Russia from the Death of Nicholas I to the Abdication of Nicholas II, 1855–1917

The Russian Empire fell apart in 1917 along fault-lines which were inherent in its situation as an empire with extensive vulnerable borders straddling Europe and Asia. For more than three centuries its structures had been those of a multi-ethnic service state, not those of an emerging nation. Social hierarchy and status were shaped by the need to provide the sinews of that empire, through taxation, recruitment, administration and military command. The economy was deflected from productive purposes to sustain the army and the administrative apparatus. A nobility was maintained in excessive non-productivity, absorbing an alien culture to guarantee Russia's status as European great power.

Most damaging of all, perhaps, Russia's church was compelled to renounce its function as guarantor of the national myth to become the marginalized prey of an activist secular state. A messianic national myth which had demonstrated its viability in the crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was spurned in favour of a cosmopolitan Enlightenment project which required all the refinement of the "well-ordered police state."

—G. Hosking, Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917

While masses of the peasantry were dragging along near to the margin of subsistence that a crop-failure meant starvation—and so came the great famine of 1891 and the lesser famines of earlier and later date. Whether the general well-being of the peasantry had shown improvement or decline—whether there had been within the peasant mass a tendency to draw together or to draw apart—still, as the day of revolt approached, there was no doubt of the existence in the countryside of a mass of penury sufficiently large, an antithesis between poverty and plenty sufficiently sharp, to give rise to whatever results might legitimately be bred and born of economic misery and economic contrasts.

—G. T. Robinson, Rural Russia under the Old Regime: A History of the Landlord-Pasant World and a Prologue to the Peasant Revolution of 1917
The main outlines of Russian history during the last several decades of tsarism are reasonably clear. The conservative or reactionary policies of Nicholas I, centered above all on “holding the line,” died with the emperor. Indeed, there is a strong but undocumentcd court and academic tradition that Nicholas I on his deathbed told his son and heir, Alexander II, to liberate the serfs. And it was high time to do so. With the growth of a money economy and competition for markets, the deficiencies of low-grade serf labor became ever more obvious. Many landlords, especially those with small holdings, could barely feed their serfs, and the gentle accumulated an enormous debt. Free labor, whether really free or merely the contractual labor of someone else’s serfs, became more common throughout the Russian economy during the first half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the serfs perhaps declined in absolute numbers in the course of that period, while their numerical weight in relation to other classes certainly declined from 58 percent of the total population of Russia in 1811 to 44.5 percent on the eve of the “great reforms,” to cite Blum’s figures. Recent interpretations of the Russian economic crisis in mid-nineteenth century range all the way from Kovalchenko’s emphatic restatement, with the use of quantitative methods, of the thesis of the extreme and unbearable exploitation of the serfs to Ryndziusky’s stress on the general loosening of the social fabric. But from either point of view, as well as most views in between, serfdom was becoming increasingly anachronistic. Moreover, the serfs kept rising against their masters. While no nineteenth-century peasant insurrection could at all rival the Pugachev rebellion, the uprisings became more frequent and on the whole more serious. Semyovskiy, using official records, had counted 350 peasant uprisings in the nineteenth century prior to the emancipation. A Soviet historian, Ignatovitch, raised the number to 1,467 and gave the following breakdown: 281 peasant rebellions, that is, 19 percent of the total, in the period from 1801 to 1825; 712 rebellions, 49 percent, from 1826 to 1854; and 474 uprisings, or 32 percent, in the six years and two months of Alexander II’s reign before the abolition of serfdom. Ignatovitch emphasized that the uprisings also increased in length, in bitterness, in the human and material losses involved, and in the military effort necessary to restore order. Ignatovitch’s long list has been further expanded by other scholars. Besides rising in rebellion, serfs ran away from their masters, sometimes by the hundreds and even by the thousands. On occasion, large military detachments had to be sent to intercept them. Pathetic mass flights of peasants, for example, would follow rumors that freedom could be obtained somewhere in the Caucasus, while crowds of serfs tried to join the army during the Crimean War, mistakenly believing that they could thereby gain their liberty. 

Moral sentiments combined with practical reasons. The Decembrists, the Slavophiles, the Westernizers, the Petrashevtsy, and some supporters of Official Nationality, together with other thinking Russians, all wanted the abolition of serfdom. As education developed in Russia, and especially as Russian literature came into its own, humane feelings and attitudes became more widespread. Such leading writers as Pushkin and particularly Turgenev, who is 1852 published in book
Decem of Nicholas I to Abdication of Nicholas II, 1855–1917

form his magnificent collection of stories, *Sportsman’s Sketches*, in which serfs were depicted as full-blown, and indeed unforgettable, human beings, no doubt exercised an influence. In fact, on the eve of the abolition of serfdom in Russia, virtually no one defended that institution as such; the arguments of its proponents were usually limited to pointing out the dangers implicit in such a radical change as emancipation. The Crimean War might well have been the last straw, for it not only resulted in a shattering defeat, but also demonstrated the damage serfdom did to the Russian armed forces, including the fact that the government relied on a standing army without reserve, because it was afraid to allow discharged soldiers to return to villages.  

The formulation, passage through appropriate government instances, and eventual proclamation and enactment of emancipation legislation proved to be difficult, because landlords and conservatives in and out of government were reluctant to lose their huge possessions and, in fact, largely their way of life. Repeated imperial prodding proved necessary. The final result, the emancipation proclamation of the nineteenth of February 1861, with attendant enactments, has been called the greatest legislative act in world history. It directly affected the status of 50–52 million peasants, over twenty million of them serfs of private landowners, and others mostly state peasants—compared, for example, with the almost simultaneous liberation of four million black slaves in the United States obtained as a result of a huge Civil War, not by means of a peaceful legal process. In addition, the main Soviet criticism of the emancipation as a clever conspiracy of the government and the landlords at the expense of the peasants lacks substance: it is disproved both by the process of emancipation itself and by a sharp decline of the fortunes of the landlord class in its wake. Yet the emancipation was in fact a compromise, and criticism, even fundamental criticism, together with the praise, may also be in order—not a surprising situation, given the scope and the import of the measure.

The land allotted to the former serfs turned out to be insufficient. While in theory they were to retain the acreage that they had been tilling for themselves prior to 1861, in fact they received 18 percent less land, with heavy losses in the fertile southern provinces. In addition, in the course of the partitioning, former serfs often failed to obtain forested areas or access to a river, with the result that they had to assume additional obligations toward their onetime landlords to satisfy their needs. One expert estimated that 13 percent of the former serfs received liberal allotments of land; 45 percent, allotments sufficient to maintain their families and economies; whereas 42 percent had to manage with insufficient allotments. Another wrote: “The owners, numbering 30,000 noblemen, retained ownership over some 95 million dessyatins of the better land immediately after the Reform, compared with 116 million dessyatins of suitable land left to the 20 million ‘emancipated’ peasants.”

Other scholars have stressed the overpopulation and undevelopment among former serfs, who, at least after a period of transition, were no longer obliged to work for the landlord and at the same time had less land to cultivate for themselves. State
peasants, although by no means prosperous, received, or the whole, better terms than did the serfs of private owners.

The financial arrangement proved unrealistic and impossible to execute. By the time the redemption payments were finally abolished in 1905, former serfs had paid, counting the interest, one and one-half billion rubles for land initially valued at less than a billion. While the serfs were officially to redeem only the land, not their persons, the payments actually included a concealed recompense for the loss of their labor. Thus, more had to be paid for the first unit of land than for the following units. As a whole, the landlords of southern Russia received 340 million rubles for land valued at 280 million; those of northern Russia, where obrok prevailed, 340 million rubles for land worth 180 million rubles.

The transfer of land in most areas to peasant communes rather than to individual peasants probably represented another major error. Arguments in favor of the commune ranged from the Slavophile admiration of the moral aspects of that institution to the desire on the part of the government to have taxes and recruits guaranteed by means of communal responsibility and to the assertion that newly liberated peasants would not be able to maintain themselves but could find protection in the commune. But the disadvantages of the commune outweighed its advantages. Of primary importance was the fact that the commune tended to perpetuate backwardness, stagnation, and overpopulation in the countryside, precisely when Russian agriculture drastically needed improvement and modernization.

The emancipation of the serfs made other fundamental changes that followed it much more feasible. These included the establishment of the so-called zemstvo system of local self-government, and municipal, judicial, and military reforms. The law enacted in January 1864 constituted a strong modernization and democratization of local government, as well as a far-reaching effort on the part of the state to meet the many pressing needs of rural Russia, largely by stimulating local initiative and activity. Institutions of self-government, zemstvo assemblies and boards, were created at both the district and provincial levels—the word zemstvo itself connotes land, country, or people, as distinct from the central government. The electorate of the district zemstvo assemblies consisted of three categories: the towns, the peasant communes, and all individual landowners, including those not from the gentry. Representation was proportionate to landownership, with some allowance for the possession of real estate in towns. The elections were indirect. Members of district assemblies, in turn, elected from their own midst, regardless of class, delegates to their provincial assembly. Whereas the district and provincial zemstvo assemblies, in which the zemstvo authority resided, met only once a year to deal with such items as the annual budget and basic policies, they elected zemstvo boards to serve continuously as the executive agencies of the system and to employ professional staffs. A variety of local needs fell under the purview of zemstvo institutions: education, medicine, veterinary service, insurance, roads, the establishment of food reserves for emergency, and many others. The municipal reform of 1870 applied many practices and princi-
ples of the zemstvo system to towns. The zemstvo system has been criticized for encompassing for a long time only the ethnically Russian central provinces, not the borderlands; for being heavily weighted in favor of landlords and property; for having an insufficient power of taxation and being in general a junior partner at best to respective governors and the entire central administration; for the fact that the smallest zemstvo unit, the district, proved too large for effective and prompt response to many popular needs, and on other grounds besides. Yet the system accomplished much for Russia, from its establishment in 1864 until its demise in 1917; criticisms refer more to the insufficient extent of the reform than to its substance. The year 1864 witnessed the enactment of another “great reform,” that of the legal system. The Russian judiciary needed improvement probably even more than the local government. Archaic, bureaucratic, cumbersome, corrupt, based on the class privilege rather than on the principle of equality before the law, and relying entirely on a written and secret procedure, the old system was thoroughly hated by informed and thinking Russians. The legislation of 1864 marked a decisive break with that part of the Russian past. The most significant single aspect of the reform was the separation of the courts from the administration. Instead of constituting merely a part of the bureaucracy, the judiciary became an independent branch of government. Judges were not to be dismissed or transferred, except by court action. Judicial procedure acquired a largely public and oral character, instead of the former bureaucratic secrecy. The contending parties were to present their cases in court and have adequate legal support. In fact, the reform largely created the class of lawyers in Russia, who began rapidly to acquire great public prominence. Two legal procedures, the general and the abbreviated one, replaced the chaos of twenty-one alternate ways to conduct a case. Trial by jury was introduced for serious criminal offences, while justices of the peace were established to deal with minor civil and criminal cases. The courts were organized into a single unified system with the Senate at the apex. All Russians were to be equal before the law and receive the same treatment. Apart from the general system stood the military and ecclesiastical courts, as well as special courts for peasants who lived mostly by customary law. Later, the government sometimes tried to influence judges for political reasons, and, more important, in its struggle against revolution it withdrew whole categories of legal cases from the normal procedure, but the basic judicial reform of 1864 could not be undone in imperial Russia.

Even the military transformation of 1874 has been appropriately listed with the “great reforms.” The obligation to serve was extended from the lower classes alone to all Russians, with recruits to be called up by lot, while at the same time the length of the active service was drastically reduced, and a military reserve was organized. New arrangements stressed military education and specialization but also, perhaps the most important point, introduced elementary education for all draftees. Minister of War Dmitri Milutin’s measures for the army were extended to the navy by Grand Duke Constantine.
The “great reforms” went a long way toward transforming Russia. To be sure, the empire of the tsars remained an autocracy, but it changed in many other respects. Vastly important in themselves, the government reforms also helped to bring about sweeping economic and social changes in the years and decades following. The growth of capitalism in Russia, the evolution of the peasantry, the decline of the gentry, the rise of the middle class, particularly the professional group, centered both in the zemstvo and the new legal institutions, and of the industrial proletariat—all were affected by Alexander II’s legislation. Russia began to take long strides on the road to becoming a modern nation. Nor could the changes be reversed.

But the road was not an easy one. Alexander II acted as he did because after thirty years of Nicholas I’s rule, there was no other way out. In contrast to Peter the Great (or Lenin later), he was a conservative, not a radical reformer, with no hatred for the old or passion for the new; and he was effectively aided only by some liberal or at least utterly loyal bureaucrats. The repeated failures and the ultimate defeat in the Crimean War had already cost the government much support throughout the spectrum of public opinion, from right to left. The reforms, particularly the emancipation of the serfs, did receive considerable, especially liberal, endorsement, but they brought new problems. Before long, the authorities abandoned their liberal course. From then until 1905, and after that in a sense again from 1907 until 1917, the liberals remained on the margin of Russian politics. Moreover, the most prominent opponents of the established system were no longer Westernizing university professors or quixotic Slavophiles but dedicated radicals and revolutionaries. The intellectual climate had changed drastically and very rapidly—a fact that is still insufficiently recognized by the students of the period. Such prominent participants in the scene as Fedor Dostoevsky, Constantine Pobedonostsev, and Michael Katkov responded much more quickly as they veered sharply to the right in reacting against what they saw on the left.

The new intellectual climate, like all the preceding ones from the time of Peter the Great, came to Russia from the West. It was an uneasy but dogmatic and inspiring combination of utilitarianism, positivism, materialism, scientism, and realism, more especially critical realism. Sometimes the entire process has been described as a transition from Romanticism to realism. Only material, scientific reality deserved recognition. Science at the time, it has been pointed out, was conquering ever-new fields and, indeed, linking its fields together toward a total scientific view of the universe. Moreover, it was claimed that a high school education should be sufficient to acquire that complete true knowledge. Many specialists have argued that while sharing in the general realistic and materialistic character of the age in Europe, Russians tended to be more extreme, because of such special circumstances as a reaction to the stifling of intellectual life under Nicholas I, the autocratic and oppressive nature of the regime, the weak development of the middle class or other elements of moderation and compromise, as well as a rather sharp democratization of the educated public. But whether especially extreme or not,
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 Educated Russians were part of the Western world. In science proper, to cite the most telling example, it was Dmitri Mendeleev's periodic table of elements (1869) that organized modern chemistry and beyond that made a major contribution to the above-mentioned total scientific view of the world. And in literature it was the great Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883), who in his celebrated novel Fathers and Sons (1862; more exactly Fathers and Children) and other works presented the most memorable account of the clash of the two generations, and ages, and established the term "nihilist" forever after.

Whereas the "fathers", the men of the 1840s, grew up on German idealistic philosophy and romanticism, in general, with its emphasis on the metaphysical, religious, aesthetic, and historical approaches to reality, the "sons" the men of the 1860s, hoisted the banners of materialism, positivism, utilitarianism, and especially "realism." "Nihilism" — and, in a large part, "realism," particularly "critical realism" — meant above all a fundamental rebellion against accepted values and standards: against abstract thought and family control, against polite manners and art for art's sake, against lyric poetry and school discipline, against religion and rhetoric. The earnest young men and women of the 1860s wanted to cut through every polite veneer, to get rid of all conventional slam, to get to the bottom of things. What they usually considered real and worthwhile included the natural and physical sciences, simple and sincere human relations and a society based on knowledge and reason rather than on ignorance, prejudice, exploitation, and oppression. The casting down of idols — and there surely were many idols in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, as elsewhere — emancipation, and freedom constituted the moral strength of nihilism. Yet few in our age would fail to see the narrowness of its vision, or neglect the fact that it erected cruel idols of its own. Interestingly, critics debate to this day whether Turgenev presented Bazarov, the nihilist, as a positive or a negative character.

Bazarov's most striking counterpart in life was a young literary critic at the Russian Word, Dmitri Pisarev (1840–1868). A long arrest and, after that, death by drowning at an early age made him in a sense a transitional figure, one to speculation as to his possible later course of development. But he did express strikingly the new nihilist negation and apparently had readers all over Russia. As the critic stated his creed: "What can be broken, that should be broken; what survives the blow, that can be of use; what breaks into bits, that is garbage; in any case, strike right and left. This will do no harm, and can do no harm." Or, a little differently: "Words and illusions perish; facts remain." And to underline the directness and simplicity of the new faith: "True science leads to tangible knowledge; and what is tangible, what can be seen by one's eyes and felt by one's hands, that will be understood by a ten-year-old boy, as well as by a simple peasant, by an educated person or by a learned specialist." Natural sciences and technical and professional skills should replace useless philosophy and aesthetics. Pisarev is perhaps best remembered for his denigration of Pushkin and his assertion that a pair of boots is of a greater value than Shakespeare.
Nihilism concentrated on the individual, whom it promised to liberate from all the prejudices and all the false gods hemming human existence, although presumably more and better critical realists would eventually improve society. But the social program, as such, had to be found elsewhere. Pisarev himself admired much in the work of Chernyshyevsky, who was probably the most influential writer in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, certainly so among the radicals. Nicholas Chernyshyevsky (1828–1889) was an erudite, a scholar, a literary critic, a publicist, and an intellectual of many parts. An outstanding economist, he also concerned himself with aesthetics, developing further Bezhsky’s ideas on the priority of life over art; and with nineteenth-century French history, where he aimed to demonstrate the failure of liberalism, as well as with Darwinism, which he regarded as an enormous advance in science but criticized for its Malthusan bias; not to mention a variety of Russian problems. The most important writer and editor of a leading periodical, the Contemporary, from 1855 to 1862, Chernyshyevsky was arrested in the latter year for connections with radical figures and underground literature. Although no criminal complicity was ever established in his case, he was eventually condemned to fourteen years’ hard labor and banishment for life to Siberia. Chernyshyevsky was allowed to return to European Russia, specifically Astrakhan, only in 1883. Perhaps more so than in regard to any other figure in Russian intellectual history, there was an astounding contrast between Chernyshyevsky’s few years and limited possibilities of activity and his colossal impact on his countrymen and women. The reader must keep firmly in mind the spirit of the time and thank such guides as Irina Paperno.7

Much more a scholar than Pisarev, Chernyshyevsky tried to analyze in some detail the Russian economy and to prescribe its future course. In the process, he became a major contributor to the emerging general doctrine of populism, because he endorsed the peasant commune and a noncapitalist way of development for his country. Yet it is also important to realize the nature of qualifications that Chernyshyevsky included in his endorsement, as well as to see how his endorsement fit into Chernyshyevsky’s general outlook as a progressive intellectual and “enlightener.” To follow Andrey Walicki:

Of particular interest in this respect in his article “A Critique of Philosophical Prejudices against the Communal Ownership of the Land.” Although he declared that there were no features typical of society that could not be deduced from characteristics of individuals, Chernyshyevsky nevertheless posited the existence of a universal evolutionary law, which he summed up as follows: “As far as history is concerned, the highest stage of development everywhere represents a return to the first stage which—at the intermediate stage—was replaced by its opposite.” Since individuals can “skip” the intermediate stage, he argued, why should not societies—which are only aggregates of individuals—be able to do so as well? If individuals can evolve at a
faster pace symbolized in the progression $1, 4, 64, \ldots$ then social development can follow the formula $1A, 4A, 64A, \ldots$.

This argument was used by Chernyshevsky to prove that Russia could bypass the capitalist stage and that the communal ownership of the land could serve as a basis for the socialist development of agriculture. \ldots The evolution of forms of ownership progressed from the communal property of the tribe through private ownership (which reached its culmination under capitalism) to modern communal ownership by associations. Chernyshevsky had no doubt that this last stage would soon replace capitalist property relations in the developed countries. Communal landholdings in Russia, Chernyshevsky thought, were a form of ownership corresponding to the first phase of the universal development of mankind; since a direct transition to the third phase—thata. of postcapitalist collectivism—seemed likely, there was no point in abolishing the village commune and thus destroying the collectivist traditions alive among the Russian people. On the contrary, attempts should be made to modernize the commune and to transform it along rational lines into an association similar to the workers' associations existing in Western Europe.\textsuperscript{6}

The whole was a remarkable combination of the Enlightenment, even of Romanticism with its triple beat, and of the newer currents of the age, all in the burgeoning spirit of radical and revolutionary optimism.

But Chernyshevsky's greatest coup proved to be his novel \textit{What Is to Be Done?} written after his arrest in 1862 and published in the main in the \textit{Contemporary} through the governmen's mistaken permissiveness. Still strange, controversial, and puzzling in places—perhaps largely because its peculiar provenance prevented a certain kind of direct sale—and, without literary merit, Chernyshevsky's work became the bible of young radicals and revolutionaries throughout Russia, all the way to Lenin's brother, executed in 1887 for conspiring to assassinate Alexander III and indeed to young Lenin himself. As heroes and heroines, Vera Pavlovna, Lopukhov, Kirsanov, and especially Rakhmetov, represented the new generation with its critical realism and superior morality, while Vera Pavlovna's dress atelier marked a new type of cooperative social organization. Rakhmetov, at least, a dedicated ascetic revolutionary (as a type of revolutionary saint, Chernyshevsky came from a priest's family), ooked beyond personal problems and adjustments to the great day.

Chernyshevsky's closest collaborator and friend at the \textit{Contemporary} was a talented young literary critic, Nicholas Dobrolubov (1836--1861). Less learned than his mentor and without Chernyshevsky's philosophical background and great variety of interests, Dobrolubov embodied the new orientation in its pristine form. He believed in facts and in social progress, and he judged writers by their faithfulness in presenting the former and contributing to the latter. Even more than Chernyshevsky,
he clashed with the members of the preceding generation, in particular the famed
Westerners, as well as with many of his contemporaries. All these were “superfluous
men,” whether embodied in Lermontov’s Pechorin or in Goncharov’s Oblomov. The
cleavage, or rather the chasm, between the radicals and the liberals in Russia had
never been so strikingly presented. Herzen was stunned and enraged by the nature
and the ferocity of the attack. Dobroliubov’s literary criticism was, of course, highly
subjective, frequently substituting the critic’s ideas for those of the author, little con-
cerned with the aesthetic qualities of what he analyzed, and otherwise deficient. Yet it
gave a fine, impassioned expression to some of the main currents and attitudes of the
age. It is in that sense that such articles as “What is Obolonovism?” remain classics.
Dobroliubov died at the age of twenty-five of consumption.

Chernyshevsky, as already mentioned, gave strong support to the peasant com-

cults by his great prestige he had acquired in radical circles and
beyond. Yet he was far from idolizing the Russian agrarian institution: communal,
it merely represented the first stage in the three-stage evolution of human society,
and it deserved preservation and had a socialist future ony because the forthcoming
moment of socialism in the West would make it possible for Russia to bypass

capitalism and join the new socialist world. Yet Russia also contained some uncondi-
tional, almost idolatrous, admirers of the peasant commune. Most prominent
were Constantine Aksakov and the Slavophiles in general, with their glorification
of “a moral choir,” “a triumph of human spirit.” It is very likely that Herzen, who
had argued indefatigably the Westerner cause against the Slavophiles, turned
around, once he had migrated to the West, and borrowed the Slavophile arguments
to defend Russia to Michelet and other disparaging critics. In any case, Herzen’s
defense of the Russian peasant commune was much more emotional and spiritual
than Chernyshevsky’s, and, again, it was, apparently, influential. Bakunin too,
already a full-fledged anarchist, put his confidence in the peasant masses, with spe-
cial faith in their revolutionary nature, which needed only an initial spark to
explode. At the time, Russia was still 90 percent peasant, and that fact was bound
to be reflected in the ideologies, literature, and general culture of the country. It
also accounted for some peculiarities of the Russian radical and revolutionary
movement and for certain differences between it and its counterparts to the west.
However, the connections between the two sides, Russian and Western, still could be
observed, especially if the issue is considered in broad terms. As Martin Malia

data recently in the poetical manner:

The point here is that the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia, from its
inception in Left Hegelianism in the 1840s to the 1880s, was in constant sym-
biosis with German and French radicalism. In fact, in Russia no less than in
Germany or France, the Socialism of the intellectuals was a variant of mod-
ern Europe’s common quest for a perfect, egalitarian democracy founded on
the people. Russian Populism was not a radical species apart, as is usually
assumed; it was an adaptation to backward Russian conditions of a common European aspiration.

As the 1860s turned into the 1870s and the Russian radical and revolutionary movement continued its wayward course, some new populist writers became important and influential. The two most frequently mentioned as amplifying and deepening the doctrine of populism were Peter Lavrov (1823–1900) and Nicholas Mikhailovsky (1842–1904). Lavrov, a colonel and a professor of mathematics at the Artillery Academy, was also a philosopher, a historian of science, and a notable publicist. Linked to the radical movement in Russia, he was forced—and fortunate—to leave the country in 1869 and to continue his activities abroad, where he published the periodical Forward, first in Zurich, then in London, and, later edited the journal of the revolutionary society Will of the People from Geneva. Lavrov’s works included, among others, A Survey of the Issues in Practical Philosophy (1866), A Survey of the Physical and Mathematical Sciences (1866), A Survey of the History of Thought (1874), and Problems in Understanding History (1898), as well as a study of the Paris Commune, in which he had taken part. Lavrov became instantly famous and a leading figure on the Left with the appearance in 1868–1869 in the periodical the Week of his series of essays known under the general title Historical Letters.

A positivist, broadly speaking, Lavrov proposed to base his own view and activity, and by extension those of populism, on the so-called subjective sociology, a heroic, if not always consistent, effort to uphold the identity, importance, and efficacy of the individual in an age of science, materialism, and determinism:

The basic assumption of “subjective sociology” (an unfortunate and not particularly accurate label) can be summed up under three headings. First, it was a defense of ethical standards, and implied that men had the right to judge everything from their own point of view and to protest even against the “objective laws of history”—that indeed they were obliged to protest against human suffering even where the situation seemed hopeless. Second, it was an epistemological and methodological standpoint that disputed the possibility of “objective” knowledge in the social sciences; “subjectivism” in this sense implied that historical and sociological knowledge could never be really objective because they were colored by the scholar’s social position, his unconscious emotions, or consciously chosen ideals. Third, it was a philosophy of history that claimed that the “subjective factor”—human will and consciousness (expressed in the activity of a revolutionary party or in deliberate state intervention)—could effectively oppose the spontaneous-development trend and influence the course of history. For the Populist revolutionaries this last point was, of course, the most important; on it Lavrov based his “practical philosophy,” which proclaimed that by forming a party and establishing a common program “critically thinking individuals” could...
become a significant force capable of changing reality and realizing their "subjective" aims.\textsuperscript{10}

Critically thinking individuals were thus the true bearers of progress, and Lavrov was certain that they would perform their historical obligation. Indeed: "The development of personality in its physical, mental, and moral aspects, the incarnation of truth and justice in social forms—here is the brief formula, which encompasses, so it seems to me, all that can be considered progress." Or: "Progress is the process of development in humanity of a consciousness and incarnation of truth and justice, by means of the work of the critical thought of individuals on the material of their contemporary culture." And: "Any human being who thinks critically and decides to embody his thought in his life can be an agent of progress." Although it was the critically thinking individuals who advanced society, a disjunction between their interests and the interests of the masses was illusory:

The interests of an individual clearly understood demand that the individual attempt a realization of common interests; common aims can be obtained only in individuals. Therefore the true social theory demands neither a subordination of the social element to the individual, nor an absorption of the individual by society but a merging of the social and the individual interests. The individual must develop an understanding of social interests which are also those of the individual.\textsuperscript{11}

Science, philosophy, art, literature, all the advantages of critically thinking individuals were obtained at the price of heavy labor, ignorance, even savagery, of the masses. "History demanded victims." And: "A better historical future had to be won." Every critically thinking individual, therefore, had the choice of joining the struggle for progress, whatever the cost, or supinely watching the evil around him or her and, so to speak, sanctioning it. The figure of a repentant nobleman—Lavrov himself came from a landowning family—or, more broadly, of the debt of the intelligentsia to the people, is often associated with populism, received a rich and striking expression in Lavrov’s writing. In fact, even in his "anthropological" studies, Lavrov emphasized three phases in the development of the animal and human world: the original Hobbesian dog-eat-dog principle; the instinctive "unconscious solidarity" of certain species in the struggle for survival; and the human conscious solidarity.\textsuperscript{12} The peasant commune was thus to mark the Russian future and to swallow private property, although, characteristically, Lavrov also stressed the need to work with and to educate the people, because they were to carry out the transformation.

Nicholas Mikhailovsky has frequently been cited as an even more quintessential populist theoretician and intellectual than Lavrov. A leading literary critic and publicist, as well as a notable sociologist, Mikhailovsky provided a broad sociological doctrine for populism and at the same time wrote striking essays on more specific
topics. Rather constant n his views and determined in hs defense of the peasant commune and populism in a Russia that was becoming increasingly capitalist and increasingly the subject to Marxist and certain other approaches, the critic dotted his “i’s” and in the process provided much evidence for the interpretation of populism as a backward peasant utopia.

Like Lavrov, Mikhailovsky was deeply concerned with the relationship between the individual and the masses, and, again like Lavrov, he favored the subjective method in sociology, based on one's moral judgment. “As unconditioned justice is impossible for a human being, as pure art without tendentiousness is impossible, so is impossible an exclusively objective method in sociology. . . . The objective method avoids in a most coarse and crude way the evaluation of the inner meaning of phenomena and glides on their surface.” In fact, however, “the human individuality, its fate, its interests that is what . . . must be placed as the cornerstone of our theoretical thought in the area of social issues and of our practical activity.” Mikhailovsky too believed that there was no contradiction between the interests of the individual and of the people, stressing the consideration that the basic identification of the individual is the individual’s work, whereas the people constituted the working classes of society. The search for truth-verity (pravda-istina, objective truth) and truth-justice (pravda-spavedlivost, subjective truth, based on the social ideal) and their synthesis represented one of the fundamental problems of sociology, which Mikhailovsky was trying to resolve.

In turning from the individual to society, social history, and social evolution, Mikhailovsky relied heavily on his own rather peculiar sociological framework. He conceded that, as the Russian (or Baltic German) embryologist Karl Ernst von Baer and other scholars had established, in the organic world progress proceeded by means of an increasing complexity and differentiation. The human organism itself demonstrated this principle. But, Mikhailovsky insisted, not human society, because society is not an organism but a totality of indivisible organisms. "In an organism it is not parts, but the whole that suffers or rejoices, in society the opposite is true."

They keep repeating heir line: society progresses when like an organism it is subject to a differentiation and divides into several parts. Well and good, let society progress, but do understand that in that case the individual regresses. If one is to consider only this aspect of the matter, then society is the first, the nearest and the mos vicious enemy of the human being against which the human being must be constantly on guard.

Thus, a peasant in a village does everything himself: he is a carpenter, a cabinet-maker, a house-painter, a weaver, and so forth. Once he moves to town and to a factory, he specializes in one productive activity, or a part of such activity, and he forgets all the rest. Society gains from the shift, but the individual loses, for he sacrifices a harmonious, many-sided development of his integral personality. Mikhailovsky came to distinguish between the type and the level of development. In
the given example, the peasant belonged to a higher type of human being, although a skilled worker in a modern factory may well have reached a much higher level within his type. The critic postulated the following definition of progress:

Progress is the gradual approach towards the wholeness of individuals, towards the fullest and the most many-sided possible division of labor among human organs and the least possible division of labor among human beings. Immoral, unjust, irrational is everything that delays that development. Moral, just, wise, and useful is only that which diminishes the heterogeneity of society, thus strengthening the heterogeneity of its individual components.

Russia, and in particular the Russian peasant commune, embodied a higher type of social development than anything the West had to offer superior though the latter was in boosting to higher and higher levels the social institutions it did possess. Therefore, Russia could have its own historical evolution, avoiding the bourgeois system of Europe and relying instead on its native communal arrangements. In 1872 Mikhailovsky wrote:

In Europe the labor question is a revolutionary question, because there it demands a transfer of the means of production into the hands of the laborer, expropriating the present owners. The labor question in Russia is a conservative question, for here it demands only the preservation of the means of production in the hands of the laborer, a guarantee of what they own to the present owners. Here, right next to Petersburg, that is, in one of the most Anglicized localities, a locality sprinkled with factories, industrial plants, parks, summer houses, there are villages, the inhabitants of which live on their own land, burn their own wood, eat their own bread, dress in kaftans and coats of their own work, made from the wool of their own sheep. Give them a firm guarantee of that kind of their own, and the Russian labor question is solved. 12

Yet it is a measure of Mikhailovsky’s worry at the time and uncertainty for the future that, in spite of his radical credentials, he wanted the autocratic Russian government to guarantee the peasant commune and peasant property.

A reference to the spirit of the age and Russian radicalism helps us to understand the peculiar course of Russian history in the 1860s and 1870s. As the government proceeded with its necessary but, in a sense, unwelcome reforms, trouble quickly came to occupy center stage. In the early 1860s there were numerous peasant uprisings, student disturbances, even the still unexplained fires of 1862. Poland, which had received a liberal treatment from Alexander II, rose in 1863 in a mighty rebellion. And on April 4, 1866, Dmitri Karakozov, an unbalanced student and a revolutionary, attempted and barely failed to assassinate the emperor. To be sure, the Polish rebellion was defeated, and the rights of the Poles were further greatly
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reduced, with the government even receiving strong support, somewhat to its surprise, from Russian nationalists. Led by Katkov. But, especially after Karakozov’s shot, there seemed to be a continuous danger on the Left and a continuous struggle of the imperial government against the revolution, all the way to 1917.

Whereas in the 1860s revolutionary acts were usually individual and revolutionary circles embryonic, there were many more radicals in the 1870s, and they were better indoctrinated and organized. Populism by that time had become the dominant radical ideology in Russia. And while relatively few men and women appeared to be ready to take it to a murderous and revolutionary extreme, they seemed to have little difficulty in re-establishing their ranks and even profiting from a certain tolerance, if not approval, of broader layers of society.

The climax came in 1873, 1874, and the years immediately following. When in 1873 the imperial government ordered Russian students to abandon their studies in Switzerland—where Russians, especially women, could often pursue higher education more easily than in their fatherland—and return home, a considerable number of them, together with numerous other young men and women who had stayed in Russia, prepared to “go to the people.” And in the summer of 1874 they went to the villages, some two and a half thousand of them, to become rural teachers, scribes, doctors, veterinarians, nurses, or storekeepers. Some meant simply to help the people as best they could. Others nurtured vast revolutionary plans. In particular, the followers of Fakunin put their faith in a spontaneous, elemental, colossal revolution of the people, which they had merely to help start, while the disciples of Lavrov believed in the necessity of gradualism—more exactly, in the need for education and propaganda among the masses before they could overturn the old order and establish the new. The populist crusade failed. On the whole, the masses did not respond. The only significant uprising that the populists produced resulted from an impressive but forged manifesto in which the tsar ordered his loyal peasants to attack his enemies, the landlords. Indeed, the muzhiks on occasion handed over the strange newcomers from the cities to the police. The police, in turn, were frantically active, arresting all the crusaders they could find. Mass trials, of the 193 and of the 50 in 1877–1878, marked the sad conclusion of the “going to the people” stage of populism. The peasants, to repeat, would not revolt, nor could satisfactory conditions be established to train them for later revolutionary action.

Yet one more possibility of struggle remained: the one advocated by another populist theoretician, Peter Tkachev (1844–1886) and by an ardent and dedicated revolutionary, Sergei Nechaev (1847–1882). It was given the name “Jacobin,” in memory of the Jacobins who seized power to transform France during the great French Revolution. If the peasants would not act—and, according to Tkachev, they would never act on their own—it remained up to the revolutionaries themselves to fight and defeat the government. Tkachev believed in conspiracy, centralization, and discipline, as well as, it might be added, in contrast to the mainstream of populism, in a leveling of human beings rather than in a many-sided development of personalities. Several
years of revolutionary conspiracy, terrorism, and assassination ensued. The first instances of violence occurred more or less spontaneously, sometimes as countermeasures against brutal police officials. Thus, early in 1871, Vera Zasulich shot and wounded the military governor of St. Petersburg, General Fedor Trepov, who had ordered a political prisoner to be flogged; but, although there was no doubt concerning her action, a jury failed to convict her, with the result that political cases were withdrawn from regular judicial procedure. Ironically, Zasulich herself rejected terrorism as revolutionary strategy. But before long an organization emerged that consciously put terrorism at the center of its activity. The conspiratorial revolutionary society “Land and Freedom,” founded in 1876, split in 1879 into two groups: the “Black Partition,” or “Total Land Repartition,” which emphasized preparation and propaganda, and the “Will of the People,” which mounted an all-out terrorist offensive against the government. Members of the Will of the People believed that, because of the highly centralized nature of the Russian state, a few assassinations could do tremendous damage to the regime, as well as provide the requisite political instruction for the educated society and the masses. They selected the emperor, Alexander II, as their chief target and condemned him to death. What followed has been described as an “emperor hunt,” and in certain ways it defies imagination. The Executive Committee of the Will of the People included only about thirty men and women, led by such persons as Andrew Zheliazov, who was born a serf, and Sophia Perovskaya who came from Russia’s highest administrative class, but it fought the entire Russian Empire. Although the police made every effort to destroy the revolutionaries and although many terrorists perished, the Will of the People made one attempt after another to assassinate the emperor. Time and again Alexander II escaped through sheer luck. Many people were killed when the very dining room of the Winter Palace was blown up, while at one time the emperor’s security officials refused to let him leave his suburban residence, except by water! (The government was isolated further, and in a major way, by the extremely negative reaction in the country to the decisions of the Congress of Berlin, which in the summer of 1878, changed the provisions of the Treaty of San Stefano, a Russian diplomatic defeat for which the public held the government responsible.)

After the explosion in the Winter Palace and after being faced by industrial strikes, student disturbances, and a remarkable lack of sympathy on the part of the educated public, as well as by the dauntless terrorism of the Will of the People, the emperor finally decided on a more moderate policy that could lead to a rapprochement with the public. He appointed General Count Michael Loris-Melikov first as head of a special administrative commission and several months later as minister of the interior. Loris-Melikov was to suppress terrorism but also to propose reforms. Several moderate or liberal ministers replaced a number of reactionaries. Loris-Melikov’s plan called for the participation of representatives of the public, both elected and appointed, in considering administrative and financial reforms—not unlike the pattern followed in the abolition of serfdom. On March 13, 1881, Alexan-
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der II indicated his willingness to consider Loris-Melikov’s proposal. On the same
day, he was finally killed by the remaining members of the Will of the People.

Although it took Alexander II a number of months to change top personnel and
to make reactionary policy explicit, that policy was to continue to the end of his
reign, as well as in the reign of Nicholas II until the Revolution of 1905. The pro-
motors of reaction included Constantine Pobedonostsev, formerly a noted jurist at
the University of Moscow, who had served as tutor to Alexander and had become in
1880 the ober-pr procurator of the Holy Synod; Dmitri Tolstoy, who returned to
the government in 1882 to lead the Ministry of the Interior; and Ivan Delianov, who
took charge of the Ministry of Education in the same year. Pobedonostsev, the chief
theoretician as well as the leading practitioner of reaction in the last decades of the
nineteenth century, characteristically emphasized the weakness and viciousness of
man and the fallibility and dangers of human reason, hated the Industrial Revolu-
tion and the growth of cities, and even wanted “to keep people from inventing
things.” The state, he believed, had as its high purpose the maintenance of law,
order, stability, and unity. In Russia, that aim could be accomplished only by means
of autocracy and the Orthodox Church.

“Temporary Regulations” to protect state security and public order issued late in
the summer of 1881, gave officials in designated areas broad authority in dealing with
the press and with people who could threaten public order. Summary search,
arrest, imprisonment, exile, and prompt trials by courts-martial became common
occurrences in Russia.14 The Temporary Regulations were aimed primarily at the
Will of the People, which lasted long enough to offer the new ruler peace, on condi-
tions of political amnesty and the convocation of a constituent assembly! Although
the Will of the People had been largely destroyed, even before the assassination of
the emperor, and although most of its remaining members soon fell into the hands of
the police, the Temporary Regulations were not rescinded but instead applied, as
their vague wording permitted, to virtually anyone whom officials suspected or
simply disliked. For many years after the demise of the Will of the People, terrorism
died down in Russia, although occasional individual outbreaks occurred. Yet the
Temporary Regulations, introduced originally for three years, were renewed. Indeed,
the tsarist government relied on them during the rest of its existence, with the result
that Russians lived under something like a partial state of martial law.

Alexander III’s government also enacted “counterreforms” meant to curb the
swelling changes introduced by Alexander II and to su tress the centralized,
bureaucratic, and class nature of the Russian system. New press regulations made
the existence of radical journals impossible and the life of a mildly liberal press precarious.
The University Statute of 1884, which replaced the more liberal statute of 1863,
virtually abolished university autonomy and also emphasized that students were to
be considered as “individual visitors,” who had no right to form organizations or to
claim corporate representation. In fact most policies of the Ministry of Education,
whether they concerned the emphasis on classical languages in secondary schools,
the drastic curtailment of higher education for women, or the expansion of the role of
the Church in elementary teaching, consciously promoted the reactionary aims of
the regime.

The tsar and his associates used every opportunity to help the gentry and to
stress their leading position in Russia, as, for example, by the creation in 1885 of the
State Gentry Land Bank. At the same time, they imposed further restrictions on the
peasants, whom they considered to be essentially wards of the state rather than
mature citizens. The policies of bureaucratic control of the peasants and of empha-
sizing the role of the gentry in the countryside found expression in the most out-
standing “counterreform” of the reign, the establishment in 1889 of the office of
zemskii nachalnik—zemstvo chieftain, or land captain. That official—who had nothing
to do with the zemstvo self-government—was appointed and dismissed by the min-
ister of the interior, following the recommendation of the governor of the land cap-
tain’s province. His assigned task consisted in exercising direct bureaucratic
supervision over the peasants and, in effect, managing them. Thus the land captain
confirmed elected peasant officials, as well as decisions of peasant meetings, and he
could prevent the officials from exercising their office, and even fine, arrest, or
imprison them, although the fines imposed by the land captain could not exceed
several roubles and the prison sentences, several days. Moreover, land captains
received vast judicial powers, thus, contrary to the legislation of 1864, again com-
bining administration and justice. In fact, these appointed officials replaced for the
peasants—that is, for the vast majority of the people—elected and independent justi-
tices of the peace. The law of 1889 stipulated that land captains had to be appointed
from members of the local gentry who met a certain property qualification. Each
district received several land captains; each land captain administered several
velosts, that is, township or cantons. Russia obtained in this manner a new adminis-
trative network, one of land captaincies.

The following year, 1890, the government made certain significant changes in the
zemstvo system. The previous classification of landholders, that of 1864, had been
based only on the form of property, so that members of the gentry and other Rus-
sians who happened to hold land in individual ownership were not distinguished.
But in 1890 the members of the gentry became a distinct group—and their repre-
sentation was markedly increased. Peasants, on the other hand, could thenceforth
 elect only candidates for zemstvo seats, the governor making appointments to dis-
tric zemstvo assemblies from these candidates, as recommended by land captains.
In addition, the minister of the interior received the right to confirm chairmen of
zemstvo boards in their office, while members of the boards and their employees
were to be confirmed by their respective governors. In 1892, the town government
underwent a similar “counterreform,” which, among other provisions, sharply
raised the property requirement for the right to vote. After its enactment, the elec-
torate in St. Petersburg decreased from twenty-one thousand to eight thousand, and
that in Moscow from twenty thousand to as little as seven thousand.
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The reign of Alexander III also witnessed increased pressure on non-Orthodox denominations and a growth of the policy of Russification. Even Roman Catholics and Lutherans, who formed majorities in certain western areas of the empire and had unimpeachable international connections and recognition, faced discrimination: for instance, children of mixed marriages with the Orthodox automatically became Orthodox, and ill but the dominant Church were forbidden to engage in proselytizing. Old Believers and Russian sectarians suffered greater hardships. The government also began to oppose sharply non-Christian faiths, such as Islam and Buddhism, which had devoted adherents among the many peoples of the empire.

Russification went hand in hand with militant Orthodoxy, although the two were by no means identical, for peoples who were not Great Russians, such as the Ukrainians and the Georgians, belonged to the Orthodox Church. Although Russification had been practiced earlier against the Poles—especially in the western provinces following the rebellions of 1830–1831 and 1863 and to somewhat lesser extent in Poland proper—and was also apparent in the attempts to suppress the budding Ukrainian nationalism, it became a general policy of the Russian government only late in the nineteenth century. It represented in part a reaction against the growing national sentiments of different peoples of the empire with their implicit threats to the unity of the state and in part a response to the rising nationalism of the Great Russians themselves. Alexander III has often been considered the first nationalist on the Russian throne. Certainly, in his reign, measures of Russification began to be extended not only to the rebellious Poles but also, for example, to the Georgians and Armenians in Transcaucasia and even gradually to the loyal Finns.

The Jews, who were very numerous in western Russia as a result of the invitation of late medieval Polish kings, were bound to suffer in the new atmosphere of aggressive Orthodoxy and Russification. And indeed, old limitations came to be applied to them with a new force, while new legislation was enacted to establish additional curbs on them and their activities. In contrast to the former lax enforcement of rules, Jews came to be rigorously restricted to residence in the “Pole of Jewish Settlement,” that is, the area in western Russia where they had been living for a long time, with the added proviso that even within the Pale they could reside only in towns and smaller settlements inhabited by merchants and craftsmen, but not in the countryside. Educated or otherwise prominent Jews could usually surmount these restrictions, but the great bulk of the poor Jewish population was tied to its location. In 1887, the government established quotas for Jewish students in institutions of higher learning: 10 percent of the total enrollment within the Pale of Jewish Settlement, 5 percent in other provinces, and 3 percent in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In 1881, pogroms—the sad word entered the English language from the Russian—that is, violent popular outbreaks against the Jews, occurred in southwestern Russian towns and settlements, destroying Jewish property and sometimes taking Jewish lives. Pogroms were to recur sporadically until the end of imperial Russia. Local authorities often did little to prevent pogroms and on occasion, it is rather clear, even encouraged them. As
Pobedonostsev allegedly remarked, the Jewish problem in Russia was to be solved by the conversion to Orthodoxy of one-third of the Russian Jews, the emigration of
one-third, and the death of the remaining third. It should be added that the Russian
government defined Jews according to their religion; Jews who converted to Christi-
tiasm escaped the disabilities imposed on the others.

Nicholas II, Alexander III’s eldest son, born in 1868, became the autocratic ruler of
Russia after his father’s death in 1894. The last tsar possessed certain attractive
qualities, such as simplicity, modesty, and devotion to his family. Indeed the extent
of his patience and resignation to the will of God have become fully apparent only
with the publication of new documents after the fall of the Soviet regime. But
these positive personal traits, and even Christian virtues, nattered little in a situa-
tion that demanded strength, determination, adaptability, and vision. It might well
be argued that another Peter the Great could have saved the Romanovs and imperial
Russia. There can be no doubt that Nicholas II did not. In fact, he proved to be
both narrow-minded and weak, unable to remove reactionary blinders even when
circumstances forced him into entirely new situations with great potentialities,
and at the same time unable to manage even reaction effectively. The unfortu-
unate emperor struck many observers as peculiarly automatic in his attitudes and actions,
without the power of spontaneous decision, and—as his strangely colorless and
undifferentiating diary so clearly indicated—also quite deficient in perspective. Var-
ious, often unworthy, ministers made crucial decisions that the sovereign had failed
to evaluate. Later in the reign the empress, the reactionary, hysterical, and willful
German princess Alexandra, became the power behind the throne, and with her
evils such an incredible person as Rasputin was able to rise to the position of great-
est influence in the state. A good man, but a miserable ruler lost in the moment of
crisis—no wonder Nicholas II has often been compared to Louis XVI. As Trotsky
and other determinists have insisted, the archaic, rotten Russian system, which was
about to collapse, could not logically produce a leader much different from that
ineffective relic of the past. Or, as an old saying has it, the gods blind those whom
they want to destroy.

Reaction continued unimpeded. The new emperor, who had been a pupil of
Pobedonostsev, relied on the ober-procurator of the Holy Synod and on other reac-
tionaries, such as his ministers of the interior, Dmitri Sipagin and Viacheslav Ple-
shr. The government continued to apply and extend the Temporary Regulations, to
supervise the press with utmost severity, and, as best it could, to control and restrict
education. The zemstvo and municipal governments experienced further curtail-
ments of their jurisdictions. For example, in 1900 the limits of zemstvo taxation were
strictly fixed, and the stockpiling of food for emergency was taken away from zem-
stvo jurisdiction and transferred to that of the bureaucracy. Moreover, the authori-
ties often refused to confirm elections of zemstvo board members or appointments
of zemstvo employees, trying to ensure that only people of unimpeachable loyalty to
the regime would hold public positions of any kind.