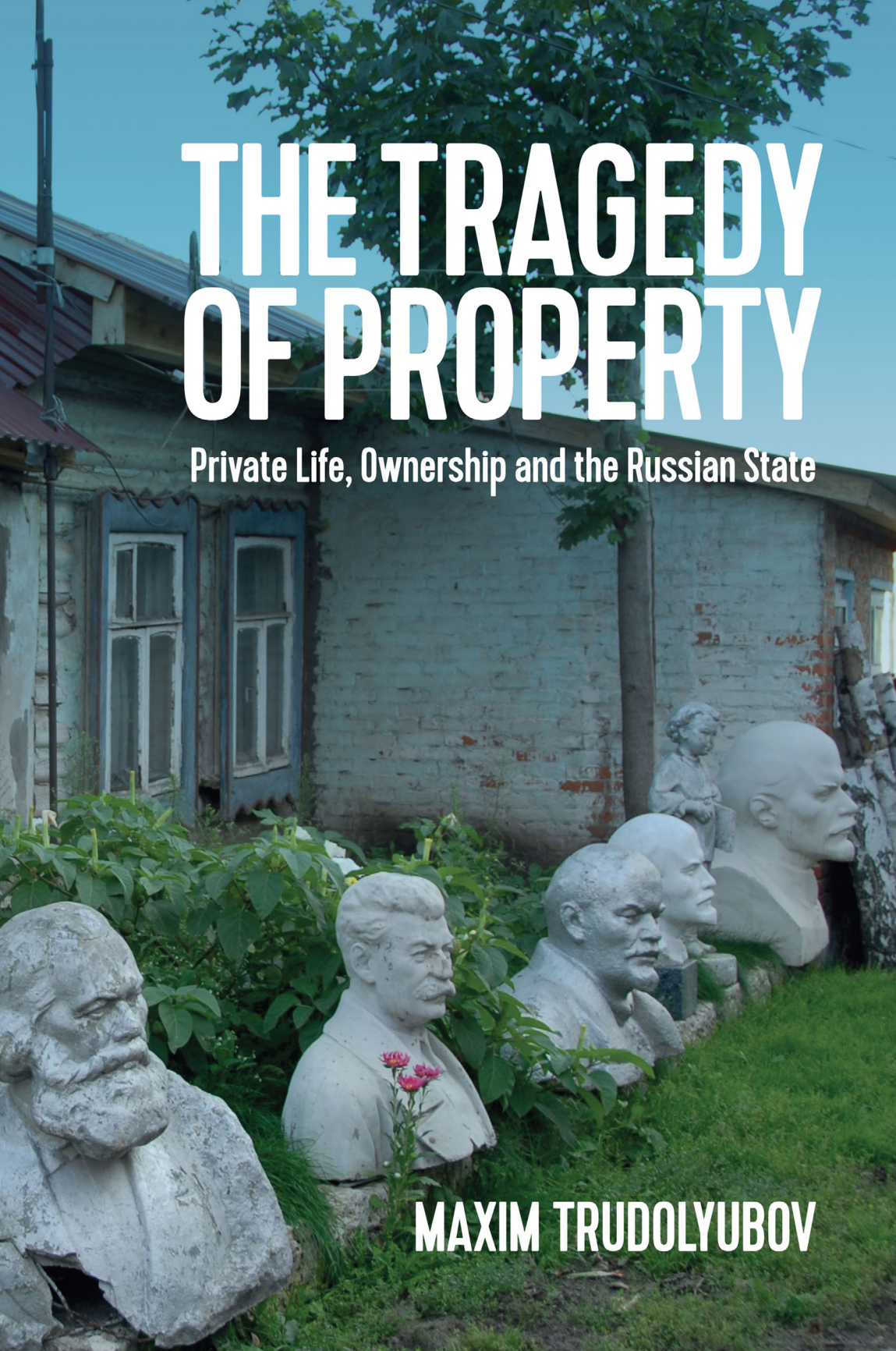


THE TRAGEDY OF PROPERTY

Private Life, Ownership and the Russian State



MAXIM TRUDOLYUBOV

The Tragedy of Property

New Russian Thought

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Zimin Foundation.*

Maxim Trudolyubov, *The Tragedy of Property*

The Tragedy of Property

Private Life, Ownership and the
Russian State

Maxim Trudolyubov

Translated by Arch Tait

polity

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Foreword by Alexander Etkind</i>	ix
Introduction: The Tragedy of Property	1
1 The Entrance	7
Homeless people	7
From city dwellers to citizens	11
Reflected modernity	12
The capital of succeeding generations	16
2 The Fence: Russian Title	22
Good fences make good neighbours	22
The permanence of the fence	25
Life without property rights	28
Russian title	32
3 Behind the Fence: The Privatization of Utopia	37
Private palaces	37
The privatization of utopia	41
The birth of private life	46
The Dutch carpenter's house	47
4 Private Property: My House Is My Castle	50
The myth of Sparta	50
The <i>domus</i> of our forebears	53
Mine and yours	58
Life, liberty and property	61

CONTENTS

Christianity and utopia	65
Utopia without property	68
5 Territory: Ambitions of Colonialism and Methods of Subjugation	73
Yermak the conquistador	73
Stewardship and extraction	77
A natural resource irony of history	81
6 The Lock on the Door: The Priority of Security	87
The collapse of monarchy in the West	87
Success in the East	88
Control as the top priority	91
Security as a threat	96
7 Labourers: Moral Economics and the Art of Survival	100
The plough, the scythe and the axe	100
Moral economics	104
The commune versus the private farmer	109
Dictatorship of the collective	113
8 Masters: The Tragedy of Domination	118
Owners and rulers	118
‘Let not the nobility be dispossessed of their estates without due process of law’	120
The birth of free people	125
Traduced and sacred law	127
The attempt to share	131
9 Architecture, Happiness and Order	136
The project we live in	136
Stalin’s orders	140
Khrushchev’s social revolution	144
Happiness and order	152
Russian order	154
10 The Halfway House	157
Favour from the tsar	157
Property without the market	162
A market without property	168

CONTENTS

11 Two Options: Finish Building the Home, or Emigrate	173
Property without property rights	173
Democracy without the rule of law	176
Law enforcement without the rule of law	178
The open door	183
Conclusion	191
Epilogue: In Search of Real Ownership	198
Moral hazards of the present	198
The invisible hand of the past	201
Still a halfway house	203
<i>Notes</i>	206
<i>Index</i>	224

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The high professionalism and intellectual distinction of my associates cannot guarantee a finished product of equally high quality, and culpability for shortcomings and errors lies squarely with me.

FOREWORD

In 2014, the revolution in Ukraine forced President Viktor Yanukovich to flee to Russia. The rebels entered his private, well-fenced residence near Kiev, which previously had been secured by dozens of heavily armed guards. In post-Soviet history, it was probably the first – but surely not the last – break-through into the intimate life of power. What the public – mostly students and impoverished intellectuals – saw in the residence was ridiculous rather than sublime. Palladian columns, gilded walls and pseudo-rococo furniture produced a strange feeling of bad taste with historical resonances: here the reminiscences of Austro-Hungarian glory, there the replicas of socialist realism, plus some imitations of the slave-holding American South to boot. Well connected and even better protected, Mr Yanukovich now lives in a smaller mansion near Moscow, where his neighbours cannot help but think about his fate.

In this book, Maxim Trudolyubov depicts contemporary Russia from an unusual but uniquely relevant perspective – the history of space. This perspective is relevant because in many ways Russia is equal to its space, and contemporary Russia particularly so. It is the integrity of space that has been the highest political value for Russian rulers, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union added fresh and traumatic undertones to this age-old sentiment. Even the ruling party calls itself ‘United Russia’ rather than, say, ‘Happy Russia’. The largest country in the world by landmass, Russia has developed its historical particularities in the millennial effort to capture, protect and cultivate the enormous territory of northern Eurasia. Sustaining life in this space has, historically, not been a trivial issue, and unusual instruments of indirect, communal organization were developed for the purpose. In the massive literature on Russian history, Trudolyubov’s

FOREWORD

book is unique in presenting the long and tortured story of Russian property arrangements in one coherent narrative. From land communes to communal apartments to late Soviet condominiums to the exorbitant inequality that is characteristic of contemporary Russia, we feel a bizarre, contingent logic to these twisted and often inverse developments. Introduced by the state, property regulations partially resolved and partially exacerbated the enormous difficulties and complexities of space and property in Russia.

Our neoliberal age has translated the problems of Russian space into legal regulations of private property on land, housing, apartments and, inevitably, fences. Trudolyubov demonstrates the ambivalent and tortured, even tragic, nature of the process. Russian history is a history of self-colonization, and Trudolyubov elaborates on this dictum. From the patriarch of Russian historiography, Vasilii Kliuchevsky, to my recent *Internal Colonization* (2011), this story of Russia's external and internal colonization has been told mostly from the perspectives of political, cultural and economic history. Independently of its declared purposes, colonization leads to tragic results. This book demonstrates that there is no better perspective on the unique character of Russian history than its space management, property regulations, privatization campaigns, enclosures and fences. This book is also about the tragedy of post-socialist capitalism, a massive but peculiar version of political and cultural economy that is still waiting for its Adam Smith.

From Ukraine to Russia to the Central Asian republics, post-Soviet states lead the world indices of unhappiness, a coherent tendency that cannot be explained by purely economic causes but has deep historical underpinnings. One common denominator for post-Soviet grievances is a lack of trust, a corrosive legacy of the socialist past with its huge, and hugely abused, public spaces and institutions. Trudolyubov's book adds a good deal to our understanding of this overwhelming mistrust. Another consistent cause of Russia's tragic underdevelopment goes deeper in history, but it takes new forms with its every turn. This is a malicious split between the ruling elite and the working masses – a total decoupling between labour and capital. The political rulers build the economy in such a way that it provides them with monies that do not depend on the population. In a resource-bound economy, the more space the rulers control, the more resources they exploit, and the less they are dependent on the population: this is the best-kept secret of Russia. In its contemporary form, this political-economic decoupling results from the increasing reliance of the output of the country and the prosperity of its rulers

FOREWORD

on natural resources such as oil, gas and metals. According to some estimates, the Russian elite now has as much wealth abroad as the state and the people, including the same elite, own domestically. When these oligarchs and bureaucrats invest their petrodollars and gasorubles in a labour-bound economy – a hotel, a private bank, a university endowment – they prefer to do it abroad.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Russian Empire openly admitted that its aim was to hold back development, and this demodernizing sentiment led the country to defeat in the Crimean War. With the new tsar, the reforms did occur; but although they deferred the disastrous revolution, they could not prevent it. In the early twenty-first century, we see a similar combination of a one-man show, cultural panic and political adventurism, with the eye of the cyclone again focusing on the Crimea. But of course we do not know the future. All we can do is study the past in order to make sense of the present.

Alexander Etkind
European University Institute, Florence
20 December 2017

Dedicated to the memory of my parents, Margarita
and Anatoly Trudolyubov

INTRODUCTION

The Tragedy of Property

The enslavement and emancipation of the peasants, the Russian Revolution and collectivization, a massive residential building programme and, finally, the transfer of newly privatized apartments to their occupants are all landmarks in Russia's history that have an impact on us today. They are all about land and the ownership of property, whether people are tied to the land or released from that tie; they are about the confiscation of property and the reacquiring of it.

These events affected literally every Russian. Tens of millions of people lost all they owned in the early 1930s; tens of millions had privacy returned to them as a result of residential building on a massive scale between the 1960s and the 1980s (see chapters 1, 10 and 11). *Homo sovieticus* was a product not so much of the revolution as of an acute housing shortage in the rapidly expanding cities. Character was formed and careers were made in cramped living conditions, through squabbles and friendships as neighbours battled over square metres of floor space. For millions of people in the USSR, possessing their own home was their ultimate dream.

The aspiration to privacy is an issue future generations will still have to address, but there has been a qualitative change affecting everyone in Russian society: the difficult transition from collective homelessness under the Soviet state to personal, private life has been achieved.

Giving its members a private life is a major step forward for any society. Today, the opportunity of being alone with yourself and your loved ones seems to us only natural. We feel that our four walls, our family affairs, our feelings and words belong to us alone; that is now not only an aspiration but a right enshrined in the constitution. In Russia, however, it is a very recent achievement, something that, in

INTRODUCTION

historical terms, happened only yesterday. Actually, it has not been around in the rest of the world for all that long.

Throughout history, human beings have existed primarily as a unit within a tribe, a group, a commune, an army, a guild, a community, a church. There has been no respite from need and want and pressure from their fellow humans. Humans may be social animals, but they value privacy.

For most of history only a privileged few, leaders and saints, have been able to withdraw into their shells. For the common man or woman, the path to a life apart has been long, arduous and slow, and it has come by way of the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of trade and the emergence of the middle class. The end result has been creation of the space essential for private life, the home exclusively for just a few people, immediate family. Before he could live in a separate apartment or house in a town, the working man who was neither a leader, a feudal lord nor a gangster boss had to rise above the threshold of hand-to-mouth living to become more ambitious and bring in more than subsistence wages. That became possible as he gradually escaped from a barrage of restrictions and as monopolies on trade and power were eroded. Geographical exploration, private ownership of land, new technologies and, with them, new ways of making money have all helped to promote the concept of private life (see chapter 3).

The acquisition of a home of your own would have been an impossibility in Russia without a new recognition of the importance, and the introduction on a massive scale, of the right to own private property. The sense of ownership of the place you live in goes back, no doubt, to the very beginnings of human culture, but awareness of one's own personal identity and consolidating the boundaries of private life is even now a work in progress (see chapter 4). At the same time, agreement is developing on what an individual may or may not consider legally his or her own property.

In all cultures, including Western cultures, there have always been alternatives to private property, in the form of public and state-owned property. Many countries are seeing increasing adoption of forms of temporary or shared use of goods. Cars, apartments and second homes are often rented rather than purchased outright. It is a curious fact that in countries with the most venerable tradition of private property, the percentage of home owners among town dwellers is substantially lower than in Russia. In Switzerland it is less than 50%, in Germany it is just over, and in the United Kingdom it is around 68%, as against 85% in Russia.

INTRODUCTION

In Russian culture, the various types of property ownership evolved differently. There is nothing mystical about that; it has nothing to do with the mysteries of the Russian soul, although it is just possible that a lack of freedom and the constraints on life in such a vast country bear some relation to the nature of our society and state.

In centuries past, Russia's rulers extended their domains and exercised control over vast territories by centralizing power rather than negotiating and delegating it. The fact that the Russian state saw its main aims as territorial expansion and security inevitably affected the way society developed, and the predominance of such sources of wealth as furs, peasant labour, timber, grain and oil facilitated the emergence of a particular style of rule.

Its priorities emerged as the Muscovite state was taking shape, and they were the creation of robust defences against external enemies, and extraction of natural resources for the benefit of a small elite. Development of a professional bureaucracy and improvement of arrangements at district level were conspicuously sluggish, which suggests they were of little concern to that elite. There is a marked difference in the welfare and mood of citizens between countries whose leading figures interest themselves in improving social conditions and countries where they do not. The latter tend to be colonies, or otherwise states where the ruling elite are interested only in exporting natural resources and other goods (see chapters 5 and 6).

Russia is an odd country, because it is simultaneously a colony and a colonizer. The paradoxical outcome of its centuries-long expansion has been that, despite having a great deal of territory, it feels overcrowded; and it feels overcrowded because so little of its vast territory has been intelligently developed.

The fact that there exists one single, overriding source of easy money sets the ground rules. If these reward a particular type of behaviour, savvy players will adopt it. If one route for advancement is far more rewarding than any other, everybody will head in that direction: to St Petersburg, to Moscow, to the state treasury, to the decision-making centre. The extraordinary concentration of resources in the two capitals and neglect of the provinces are related: underdevelopment of the latter is the direct consequence of a strong, centralized regime. We have too little space because we have too much regime.

In Russia the universal human desire for personal well-being constantly collides with a political system that puts maintaining order (in terms of class, ideology and the state) above economic development. Unlike in the West, private property has not been a badge of citizenship, conferring rights and involvement in public affairs.

INTRODUCTION

The institution was not well regarded either before the Bolsheviks' revolution or after the revolution of Yeltsin and Gaidar in the 1990s. For some, property was, and is, a legitimate means of retaining their dominant position, for others it was, and is, evidence of a profoundly unjust social system (see chapters 7 and 8).

Many scholars have linked the languishing of the institution of private property in Russia with peculiarities of the country's political development. The best known examples are Richard Pipes' *Russia under the Old Regime* and his *Property and Freedom*,¹ in which he correlates the extent to which private property develops in Russia with the level of political freedoms.

There has, however, been no lack of private property in Russia: it has existed in one form or another throughout our history, and in the last 150 years of the St Petersburg period it was even more radically 'private' than many European analogues. The problem is just that property and freedom in Russia are entirely separate: they occupy parallel universes.

At one time it was customary in Anglo-American discourse to talk about the 'tragedy of the commons', which was held to show the impossibility of sharing resources equitably and to demonstrate the superiority of private property. In Russia, it seems to me, we need to talk rather about the 'tragedy of private property'. The history of attitudes to property here is different from that of the West. In Russian political culture, private property has not provided a foundation for awareness of other civil rights. Those championing property and those championing human and civil rights have often been on opposite sides of the political divide. Private property, particularly large amounts of it, has been perceived in our culture as unearned and hence not deserving to be defended. It was used negligently and foolishly, with the result that society did not see it as having any great moral value and readily repudiated it during the social upheaval of the 1917 Revolution. 'If private property was easily swept away in Russia, almost without resistance, by the whirlwind of socialist passions,' S.L. Frank wrote in 'Property and Socialism', 'that was simply because belief in the rightness of private property was so weak; even the robbed property owners, while they excoriated those who had robbed them on a personal level, did not themselves, deep in their hearts, believe they had legitimate title to their own property.'²

One of the basic premises of the Soviet project was that life would be organized on rational, scientific principles, which implied management of the economy from a single centre. The leaders of the communist state promised the world they would put right the deep,

INTRODUCTION

inherent unfairness of capitalism and economic relations based on private property, thus doing away with social inequality and a dearth of coordination of human activity. If there was no private property, there would be none of the selfishness of those who owned it, who inevitably tried to pull more than their fair share of the blanket to their side of the bed. The Marxist ideal proved impracticable, however, perhaps because human nature proved more powerful than reason, and the Soviet economic project collapsed under its own weight.

The post-revolutionary pendulum swung back incredibly strongly in 1990s Russia. The right to own the residential property they currently occupied was officially conferred on the sitting tenants, and privatization vouchers were offered to virtually the entire population. That was not enough, however, to make people property owners in spirit, even though the right to their property, no matter how vulnerable because of the imperfections of the new Russian state, was entirely real. Somehow it was not the magic wand capable of transforming the population into citizens, and voters into masters of their country. They gained possession of certain things but not of their country. People were searching desperately for an understanding of their own identity, of how they related to their homeland, and of the sense in which they could be said to own it.

The rehabilitation of private property in the new Russia opened up unprecedented opportunities but raised new problems. There was no way those who now began to control and exploit the country's natural resources and formerly public assets, created by the united efforts of the population in the Soviet era, were going to be viewed by society as having earned it honestly by their own hard work. Neither was that something the state wanted; indeed, it had every intention of ensuring that no property owners, not only those who had been handed the country's natural resources on a plate, but even the owners of small or medium enterprises, should be allowed to feel independent. No trustworthy legal underpinning or stable definitions were created for property owners in Russia. This was partly because it was always possible to have recourse to the legal systems of other countries, but partly also because keeping owners uncertain of the rules suited the regime's upper echelon nicely. Under the new dispensation, the right to own property was placed once more, as in earlier times, in a category separate from other civil rights.

The post-Soviet years have seen Russian society pass through a period characterized more by appropriation than creation. There was a boom, a tsunami, of appropriation; everything was up for grabs.

INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Bibikhin tried twenty-five years ago to discriminate between the sense of ‘mine’ felt for appropriated property and the sense of genuine ownership of property acquired by intelligence and hard work. He suggested the difference was between ‘mine’, when it meant only ‘not yours’, and the sense of ownership of something truly one’s own.³ To this day Russian society has failed to master the distinction.

This book is structured as a progress through an imaginary private home. We will be contemplating the fence, the space of the courtyard, the land the house is built on, and the issues of its security, price and the design to which it was built. There are chapters about the people who live in this house, whether as ‘workers’ (from the peasants to our contemporaries) or as ‘owners’ (from before 1917 and in the present day). We shall consider the history of Russia’s property institutions and propose a view on how far we remain in thrall to the past, and this will lead on to discussion of the future.

THE ENTRANCE

Homeless people

In 1970, nobody was more delighted with the move than my grandfather. A separate, three-room apartment in a new, nine-storey block was now his, conferred on him as a senior electrician and war veteran. He was fifty-five, his grandson had just been born, and he was happy. This was not a makeshift roof over his head, not a room shared between several families, but an actual, separate address. This was the culmination of a forty-year journey from the countryside to the city, and it came with documentary confirmation and a passport with the best residence permit in the world, for Moscow. It was a journey that had started when he was fifteen and fled Perevitsky Torzhok, a village in Ryazan, 200 km southeast of Moscow.

Perevitsky Torzhok stands on the River Oka, on steep hills above the township of Konstantinovo, where the poet Sergey Yesenin was born in 1895. Even today art students are brought here to sketch: the place is almost unspoiled, and at the time my grandfather was living there must have been breathtakingly beautiful, with a high hilly bank affording a view over plains that stretched endlessly beyond the river. In 1930 there had been no time to admire the view, however: my grandfather got out of Perevitsy Torzhok after the local people were forced to join a collective farm and it became impossible to carry on living as an extended family in the traditional way. He said he left because of the system of communal remuneration. ‘We started working for “worked-day credits”. You do a day’s work, you get a note in your record book, and that’s it.’

He loved to recall how picturesque the countryside he left behind

had been, and claimed their village was even more beautiful than Konstantinovo. He told us how he and the other boys would leap off a steep bluff into the river, and that a hill called Makovishche that rose up directly opposite their house was actually an ancient burial mound where you could dig up Tartar and Russian skulls. He recounted these stories, though, without emotion, and thought back to the past only rarely, like an émigré long out of touch with the old country.

His first job in the city was riveting boilers at an asphalt factory in Moscow, and to start with he and the other workers actually lived under the boilers. It was terrible work, literally deafening, but he felt no urge to go back to his family home on that beautiful hillside. I never detected any sense of attachment in my grandfather to the sundry places he had lived in. A scrap of land between a platform and the tram turnaround hardly counted as home. So he was proud of the apartment he had been awarded in recognition of his labour and army record, although I always felt he took an even greater pride in the documents confirming the award. He had no interest at all in the new district of Belyaev where he now lived.

He was one of eight children in a large peasant family and there was no time for schooling, but he became a man with urban ways and urban ambitions. He loved his job as an electrician, loved books, reading newspapers, going for walks in the park and making a career. He enjoyed the moving from one job to another, climbing the ladder step by step, and celebrated every new advancement by unselfconsciously drinking himself silly. He accepted the rules of a city of newcomers, moving ahead and paying little attention to anything else. There were more ladders in the city than in the countryside, always giving something new to aim for.

My grandfather's career was typical, and what he experienced was the experience of the majority. He was born in a country where 85% of the population were, like him, peasants. His fortunes changed, like those of everybody else, in 1929–30 with the mass collectivization of agriculture. He went to the front, like most men of his age, but, unlike many, survived. That was the second big event in his life. The third was when he was awarded a separate apartment, and that, too, occurred at much the same time as for many of his generation. He died in a country where a large majority, 74% of the population, were, like him, town dwellers.¹ In the country my grandfather was born in, the majority of people were under thirty. At the time of the 1917 Revolution, over 60% of the population of the Russian Empire were young. In the country in which he died, there were already more

elderly people than young. Nowadays less than 40% of the population are under the age of thirty.²

This incredible transformation took place in less than one lifetime. Millions, like my grandfather, fled the countryside, famine and the new ways of doing things, and those who survived settled in cities. It was young people born, like my grandfather, to large families in the year of the revolution – or a little earlier or a little later – who became the first ‘new generation’. It was new in the sense that the lives of such a vast number of people were to bear no resemblance to the lives of any previous generation of Russians. The aspiration to earn wages and gain an education had, of course, brought peasants to the cities before this, but never on such a scale. Millions of new proletarians, in cities or on collective farms, had to learn to live in an entirely new way, where the experience of their parents could only be a hindrance. The traditional way of life could no longer feed them, large families were an unsustainable burden, and they were forcibly converted from their old religion to a new one.

The introduction of collectivization, the liquidation of the more successful ‘kulaks’, and the policy of breakneck industrialization ‘convulsed the lives of the Soviet Union’s more than 130 million Soviet peasants’.³ In their scale and consequences, the end of 1929 and the first months of 1930 are more significant than the revolutionary events of October 1917. Nicholas Riasanovsky likened collectivization to the christianization of Rus. ‘[B]ecause it affected most Russians in a fundamental way, the year 1929 marked the most important turning point in all Russian history, with the probable exception of the year 988,’ he writes in his book on Russian identities.⁴

These young, strong, homeless people were forced, before they could become fully attached to the old way of life, to master the new way. They were a blank sheet of paper, willing to listen, understand and work. They provided a demonstration of just how much privation a human being can endure and what sort of conditions he can survive. For them, sleeping in a proper bed rather than under a boiler, the opportunity of earning extra rations, meant more than being part of the great national construction project. Riasanovsky writes that steadfastness and endurance rather than enthusiasm for work were the norm for most of these people. Steadfastness is not one of Aristotle’s political categories, but it had a political role to play. It helped to hold the Nazis at bay at Stalingrad, and also helped people to endure all the trials of Soviet history.⁵

These stoical people were, moreover, accommodated in atrocious conditions, in utility rooms, dugouts, barracks, huts, hostels and

communal apartments. The homelessness of an enormous number of Russia's citizens was actually a deliberate policy decision on the part of the regime. Firstly, this was because housebuilding was one of the casualties of the 'great turning point' of 1929–30. A conscious decision to concentrate limited resources on defence and heavy industry doomed the rest of the economy, including housebuilding, to be starved of funds. Investment in housebuilding was cut, and by 1940 even the statutory norms of floor space per person had been almost halved. Needless to say, no explicit policy of creating homelessness is to be found in Party documents, but it is entirely reasonable to infer this was a policy decision.

Secondly, the housing famine made it easier for the political leaders to direct labour at will. Most people were allocated accommodation through the enterprises for which they worked, and were only too willing to go wherever housing would be 'given': square metres were more readily available to those working in priority sectors. Thirdly, there was the system of residence permits, which, in a slightly modified form, is still in force today. Mandatory registration of citizens' place of residence made it easier to monitor them, both through official channels and with the aid of volunteers keen to assist the Party: unmasking an enemy of the people among your neighbours enabled you to lay claim to the room thus vacated.

What millions of new proletarians and collective farm peasants were unwittingly caught up in was an unprecedented experiment, an attempt by the political elite to achieve a predetermined result (a communist society, otherwise known as 'the radiant future') by radically accelerating and rigidly directing the historical process. It was a controlled social explosion. The theoreticians and practitioners of Leninist communism were planning to imitate, and indeed improve on, a process that in Europe had taken several centuries.

The hunger and deprivation were invariably presented as the price of the Party's march towards the radiant future, and that ideal really become rooted in citizens' minds. As a result of the homelessness to which the Soviet strategists doomed most of the USSR's citizens, the radiant future they really aspired to, however, was a separate, private apartment. This dream of private accommodation and a private life has, as we shall see, been crucial to how Russia developed, in both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras.

In Russian history, there have been no few rulers who believed the historical process was as malleable as metal and lent itself to technical manipulation. Peter the Great was certain he could, within a generation, turn Russia into a European state governed under the rule of

law and complete with competent officials and army officers. The Soviet leaders were sure they could create an urbanized, industrialized country without having to pass through all the stages of organic growth of cities and industry. The post-Soviet leaders supposed they could establish a market economy without the institutions of private property and an independent judiciary. It would not be true to say that nobody has ever been able to leapfrog history – rapid transformations are possible – but success is never guaranteed and, more often than not, the result is far from what was intended.

From city dwellers to citizens

The rise of cities in Europe saw not only a rise in the urban population, but also a strengthening of its role in administering the cities and later the country. Yesterday's peasants, Europe's new citizens, had to defend the fruits of their labours from both feudal lords and monarchs, and this was the context of their efforts to organize themselves into guilds, parliaments and various popular movements.

The rulers needed the townspeople. Without their cities, the monarchs would never have been able to create nation states: the city was an ally in the struggle against the centrifugal forces of the provincially based hereditary aristocracy. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when modern states were being formed, European monarchs relied increasingly on the growing urban population, seeking agreements with representative institutions and taking into their service citizens with the benefit of a university education. Thus was the bureaucracy born, the upper level of the 'third estate'. 'With the development of industry, however, the third estate became too powerful for its former ally, the monarchy, to control, especially if the central government was weak or corrupt,' historian Vasiliy Rudich tells us. 'This led to bloody revolutions in Europe, and then to the birth of the modern age.'⁶

The city dwellers helped modern society to take shape. Industrialization and urbanization involved more than a mere growth in output and crowding of increasing numbers of people within cities' walls. Over long years, the city dwellers won what philosophers call designated rights. The rights to private life, freedom and the inalienability of property were formed over many centuries of deal-making between monarchs, the Church, the aristocracy and the city dwellers. In the course of all this bargaining, the city dwellers became citizens.

A crucial part in demonstrating the very possibility of private