope of the Tsar’s more arrogant (and more racist) servants. Instead what Russia faced was a dress rehearsal for modern war leading to revolution.

## **The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905)**

The fighting was terrible and in the course of the conflict some 400,000 of the Tsar’s subjects lost their lives. The Russian armed forces suffered defeat after defeat: Port Arthur fell in December 1904; the battle of Mukden was lost in February and March 1905; the Baltic Fleet, which had hurried around the world to relieve its Pacific sister, was annihilated in May. The empire was beaten at sea, but also on land. Both sides sent their soldiers into suicidal frontal attacks on entrenched positions defended by barbed wire enclosures and machine guns.

Contemporary descriptions of such battles are reminiscent of the killing fields at World War I’s Western Front, where German, French, British, and US troops would confront the terror of the modern battlefield. This similarity is significant. While older histories have seen the 1914 to 1918 war as the birth pangs of the twentieth century, more recently the 1904 to 1905 war has received more attention. As the history of the twentieth century becomes less and less



Eurocentric, historians have started to understand the Russo-Japanese war as the first major conflict of this terrible epoch: “World War Zero,” as one pithy formulation has it. In this foundational carnage, the Russian army faced defeat despite numerical superiority (as it would later, in World War). Incompetently led, poorly equipped, and suffering from the logistical problems of long lines of communication, the Tsar’s army bled and bled.<sup>2</sup>

The unbelievable carnage of this war; the humiliation of being beaten by an Asian foe, who, somewhat annoyingly, accepted all extant rules of war making (proving that there was nothing European about “civilized warfare”); and the clearly inept political and military leadership of this catastrophe all stirred opposition in Russian society. Critics of autocracy had multiplied since the middle of the nineteenth century; they were joined by others unhappy about their living conditions, their working lives, their access to land, or the status of their national group within the Tsarist multinational empire. In the context of the debacle of the war against Japan, the opposition of a variety of groups first grew, then merged, and then exploded.

## **Forces of Discontent**

First was “liberal society,” whose campaign for political reforms heated up considerably in the context of the war. Its backbone was the class of professionals – lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, engineers, teachers, journalists, academics – which had been growing since the nineteenth century as an unintended outcome of Alexander II’s reforms. Their outlook was European, like their training, which they had often received abroad. For them, Russia was hopelessly backward and needed to “modernize”, that is, be dragged out of its stinking sheepskin coat and become more like Western Europe. The peasants needed to be washed, taught to read and write, and educated in the ways of the world. Superstition had to be replaced by enlightenment, the wooden spoon and the communal bowl by more hygienic eating implements, drunkenness by sobriety, and sloth by discipline. Healthcare, education, and transport had to become state of the art, and the political system needed to listen to its people, or at least to the voices of experts and professionals. Liberal society also included some industrialists and other businessmen who elsewhere would have been considered a bourgeoisie. While some of them were critical of autocracy, others wanted a more efficient government and a predictable legal system, but were otherwise content with the state of affairs.

Partially overlapping with “liberal society” was the most Russian of social groups – “the intelligentsia.” Historians have struggled to define its essence. Was it a social stratum, emerging from the most peculiar of the estate categories, the “people of various ranks” (*raznochintsy*) which included a variety of people who