PERSPECTIVES

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Tsarism, 1881–1905

A 'superannuated' form of government?

In 1902 the famous author Count Leo Tolstoy wrote an open letter to Tsar Nicholas II, in which he asserted: 'Autocracy is a superannuated form of government that may suit the needs of a central African tribe, but not those of the Russian people who are assimilating the culture of the rest of the world.'

Traditionally, western criticism of late tsarist Russia has concentrated on the role of the individuals who ruled after the death of Alexander II. Unlike Marxist interpretations, which postulate the unequal ownership of property and capital as the cause of tsarism's fall, western liberals have to explain the collapse of what should have been an increasingly stable and prosperous country, as Russia cast off its peasant backwardness.

Seeking to account for this, A-level texts often draw an artificial distinction between those Tsars and ministers who 'opposed reform' and those far-sighted individuals who 'sought to modernise Russia'. Amongst the former we find such unedifying specimens as the boorish Alexander III, the weak Nicholas II, the desiccated Pobedonostsev and (every student's favourite) the 'mad monk' Rasputin.

Russia doubled in size during the nineteenth century, but seemed incapable of developing an efficient bureaucracy to control it. Corruption was endemic. In contrast to the spread of democracy in Europe, why was Russia unable to reform itself?

Those blessed with the title 'reformer' form a holy triumvirate: the 'Tsar Liberator' Alexander II, the ex-railwayman Sergei Witte, and Peter Stolypin, author of the agrarian reforms (see next article). Had assassination or dismissal not felled these giants, it seems Russia would have been safely on the path to stable capitalism and, ultimately, that most cherished of western political virtues, parliamentary democracy.

Except, of course, for the problem that this picture is largely inaccurate. Consider the reactionaries: Pobedonostsev was responsible for the judicial reforms of 1864 and Alexander III presided over the introduction of Russia's first factory legislation. As for the reformers, Alexander II's reputation is tarnished by his violent crushing of the Polish revolt of 1863; and 'Stolypin's necktie' (the noose) associates that reformer with the death of 1,700 revolutionaries, following the suppression of the 1905 revolution. Even Witte, designer of the October Manifesto, once said, 'I have a constitution in my head, but in my heart I spit on it,' and added 'If the Tsar's government falls, you will see absolute chaos in Russia.'

One of the main reasons for this confusion is the tendency to equate economic reforms with political developments. If we narrow the definition of 'reformer' to economic issues, Alexander II, the emancipator of the serfs, Witte, the architect of the railway boom, and Stolypin, all pass with distinction. However, these three intelligent, high-minded men, in common with many others, believed absolutely in the viability and the desirability of a near-feudal autocracy.

Tsar Alexander III *Tsar Nicholas II*

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If one concludes from this that both 'reactionaries' and 'reformers' agreed on ends — the perpetuation of tsarist rule — and merely differed on means, it becomes evident that analysing individuals will not suffice to explain the collapse of the regime. This often directs the student to a study of social relations, or the revolutionary activists of the period, in order to find a better explanation. This article will suggest that the very system of government created the circumstances which caused its ultimate collapse.

The role of the Tsar

Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs in 1861 created 23 million free peasants. In consequence, however, the entire structure of autocratic government had to be refashioned in order to accommodate this new citizenry. Alexander II had argued that: 'It is better to abolish bondage from above than wait for the time when it will abolish itself from below.' However, he had, like his predecessors, no inten-

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tion of creating an elective national assembly, despite the establishment of elective district assemblies (*zemstva*) in 1864.

But the emancipation of the serfs had shattered the power of the nobility by removing both their income from feudal dues and free labour, and their political control of justice. In order to rule Russia effectively without them, Alexander was forced to reorganise the central organs of government, placing a greater responsibility on ministers and bureaucrats. However, while the powers of the bureaucracy grew, the system of government, especially the Tsar's role within it, remained much as it had been in the eighteenth century.

Peter Bark, Nicholas II's last minister of finance, noted: 'The Russian Empire was to him [the Tsar] a sort of family estate, private property,' and this explains why the last Tsars were so reluctant to relinquish their power. It was the family's property, handed down to them, to be passed on in turn to their children. The Tsar saw himself as the 'Little Father' of his people and distrusted the bureaucrats who, as he saw it, sought to usurp his power and deceive the people.

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In the vast and centralised Empire of late nineteenth century Russia, this approach was not merely anachronistic, it was disastrous. The Tsar was overloaded with pointless tasks that any competent secretary could have handled. He consequently had little time to consider more far-reaching policy decisions or even to read a newspaper. He had no one, outside his family, to discuss important matters with, and was wholly reliant on his ministers for information. He therefore tended to agree with their interpretations, being unable to question their recommendations without the requisite specialist knowledge.

This made a coordinated and balanced government policy impossible. Of course, in the case of a determined and dynamic Tsar, such as Alexander II, such obstacles did not prevent him from driving policy in a general direction. His successors, however, lacked his clear sense of direction; and although they raged about the system of government that they had inherited, they failed to provide an alternative, until one was forced upon them.

Isolated and poorly prepared for the task, surrounded by friends of similar political naivety, dependent on bureaucrats for information — neither Alexander III nor Nicholas II was able to extricate himself from the deadening routines of autocracy and act as an effective leader of the political nation.

The ministers

The unreformed structure of executive government tended therefore to devolve policy making and the day-to-day rule of Russia to ministers. In essence, each of the ten ministers was a mini-Tsar in his own sphere. They shared the Tsar's faults, too, frequently receiving petitioners and public deputations in their antechambers, diverting valuable time from more important issues.

Ministers were nonetheless entirely dependent on the Tsar for their positions and constantly sought to justify their behaviour, and influence their monarch to their way of thinking. Unsurprisingly, rivalry between ministers was a constant thorn in the government's side, as was the fear that others might poison the Emperor's mind against them.

Ministerial access to the Tsar and to decision making took the form of regular, private, one-to-one audiences, for which no documents were submitted and no records kept. As a result, ministerial intrigue continued, most notoriously in the rivalry between the Minister of the Interior, Plehve, and the Minister of Finance, Witte, which ultimately resulted in Witte's removal in 1903.

Intriguing ministers: Witte (right) and Plehve. The more reformist of the two, Witte, was dismissed in 1903 but reinstated in 1905. Plehve was assassinated in 1904.

As Minister of the Interior, Plehve was possibly the second most powerful individual in Russia. The Ministry of the Interior appointed provincial governors, controlled the police and the secret police, censored the press, issued internal passports, supervised local government and even organised medical services across Russia. Such enormous power was invariably entrusted to unbending defenders of autocracy, such as Dmitri Tolstoi (1882–89), Dunovo (1889–95), Sipiagin (1899–1902) and finally Plehve.

In 1902 Plehve attempted to block reform through the suppression of peasant voters and Armenian and Finnish nationalists, the tacit encouragement of pogroms against the Jews (such as at Kishinev in 1903) and attempts to buy off prominent liberals such as Miliukov with government positions. Like his predecessor, Sipiagin, Plehve was assassinated in 1904. After his death, his policy of last resort was adopted — the 'short victorious war' against Japan, the failure of which returned Witte to government in 1905.

Before his first dismissal, Witte was Minister of Finance, the most reformist department of the Tsar's government and perhaps the most powerful after the Interior. It assessed and collected taxes and customs duties and prepared the budget. In order to achieve the industrial expansion demanded by the Tsar, the Finance Ministry was necessarily staffed by experts, often recruited from outside the bureaucracy — unlike the court favourites of the Ministry of the Interior. Every Minister of Finance from 1881 to 1903 endured great hostility as a result of this.

Witte regarded Plehve's repression as ultimately futile and favoured continuing Alexander II's reforms. He had no desire to advance the cause of democracy, but aimed to use the autocracy's power to modernise Russia industrially. Given the threat this posed to the aristocracy, it is easy to see why Witte had so many enemies at court and why he despaired of Nicholas II after his dismissal in 1903.

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The bureaucracy

What then of the implementation of government policy? The government was served by an ineffective bureaucracy, popularly known as 'Chinovniks' in reference to the 14 ranks ('chin') above the level of clerk. The hierarchical nature of the civil service ensured that, while educated and honest public officials aspired to the moderately well-paid higher ranks, based in St Petersburg and Moscow, those who served in the provinces and at the lower levels were quite different. Often poorly educated (more than half the 4,339 appointees in 1894/5 had no secondary education) and badly paid, the average local bureaucrat took advantage of his position to supplement his meagre income at society's expense through bribery and extortion.

Unsurprisingly, such bureaucrats were often the target of the revolutionaries' bombs and bullets in the last decades of tsarist Russia. After 1881 the civil service developed a bunker mentality, in which it began to see the intervention of any other agency as a threat to its power and influence.

The Tsar's suspicion of outside experts and private-interest bodies was encouraged by the ministers who, as head of their branch of the civil service, realised that their power and influence was in jeopardy if others were allowed to participate in government. Most senior civil servants were noblemen (one wit observed that the aristocracy were 'bureaucrats in dressing gowns') and they viewed with horror the influx of academics, engi-

neers and other middle-class 'experts'.

This attitude survived until the First World War, when a congress of *zemstva* was prevented from helping the faltering Russian economy. Yet, as Gradovsky concluded, 'In the hands of the government rested concentrated power without competence, and in the hands of the *zemstva* was concentrated competence without power.'

The police state

The fear of revolution reinforced this state of affairs. In 1881 Alexander II and Pobedonostsev introduced 'emergency procedures' to preserve order. The struggle against activism was fully concentrated in the hands of the Minister of the Interior and the powers of Governor Generals were increased. Under this 'temporary' law (which was renewed every 3 years until 1917), dismissal from *zemstva*, government or courts could be caused by 'untrustworthiness', and governors acquired the authority to order arbitrary arrest, fines, imprisonment, censorship, the banning of public meetings and exile.

Thus *'poizol'* was reinforced, and reform from within became well-nigh impossible. The Tsar had pinned his hopes on the 'police state'. As Lopukhin, Head of Police from 1902 to 1905 observed, the police now 'constitutes the entire might of a regime whose existence has come to an end'.

To reinforce the Extraordinary Laws, the Department of Police acquired a judicial section to oversee political cases. 10,000 policemen could now convict without reference to the courts. In addition 'protective sections' of the secret police (the Okhrana) were set up to act as agents on behalf of the state. So powerful were the Okhrana, that they monitored the post of all leading statesmen, even Pobedonostsev. So effective were they, that one of their double agents, Evno Azef, became head of the Combat Detachment of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRS), which he betrayed to the Okhrana in 1905. Unfortunately, so unsupervised were their activities, that Azef chose to prove his credentials to the SRS by organising the murders of Sipiagin and Plehve (his own superiors) and of Grand Duke Sergei (the Tsar's uncle).

One consequence of this clumsy and inefficient 'police state' was to alienate potential supporters of the regime. Liberals who supported tsarism were spied on; worker co-operatives were banned for fear of inciting revolution; peasant activities were supervised by 'land captains' from St Petersburg; students were prevented even from setting up drinking clubs.

The police, like all other branches of the bureaucracy, favoured the rich and used their enormous power to harass those who threatened their monopoly of wealth. Furthermore they were not even effective in controlling revolution. Flight abroad to revolutionary centres like Switzerland and England remained relatively easy and the government continued to forward rents and pensions to exiles, enabling them to continue funding their campaigns.

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The all-powerful secret police (Okhrana) in St Petersburg, 1900.

Although almost every prominent revolutionary was abroad in January 1905, there were only 4,113 political prisoners in Siberian exile (out of a population of 150 million). Thus revolutionary conspirators were not effectively impeded, but ordinary citizens were harassed, incommoded and suspected. Lopukhin saw that: 'By widening the gulf between the state and the people, it engenders revolution ... There are the people and there is the state authority and the latter is under threat from the former.' By 1905 this gulf had become a chasm of mistrust, into which the tsarist regime collapsed.

Conclusion

The last two Tsars attempted to implement Pobedonostsev's instruction that 'the continuation of the regime depends on our ability to keep Russia in a frozen state'. Political reform was halted, but the uncoordinated system of government ploughed on with economic reform, producing a famine in 1891 and mass discontent among the exploited urban workforce.

Surrounded by their bureaucracy, the Tsars shunned all offers of help, becoming instead entirely dependent on the conflicting advice of their ministers. Consequently, no serious attempt was made to rationalise the system of government, and tsarism stumbled from assassination to famine and industrial unrest, with the police using the opportunity to assert their control over Russia.

Given this, the question is no longer 'Why was there a revolution in 1905?' but 'Why on earth did it not happen earlier?' Such a regime could only hold back the demands for popular participation if it could demonstrate its fitness to govern. That tsarism survived up to 1905 was due to its good fortune that no major challenge to its authority, at home or abroad, occurred before then. However, the disasters of the Russo-Japanese war exposed the lack of effective leadership and the disintegration of government. When orderly protest was inevitably met with bullets in 1905, the Russian nation turned to the only alternative that remained — insurrection.

Although tsarism survived the uprising, there was a price to pay. After 1905 autocracy was finally forced to accept popular participation in the shape of the *Duma*. Even so, by 1917 the Russian people had drawn the logical conclusion that tsarism was antithetical to the effective government of a modern state. Ultimately, the Tsar's belief that his position was God-given, and therefore not his to relinquish, gave the Russians no alternative but to take action themselves.

This medieval attitude may explain the Tsar's stubborn refusal to accept reform, but it does not excuse the incompetence of his regime. Fundamentally, the Russian system of government *was* 'superannuated' by its insistence on retaining eighteenth-century structures to deal with twentieth-century problems, despite their proven inability to do so. It was this, rather than the question of personality, which explains its ultimate fall.

Further reading

Crankshaw, E. (1978) *The Shadow of the Winter Palace*, Penguin.

Figes, O. (1997) *A People's Tragedy*, Pimlico.

Lieven, D. (1994) *Nicholas II: Emperor of all the Russias*, Random House.

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