

HIS 242 Unit 5

1905 and After

Remarks by Professor Blois

Russia experienced a shorter period of constitutional government than any other major European state. Following the travail of 1905, there was a brief phase of semi-constitutionalism, but by 1907 it essentially had been overcome by the entrenched and still-powerful autocracy. The only other period of constitutional government in Russia was more liberally-inclined but was also even briefer in duration--the Provisional Government of 1917, discussed in a later unit.

Nicholas and Witte Tsar Nicholas II suffered a most inauspicious accession to power. On the day of his 1895 coronation, over 1300 people were killed in the Khodynka Field riot. Nicholas' apparent unconcern for the suffering of his subjects immediately gave him the reputation of an uncaring monarch. He was unable to overcome this stigma, and in fact bolstered it during his reign.

Nicholas soon dashed any hopes that he might depart from the reactionary policies of his father, Alexander III, by denouncing as "senseless dreams" the aspirations of zemstvo leaders for a more active role in national affairs. From the very outset of his reign, Nicholas created an atmosphere completely antithetical to political change in Russia. His image of indifference to national affairs was only furthered by his habit of withdrawing into his family circle, especially after the birth of the hemophiliac tsarevich in 1904.

If constitutionalism was anathema to Nicholas, it was entertained with only a little less apprehension by Sergei Witte, his finance and later prime minister. Witte's political views were not as fixed as those of Nicholas. He felt that for Russia a dynamic, innovative autocracy was the best government and believed, perhaps wrongly, that Alexander III met this standard. Recognizing that Nicholas lacked the requisite strength of purpose to lead Russia, Witte came to entertain the idea of constitutional government. To avoid compromising his plans for the economic development and modernization of Russia, the one fixed idea to which he held, Witte was prepared to make political concessions.

In his economic policy Witte was the most farsighted of tsarist ministers of finance, despite failing to deal effectively with the land problem or with the maze of questions associated with peasant repayment arrears (a hangover from the 1861 reforms). Witte did much to modernize Russia's economy and to facilitate the compromise of 1905. It was only the capriciousness of the childish tsar that deprived him of appropriate credit in this matter and instead forced his resignation from the government. Nicholas then turned to ministers lacking even a pragmatic belief in constitutional procedures and guarantees.

Russian liberalism Liberalism, like its standard-bearer the middle class, developed slowly in Russia. However, by the 1890s groups of professional people and zemstvo officials were eager to expand the scope of their activities to the national level through popular representation in the central government and through a centrally-organized administration for the zemstvos. George Fischer, a historian of Russian liberalism, has characterized the movement's two central tendencies as "senseless dreams" (typified by demands for a constitutional republic, for which there existed no

precedent and little hope), and "small deeds" (born of frustrated attempts to deal locally with the problems whose sources often lay at the national level). By the 1890s, when Nicholas made his "senseless dreams" speech, the liberal movement was, ironically, beginning to espouse a more realistic, gradual approach to political change. Thus, Nicholas' words were especially obtuse, inappropriate, and stultifying.

The liberal "third force", emerging as the representatives of a moderate approach between the extremes of the government and the radical intelligentsia, became entirely estranged from the regime by the late 1890s. As capitalism developed more rapidly, the middle class grew and its more politically conscious members began to organize into oppositional groups, led by such prominent figures as Miliukov and Struve. Another oppositional force now confronted the autocracy openly.

The constitutional period Only a cataclysmic set of circumstances brought the revolution of 1905 and the resulting short period of semi-constitutionalism to Russia. Political unrest, assassinations by terrorists, and defeat in the Russo-Japanese War had driven the Russian state to the brink of disaster. When the inexcusable violence of Bloody Sunday provoked even more strikes and unrest than before, the government began to issue conciliatory proclamations. None of these offered concessions sufficient to meet the rising demands of various oppositional elements, and in September 1905 Russia was gripped by a general strike. It was in this context that the October Manifesto was grudgingly approved by the tsar.

No sooner had the October Manifesto been promulgated than Nicholas began to have second thoughts, blaming the entire revolution and attendant concessions on Witte. Like so much else at court, this attitude was

apparently fostered by the tsarina, Alexandra. With the resignation of Witte, the impetus for constitutionalism closest to the tsar was lost, causing prospects for the newly-established Duma to be quite dim from the outset.

Chances for a fully functioning Duma worsened before it first met. Four days before it convened, Nicholas enacted the Fundamental Laws, greatly restricting the Duma's powers vis-a-vis those of the tsar. This legislation soon became the tool enabling introduction of Stolypin's policies.

Stolypinshchina The last effective minister of the Russian autocracy was Peter Stolypin, Nicholas' chief minister in the years 1906 to 1911. Stolypin first gained notoriety as the brutal suppressor of peasant unrest in Saratov, where he was provincial governor in 1905 (also his birthplace). When Nicholas dismissed the radically inclined First Duma, he called upon Stolypin to serve as prime minister. Among his first acts was the introduction of nationwide martial law. Stolypin initially made overtures of cooperation to the Duma, but considering his past and the context in which these offers were made, the rebuff he met cannot be held against the Duma leaders, despite such a contention by some historians.

In 1907 Russia fell under what was termed the "monarchy of the Third of June" by Soviet historians, the date on which the Second Duma was dismissed. In ordering it prorogued, Stolypin relied on trumped up evidence of a conspiracy by some of the socialist delegates. Armed with so little evidence, he introduced new, highly restrictive electoral laws that were in effect until 1917. The Third and Fourth Dumas, elected under these provisions, lasted out their terms, but were even further restricted and tended to be ineffective even in those matters over which they had jurisdiction.

At the center of Stolypin's social policy was an attempt to defuse peasant unrest through abandoning the old repayment schedules and striving to create a strong class of yeoman farmers. The potential success of Stolypin's reforms was acknowledged even by Lenin. Never an insider at court, Stolypin finally was virtually ostracized, and his fate was sealed by trying to engineer the removal of Rasputin from the capital. In August 1911, Stolypin was assassinated by an agent in the employ of the tsarist police. Having earlier lost all by the semblance of constitutional government, Russia now lost something even more critical--her last competent minister--on the eve of the catastrophe of the World War.

Russia under the last tsar The reign of the last Romanov has usually been considered a preparatory period for the coming revolution. It was long felt, however, that World War I was necessary to provide a catalyst, magnifying and accelerating the shortcomings of Russian society, making Russia ripe for revolutionary change. This interpretation was a constant in the immense literature produced after the 1917 revolution by emigre Russians of every stripe, including former ministers of both the tsarist and provisional governments. And it was shared through several decades by virtually all non-Soviet historians. Soviet scholars, on the other hand, consistently stressed the revolutionary potential of the immediate pre-war years, and were followed in this reinterpretation by some Western specialists.

The case for the stability of Russian society under the last tsar, and especially in the period between 1905 and the onset of war, was cogently put in Michael Karpovich's Imperial Russia, 1801-1917, first published in 1932. It was only in the mid-1960s that the issue was again raised. The newer interpretations hinged on reassessment of 1905, the Dumas, the

Stolypin reforms, and the last months before the war. Even the revisionist view supports the stability premise until near the time of Stolypin's assassination in 1911. After this time, however, a new wave of strikes erupted which, together with the Lena goldfield massacre, caused Russian society to exhibit centrifugal tendencies again.

In short, there was ample evidence to generate a debate on the issue of social stability in Russia on the eve of the war. Following are two of the core statements in the controversy--those of Karpovich and Leopold Haimson.

The Karpovich thesis The essence of the Karpovich thesis lies in the belief that Russia was improving economically and culturally (that both the "body and soul of Russia" were growing stronger) in the decade prior to World War I. Corollary to this belief is the statement that the danger of violent upheaval was becoming more remote. In support of his claim Karpovich cites the Stolypin agricultural reforms, the government's long range plan for universal education, and the increasing tempo of Russian industrialization. Moreover, Karpovich felt that the revolutionary movement in Russia was growing noticeably weaker because of the above factors and its infiltration by the police.

A bit about Karpovich: He was in his late twenties in 1917. After some flirtations with the Social Revolutionaries, he became more centrist (Constitutional Democrat or 'Cadet') in his views, and in early 1917 was hired as secretary by Russia's ambassador to the U.S., and in this capacity traveled to Washington, DC. He never returned to Russia, and wound up on the faculty of Harvard in the 1940s (and until his death in 1959), where he became the dean of American historians of Russia. In this capacity, he

trained and mentored the next, and perhaps greatest generation of historians of Russia. One of these, by the way, was Leopold Haimson (see *infra*).

A noteworthy proponent of the Karpovich thesis was the economist and economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron, who felt that the situation for both labor and agriculture was improving in the years after 1905. Russian industry finally had become self-sustaining, he contended, and the state had retreated from its formerly prominent role in fostering economic development. With the gap filled by banks and private financiers, Russia's industrial growth rate was 6.25% between 1906 and 1913, by Gerschenkron's calculations. Though no one has refuted all of Gerschenkron's arguments, there is a great deal of contradictory evidence. For example, a high rate of inflation accompanied the growth and structural development of the Russian economy in these years, and it was outstripping all increases in industrial wages.

A bit about Gerschenkron: Younger than Karpovich by almost a generation, the young Gerschenkron left Russia with his family for Austria in 1917, and in 1938 emigrated from there to the U.S. He, like Karpovich, wound up at Harvard where he, again like Karpovich. Among his notable students was Henry Rosovsky, who late in his own career became dean of the faculty at Harvard, where I had the privilege to work with him very briefly in 1993. Like Karpovich and Gerschenkron, Rosovsky was an emigrant from Russia.

A further, implicit attempt to validate the Karpovich thesis is found in the work of J. P. McKay on foreign investment in Russia (*Pioneers for Profit*, 1970). McKay detected strong evidence that after 1905 there was much

more portfolio investment by foreigners in Russian firms, rather than the direct ownership which had earlier been characteristic. McKay saw this change as proof that Russia's economy was maturing and that her future was viewed as sound by the big capitalists of Western Europe.

The Haimson thesis Leopold Haimson's central statement on the decade 1905-1914 was first set forth in two articles published in the Slavic Review in 1964-65. His interpretation allowed for the stability premise in the period before 1912, but stated that by then two factors were coming into play which greatly undermined social stability in Russia and, most likely, would have produced revolutionary change in the near future even absent the trauma of World War I. The first factor was a growing spirit of rebelliousness among Russian workers. This could not possibly augur well for the tsarist regime, since the labor force was growing rapidly. The second factor, Haimson felt, was a growing polarization of the three groups contending for leadership in Russia--the government, "educated society" or the intelligentsia, and the masses. If this representation of the social situation was accurate, it meant that not only was the government shorn of virtually all support, but also that the only group "fit" to govern, the educated stratum of society, was increasingly unable to attract a sufficient base of support from which to govern.

In his conclusions, Haimson was not much different from the Soviet view of this period. He differed on two points only. One concerned the prospects for stability in the first years after 1905, and especially after 1908. Haimson had not studied these years closely, but Soviet specialists who had reached the conclusion that there was only a slight ebbing of revolutionary activity in these years. The second difference stemmed from Haimson's subscribing to the Menshevik theory that the most revolutionary workers

were always those most recently recruited into the labor force. Orthodox marxism, and Bolshevism, posited a growing revolutionary consciousness among the most mature workers, and tended to identify newly-recruited workers as more akin to the peasantry in their political outlook.

T. H. Von Laue, another noteworthy historian and the biographer of Sergei Witte, made a case for pessimism even stronger than Haimson's but linked his interpretation to externalities more than factors internal to Russian state and society. In his widely read Why Lenin? Why Stalin? (in its last edition updated to include a third question in the title: Why Gorbachev?) and in numerous articles Von Laue (yet another emigre--from Germany in the late 1930s--who did much to establish Russian studies in the U. S.) presented an interpretation of the fall of the autocracy due to its utter inability to cope with the imperatives of modernization. Von Laue felt that no effective renovation of Russian society was possible until the problem of an outdated and impotent leadership elite was solved. This would have made it impossible for the autocracy to survive a shock like the war, no matter when it came.

Recommended readings list bks by Biely (novel SPB), Fischer, Harcave, McKay, Miliukov, Trotsky, Karpovich, Gerschenkron, Massie (N&A), Von Laue, Stavrou (R under the last tsar), Robt McNeal (Russia in transition 1905-1914), McKay