Chapter 3

The prime of the Empire

It was in the eighteenth century that Russia became a major European power. The most spectacular rise in her international status occurred in the reign of Peter the Great (1682–1725). His Great Northern War against Sweden, concluded by the Treaty of Nystadt in 1721, secured for Russia her 'window on the West'. Her acquisitions included the territories that became modern Estonia and parts of those which became modern Latvia. Peter founded the new capital of St Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland to demonstrate Russia's permanent footing on the Baltic. Embassies were rapidly established in the capitals of Europe and the Imperial title he accepted from the newly created Senate was gradually recognized by his fellow monarchs.

During the mid-eighteenth century, without making major territorial gains, Russia significantly increased her influence both in the Baltic and in central Europe. This was reflected in her growing ascendancy over Poland, and in the new-found respect with which the major continental powers treated her. The cornerstone of over a century of Russian diplomacy was laid with the signing of a formal alliance with Austria in 1726. Under Anne (1730–40) the two eastern monarchies defeated French sponsorship of a candidate for the Polish throne. Under Elizabeth (1741–61), south-eastern Finland was annexed following victory over Sweden (1743), and Russian support for Austria in the Seven Years' War (1756–63) brought Prussia to the brink of ruin: Frederick the Great was saved only by the death of Elizabeth. In the south, although French support for Turkey postponed any decisive reckoning, the military balance was clearly moving in Russia's favour.

The reign of Catherine the Great (1762–96) saw the largest territorial acquisitions since the sixteenth century. The Empire expanded across a broad band of territory running from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and down to the Caucasus. Most satisfactory for Russia were the gains made at the

expense of Turkey. Until now Turkish protection of the Crimean Tatars had enabled them to launch repeated slave raids on Russian territory, prevented settled cultivation of wide areas of the Ukraine, and blocked Russian access to the Black Sea. The defeat of Turkey in the war of 1768–74, therefore, marked a major step in consolidating Russia's southern flank. By the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardzhi Russia acquired a Black Sea coastline. In 1783 she proceeded to annex the nominally independent Crimea and to construct a large Black Sea fleet. Turkey's efforts to reverse the verdict between 1787 and 1791 were unavailing and by the Treaty of Jassy she was compelled to acknowledge Russian rule across the northern coast of the Black Sea.

The Empire's expansion in central Europe was a much more qualified blessing. Recurrent Polish resistance to Russian domination encouraged Catherine to destroy the buffer state altogether. Russia's prolonged struggle with Turkey gave Prussia and Austria the leverage to ensure that they should benefit from the dismantling of Polish independence. By the partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795, therefore, Poland was carved up between the three powers and erased from the map. Russia's share included Lithuania, the remaining territories of modern Latvia, Belorussia, and the western Ukraine (with the exception of Galicia, which fell to Austria). Unlike the acquisition of the Black Sea coast, the Empire's new western border was marked by no natural barrier. Moreover, among the 7.5 million new subjects acquired were two national and religious minorities, Catholic Poles and Jews, who were destined for very different reasons to prove particularly disruptive to the Empire.

South of the Caucasus, Catherine had been invited to extend protection over the kingdom of Georgia, which was subject to encroachment by both Turkey and Persia. When at the end of his brief reign, Paul I (1796–1801) decided to annex the kingdom, Russia faced Georgian resistance and became involved in a long, if relatively untaxing, war with Persia (1804–13), which yielded most of eastern Transcaucasia. By Paul I's time, however, Russia's primary concern was with the destabilizing energy radiating from revolutionary France. Dissension among France's enemies broke up the Second Coalition, though not before Russia's most revered commander, Suvorov, had temporarily driven the French from northern Italy and conducted a legendary retreat through the Swiss Alps. Paul then allied briefly with Napoleon before he was assassinated in favour of his son, Alexander I (1801–25).

It fell to Alexander to bear the full brunt of Napoleon's ambition. Russian participation in the Third Coalition ended in disaster at Austerlitz (1805), but Alexander used the breathing-space afforded by the Treaty of Tilsit (1807) to good effect. He drastically lowered the price demanded from Turkey for an end to the war of 1806–12, accepting Bessarabia as adequate spoils, and having deprived Sweden of the remainder of Finland, he hastily concluded a treaty with her in 1812. That summer Napoleon assembled the

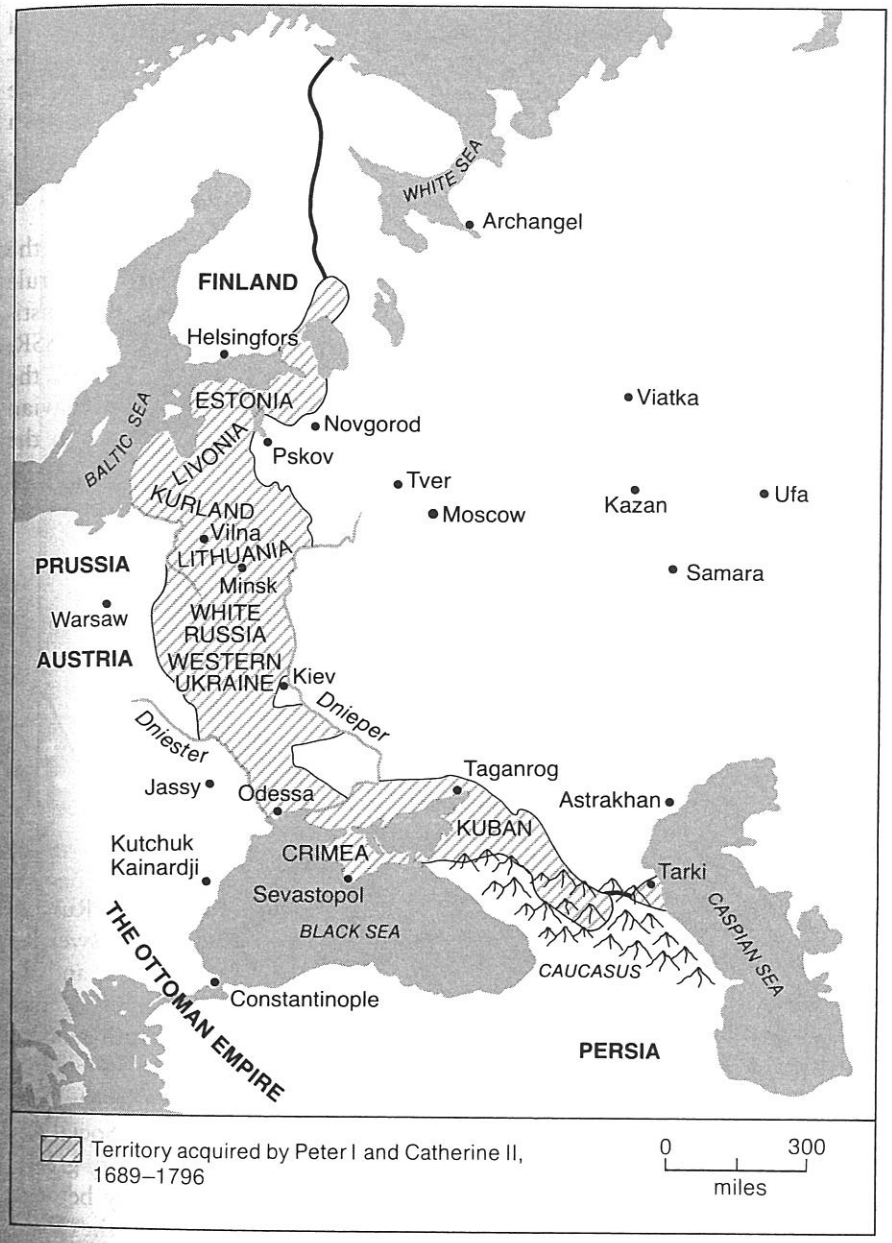
Grande Armée and in June invaded Russia through Poland. The Russians denied him the decisive pitched battle on which he had counted. The Armée's massive size proved a positive handicap to Napoleon as its supply problems became horrendous. By the time the French approached Moscow, General Kutuzov was ready to stand his ground. On 7 September[1] on the field of Borodino the Russians inflicted the worst savaging any army of Napoleon's had ever suffered, before withdrawing in good order. Moscow was abandoned, but Napoleon could make little use of its capture – especially since nine-tenths of the old capital was burned to the ground. As winter approached, Napoleon was unable to advance further, nor could he persuade the Tsar to negotiate. On 19 October the French Emperor turned for home. The retreating army was ravaged by hunger, cold, disease, and ever more audacious and vicious assaults by peasant partisans. Alexander insisted upon chasing the French all the way back to Paris. A relieved Russian establishment conferred upon him the title of 'the Blessed'. He had done what all Europe had failed to do: he had stopped Bonaparte.

Alexander extended Russia's borders further west than ever and they remained essentially unchanged until the First World War. Despite Allied opposition he reconstituted the much expanded Polish territory under his control as an independent kingdom linked to Russia through the person of the monarch. He created the Holy Alliance of Christian monarchs dedicated to peace and upholding the existing order, and in subsequent years urged Great Power intervention against revolutions in Spain, Piedmont, Naples and, with much less conviction, Orthodox Greece.

His brother Nicholas (1825–55) adopted an even more rigidly conservative approach towards the West. A fierce revolt in Poland in 1831 was crushed and the separate kingdom abolished. During the revolutions of 1848 he used his seemingly impregnable position to repress rebellion in Romania, to restore Habsburg control in Hungary, and to prevent constitutional change in Germany. Alexander the Blessed had been succeeded by 'the Gendarme of Europe'.

In fact, however, the Empire had passed its prime by Nicholas's time. Russia's armies were adequate to increase her influence in central Asia and to inflict further defeats on both Turkey and Persia, thereby extending Russian rule in the Caucasus, incorporating much of modern Armenia and Azerbaijan. They could deal with the ill-organized forces of eastern Europe's revolutionary outbursts. But their limitations were fully exposed in the course of the Crimean War (1853–56). Nicholas's government underrated the concern felt by Britain, France, and her traditional ally Austria over Russia's growing influence in the Balkans, and above all over the

[1] Between Peter I's calendar reform in 1699 and that of the Bolsheviks in 1918, Russia used the Julian calendar which was twelve days behind the West in the nineteenth century and thirteen in the twentieth.



Map 4 The western expansion of Russia under Peter I and Catherine II, 1689–1796

possibility that Constantinople might fall under her sway. Nicholas refused to back down from asserting his right to protect the Sultan's Orthodox subjects, Turkey declared war, and Britain and France came to her aid. In the ensuing conflict Russia was defeated at sea and humiliated on her own doorstep by the fall of her Crimean naval base at Sevastopol. She was compelled to sue for peace, and under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, was disarmed on the Black Sea.

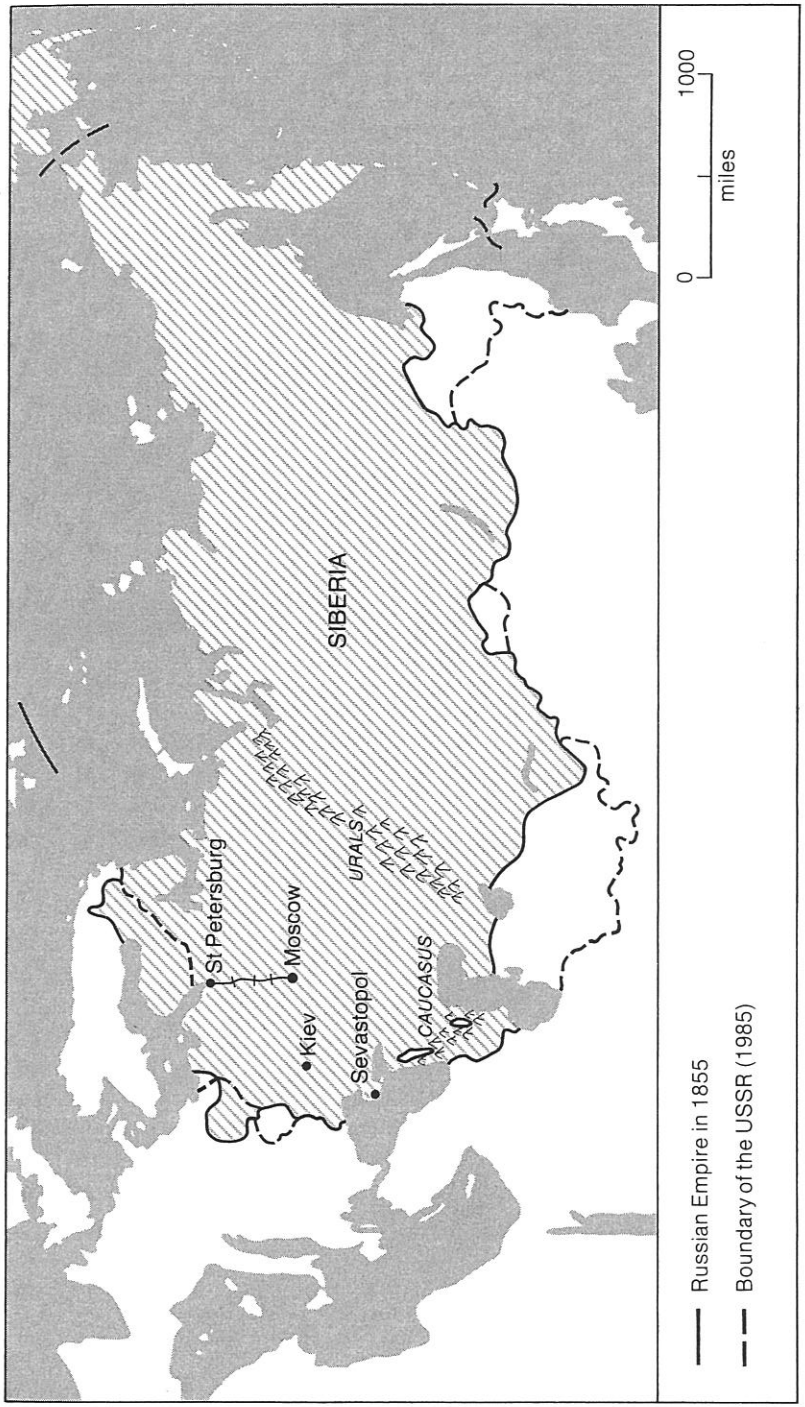
In the century and a half before the Crimean War, however, the Empire had brought a rich array of peoples under her sway. Russian rule had been extended over most of the territory which would one day constitute ten of the fourteen 'Union Republics' united with Russia in the USSR: to the north, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; to the west, Belorussia, the Ukraine and Bessarabia (which would form the nucleus of the Moldavian Republic); in the Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan; and in the south, Kazakhstan.[2]

Table 3.1 The Imperial succession

1682–1725	Peter I – the Great
1725–1727	Catherine I
1727–1730	Peter II
1730–1740	Anne
1740–1741	Ivan VI
1741–1761	Elizabeth
1761–1762	Peter III
1762–1796	Catherine II – the Great
1796–1801	Paul
1801–1825	Alexander I
1825–1855	Nicholas I

How are this massive expansion and the remorseless rise in Russia's international prestige to be explained? A significant part of the answer lies in the social, economic, and political problems of her neighbours, and the pattern of their diplomatic manoeuvres. The remarkable ascent of Swedish power from a tiny base was doomed to retraction in the eighteenth century, and Russia was the natural beneficiary. Poland's collapse owed as much to the failure of her serf-owning nobility to cooperate behind a powerful central government and army as to the exertions of her neighbours. Social and economic stagnation ensured Turkey's decline (and to an even greater extent Persia's) compared to Europe's major powers. The rivalry between Austria and Prussia, and their involvement in the wars of the West, increased Russia's weight in central and eastern Europe.

[2] The territory that would constitute the other 4 Union Republics – the Central Asian Republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan and Kirgizia – was acquired in the latter part of the nineteenth century.



Map 5 The Russian Empire by 1855

Yet this provides only a part of the explanation. In order to benefit from favourable international developments, indeed in order to avoid falling victim herself to the volatile diplomacy of the period, Russia had to mobilize her resources far more effectively than she had under Peter's predecessors. It was his success in mobilizing men, arms, ships, and provisions which was most characteristic of Peter's reign. He abolished the *streltsy* and the old service cavalry altogether and, building on Muscovy's new-formation regiments, he completed the construction of a regular standing army. It became possible to instil the drill, discipline, and skills required to make the army an effective fighting force. It became possible to standardize the *matériel* and develop strategy in a way that had been beyond Muscovy's capabilities.

The Petrine military system remained unchanged in essentials until after the Crimean War. The rank and file were drawn from forced levies laid upon the tax-paying population. Service was for life: this was reduced to twenty-five years at the end of the eighteenth century, but all too often the difference was purely nominal. The officers were drawn from the nobility. Peter made service in the army or the civil administration compulsory and lifelong for all noblemen. The term of service was reduced by his successors and in 1762 it was made voluntary, but the great bulk of the officer corps continued to be staffed by hereditary noblemen. During the eighteenth century the irregular Cossack hosts were gradually brought under control and absorbed into the regular army. Although the government was cautious about enrolling men from newly incorporated minorities, the size of the army rose in line with the population – which increased from some 15 million under Peter to double that figure under Catherine II and reached about 67 million by the 1850s.

At the same time as Russia became a leading military power she began to develop a considerable naval capacity as well. Peter founded the navy out of virtually nothing, recruiting officers and sailors in the same way as for the army, and used it to good effect against the Swedes. Renewed progress was made, after a prolonged period of decline, when Catherine II's acquisition of the northern coast of the Black Sea initiated a major shipbuilding programme.

The shift from short-term mercenary troops, from unreliable feudal levies, and part-time forces expected to earn their own living was undertaken by most of the powers of early modern Europe. Success depended upon discovering ways to supply the standing army. In Russia, rank-and-file wages were kept very low, and throughout the period Russian regiments supplied many of their own needs, a high proportion of 'soldiers' serving as tailors, carpenters, cobblers, and so forth. In peacetime, regiments were billeted upon towns and villages. Nevertheless, it was necessary to raise and administer far more revenue than Muscovy had ever handled. At the centre Peter created a governing Senate to oversee all administration. He replaced the overlapping chancelleries with colleges in which efficiency was supposed

to be ensured by the mutual responsibility of thirteen top officials in each, and which, at least in theory, had more clearly defined duties. Under Alexander I they were, in turn, replaced by distinctly more effective ministries. At the local level Peter left tax collection to the army, dealing through intermediaries chosen by the peasantry and townsmen themselves. From Catherine II's reign the local administration began to expand, and although the number of officials remained minuscule the system sufficed to meet the needs of the army.

Peter's reign saw the most dramatic leap in the revenue raised by the State. It is estimated that he trebled it in real terms – and this at a time when the population was stagnant. His most important innovation was the poll-tax in place of the household tax, which the peasantry had been able partially to evade by merging households. The poll-tax, a fixed annual levy placed on all tax-paying males regardless of age, together with the rent extracted from state peasants, formed the basis of state revenue for over a century. In addition Peter imposed an astonishing range of indirect taxes, on everything from beards to blue eyes, the most important being those on alcohol and salt. In the nineteenth century, as the pace of domestic and foreign commerce quickened, indirect taxes gradually yielded more than the poll-tax. Peter also greatly increased the subventions paid out of church revenue towards the needs of the State, a process which culminated in the secularization of church property in the 1760s. Peter himself achieved a balanced budget, but his successors found it necessary to supplement their income by resorting to ever larger foreign loans.

With the help of the army, then, Peter and his successors were able to squeeze more revenue from the population. But the State's increased income also reflected significant economic development from Peter's reign onwards. Forced labour was used to found metallurgical and textile industries, making Russia self-sufficient in arms and uniforms. The major step in agriculture was the opening-up of the rich lands of the Ukraine as Russian rule was consolidated against Turks, Crimean Tatars, and Cossacks, while the establishment of outlets to the Baltic and then to the Black Sea greatly expanded foreign trade.

Once the industrial and social changes which were transforming the West during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries began to find military expression, of course, the limits of Russia's resources would be fully exposed. Handicapped by serfdom, primitive agricultural methods, and the far-flung, inconvenient location of her natural resources, it was impossible for her to keep pace. The most graphic illustration of her rapid relative industrial and technological decline is provided by figures for production of pig-iron. Whereas in the 1780s she produced twice as much as her closest competitor, Great Britain, by the end of the Crimean War she had been overtaken by Belgium, France was exceeding her output threefold, and Britain no less than fourteenfold. The army itself constituted a major drain

on the economy. It numbered well over a million men by Nicholas's day. Annual recruitment had to be even heavier than this total suggests, since well into the nineteenth century a high percentage of recruits died before even reaching their regiments and disease took a heavy toll among established troops. Yet the government found it impossible to reduce the size of the army. The extended frontiers, the recurrent danger of resistance from national minorities, and the permanent threat of peasant disturbances necessitated a huge military presence. Nor could the standing army be cut by building up a reserve since trained men, automatically liberated when drafted, could hardly be returned to enserfed villages. Russia's defeat in the Crimean War certainly owed something to poor leadership and complacency at the top. But in an age of railways and steam-power it became increasingly difficult for her to compete. Her army and navy were becoming antiquated.

The State which organized the Empire's military effort is described in both Soviet and Western historiography as an 'absolute monarchy'. The label draws attention to three important developments which distinguish it from the early Romanov State. In the first place, the creation of a regular standing army marked a qualitative change in the authority of the monarchy. Whereas Muscovy's *streltsy* and pomeshchiks had proved thoroughly unreliable and resistant to central organization and discipline, Peter bequeathed a military machine responsive to hierarchical control. The last traces of independence within the military establishment were removed and the State's powers of coercion greatly enhanced.

The second major departure was the *coup de grâce* administered to the Church, the one institution outside the State with which Muscovite monarchs had been compelled to reckon. Peter firmly subjugated the Church to the State. The Patriarchate was abolished and ecclesiastical administration taken over by the Holy Synod (1721), a department of State headed by a layman. After the secularization of church lands, initiated during the brief reign of Peter III (1761–62) but completed by Catherine II, the clergy became salaried employees of the State. The political independence of the hierarchy was broken.

Finally, from the time of Peter the Great decision-making power was concentrated in undiluted form in the hands of the monarch. Peter ceased appointing his most trusted aides to the Boyars' Duma, the Duma's residual right to be consulted went by default, and the institution withered away. The *Zemsky sobor*, whose role in decision-making had never approached the status of a right, disappeared altogether. The nearest thing to a *Zemsky sobor* summoned by Peter's successors was Catherine II's Legislative Commission (1766–68). It helped make the government conscious of some

3.1 Peter the Great. A portrait celebrating the Imperial status conferred upon the Tsar by the Senate following his victory over Sweden.

of the preoccupations of nobility and townsmen, but when its proceedings were interrupted by the Turkish War, Catherine allowed the experiment to lapse. Nor did any of the projects for constitutional constraints upon the Tsar's discretion bear fruit. The only major attempt to impose terms on the Crown was made in 1730, when Peter's daughter, Anne, was offered the throne. The Supreme Privy Council, established during the reign of Peter's widow Catherine (1725–27), sought to establish the right to participation in, and an effective veto over, all major policy decisions. Although the Empress submitted momentarily, divisions within the nobility enabled her to tear up the councillors' terms. Both Catherine II and Alexander I were urged early in their reigns to make significant if less dramatic institutional reforms, but in neither case could the reformers mobilize strong pressure upon the monarchs to consent. The more sophisticated projects drawn up by Speransky in 1809 and Novosiltsev in 1819 were made at Alexander's instigation and fell to the ground the moment he lost enthusiasm. Thus no institutional check upon the Tsar was established. Even when the incumbent on the throne showed little inclination for active policy-making, those who acted for the Tsar owed their power solely to proximity to the throne.

These developments concentrated enormous power in the hands of the individual on the throne. His or her personality and judgement were of most significance in the fields of foreign and military affairs. There were of course major guidelines within which even the most idiosyncratic monarch would operate: security in the west, a steady probing towards outlets in the Baltic and the Black Sea, incremental expansion and pacification in the south-east. Yet major strategic decisions could depend very much upon the will of the monarch. The grim determination with which Peter the Great restored the army after the disaster at Narva (1700), and risked all in the decisive battle against the Swedes at Poltava (1709), reflected in large measure his own indomitable, exuberant, ruthless personality. Peter III was personally responsible for the abrupt cessation of hostilities against a prostrate Prussia in the midst of the Seven Years' War. Alexander I rebuffed repeated advice that he come to terms with Napoleon during the French invasion. The Crimean War was as much the product of Nicholas's own judgement – or misjudgement – as of any irresistible pressure upon him. There was plenty of room for sheer caprice: Paul I's order for an overland march across unmapped territory to wrest India from the British was only the most bizarre instance. Military organization, too, owed much to the whim of the Tsar. Virtually all the Romanovs from Peter's time took limitless pleasure in the glitter and order of parade-ground drill, thereby seriously diminishing the emphasis on combat training. Equally striking was Alexander I's experiment with 'military colonies', which was very much his own pet scheme. He envisaged combining farming and family life with military service in idyllic rural settlements. But the colonies were run on a shoe-string and generated explosive tensions; both officers and men loathed the system, and the

attempt to make it pay by imposing the most detailed and humiliating regulations sparked off repeated risings. With over a third of the standing army enrolled in the colonies, the situation became dangerous and Nicholas phased them out.

For all the Tsar's power over the army, where domestic affairs are concerned the phrase 'absolute monarchy' may obscure as much as it reveals. It conjures up the picture of an omnipotent and independent sovereign – the image actively cultivated by the ideology of Tsarism. It was this image of the disinterested and all-powerful Tsar which so endeared the 'little father' to generations of Russian serfs. And the myth was sincerely believed by many of the monarchs themselves. Their personal responsibility for decision-making seemed to elevate them above the social struggle, to make them neutral arbiters between the competing interests of nobles, townsmen, and peasants. Paul I was the last Tsar who actually enjoyed his office. His successors were weighed down by the sense of duty. Nicholas wore himself out seeking to keep control over every conceivable decision in his own hands, so convinced was he that the sovereign alone could perceive the common good. This supposition informs much Imperial legislation and permeates many liberal treatments of the nature of state power. Yet the reality was different. Although the post-Petrine State was much more formidable than that of Muscovy, there remained very real constraints upon the options open to the Tsar. These were of two kinds: those deriving from the social structure on which the monarchy rested, and those implicit in the rudimentary nature of the administrative instruments at the Tsar's disposal.

In a society based on serfdom, order depended upon upholding the authority of the serf-owners. To subvert them would be to incite peasant revolts even more threatening than those which punctuated the eighteenth century. It was simply inconceivable for the monarchy to contemplate sweeping away the nobility. This is not to deny that the monarchs themselves became increasingly conscious of the social tension, economic stagnation, and moral evil implicit in serfdom. Tsar after tsar floated notions of at least ameliorating the virtual slavery of the peasantry. Alexander I refrained from reimposing serfdom in the Polish territory he acquired, and between 1816 and 1819 he gave to the peasants of the three Baltic provinces the doubtful blessing of landless emancipation. Nicholas set up no less than nine secret committees to consider the issue. Yet each tsar was advised against drastic action and each duly backed away. To tamper with serfdom was certain to arouse wild expectations among the peasantry and would require the most rigorous control. Should the nobility refuse to cooperate, the monarchy would be left high and dry and the monarch himself would be unlikely to survive. Nothing could be done without noble acquiescence.

The effective veto that the nobility exercised over this most central issue of social life was guaranteed by the whole structure of the State. The army, the Tsar's ultimate weapon, was commanded by noblemen. The

influence this gave to the nobility was most clearly demonstrated in the role played by the elite Guards regiments in settling the succession struggles in the period between the reigns of Peter I and Catherine II. Should a wayward tsar stray too far from the path approved by the nobility, he or she could be replaced. Nor was noble influence brought to bear only in moments of crisis. In the eighteenth century the civil administration was overwhelmingly staffed by men of noble origin. Thereafter the proportion of commoners began to rise, but the upper reaches remained wholly dominated by the nobility: at Nicholas's death 70 per cent of the highest ranking bureaucrats were landowners, often possessing vast estates. Despite the arrival of occasional parvenus such as Speransky in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Tsar was surrounded by military and civil advisers who were bound by the strongest bonds to the serf-owning nobility. And the royal family itself, despite intermarriage with foreign royalty and its unique treatment in law, lived and moved within the milieu of Russia's aristocracy.

It is in this context that the absence of any corporate forum through which the nobility could participate in decision-making should be understood. Various secondary explanations for the Russian nobility's failure to mount a *fronde* against the Crown can be adduced. Court politics were pursued within a context of competition between rival patronage groups. Senior officials inevitably tended to view any proposals for constitutional reform or institutional innovation according to the impact that would be made upon their own position and that of their clientele. This made it impossible for those who did advance reform proposals, such as Panin under Catherine II and Pahlen under Alexander I, to organize united pressure upon the Tsar to compromise royal authority. Moreover, outside Moscow and St Petersburg political consciousness among landowners remained weak. Not until Catherine II deliberately established permanent provincial assemblies of the nobility (1785) were there any estate institutions in which pressure upon the central government might gather momentum – and even then the assemblies remained passive and ill-attended. As in the seventeenth century, the development of political consciousness was inhibited by the low cultural level of provincial noblemen, and by the differences in outlook between noblemen of different regions and different degrees of wealth. In any case, the career patterns of service to the State and the rapid fragmentation of noble estates, divided among several heirs, continued to deprive them of strong local ties comparable with those of British and French noblemen. But the fundamental explanation for the absence of political confrontation between Crown and nobility remained the community of interest between them. The need both for foreign and domestic security was evident to all. It was royal troops who drove out Poles, Swedes, Turks, and Frenchmen; it was government forces which kept the serf in his place. The fate of Poland demonstrated the price to be paid for oligarchic fracturing of state power; the Pugachev rebellion (see below, pp. 58–9) (1773–74) demonstrated all too brutally the need to buttress the Tsar's authority. Only when the Crown showed itself unable or unwilling to uphold their serf-owning authority would the nobility be motivated to question the Tsar's 'absolute' power.

Individually, the Russian nobleman continued into the eighteenth century to enjoy much less security under the law than his Western counterpart. The ruthless punishment meted out to senior officials who fell from favour reflected the general lack of legal safeguards for life and property. Yet, while bureaucratic power over commoners remained capricious right into the nineteenth century, steady progress was made in entrenching the individual rights of noblemen. From the mid-eighteenth century, in theory at least, they could not lose rank, estate, honour, or life without trial by their peers, and they became immune to corporal punishment. Catherine's Charter to the Nobility of 1785, which formally confirmed these rights, also recognized their absolute property rights and exemption from personal taxation and billeting obligations. Not the least of the offences which led to Paul's assassination in 1801 was his contemptuous treatment of courtiers. Noble sense of personal dignity had passed the point where such treatment was tolerable.

The constraints imposed upon the State by the interests of the nobility are sometimes overlooked because of its apparent collective vulnerability to state interference. Yet such interference was possible for only one ruler of Imperial Russia: Peter the Great. The creation of a regular army and somewhat more effective administrative apparatus enabled him briefly to force the pace of change in the face of widespread noble hostility. The astonishing range of innovations made by this tireless giant of a man gave contemporary noblemen – never mind humbler folk – the sense of being in the hands of some alien, elemental force. His most striking imposition on the nobility was the introduction of compulsory, lifelong service to the State. All noblemen over the age of 15 were to register for service and proceed through the fourteen grades of a carefully constructed Table of Ranks (1722) drawn up for military, civil, and court service. He succeeded in forcing several thousand nobles into service by threatening them with loss of status and land. No other eighteenth-century European elite was so ruthlessly dragooned.

Yet even Peter's ascendancy over the nobility must not be exaggerated. The most prominent families had no objection to service – it had long offered them the surest route to power, wealth, and prestige. Those who did object found various means of evasion, and in any case, within a very brief period, the initially reluctant provincial nobility became acclimatized. During the succession crisis of 1730 complaints against compulsory service were barely audible even among the lesser nobility. In 1736 the period of service was cut to twenty-five years, and in 1762 Peter III abolished compulsory service altogether. By the time of Catherine's Legislative Commission (1766–68), the predominant concern among the nobility was to exclude

commoners from the Table of Ranks. Even the middle-ranking provincial posts continued to attract humbler noblemen who often took them up after retiring from the army. Once they had acquired the taste, a service career became increasingly attractive to them. It offered wider horizons, higher status, an opportunity to wield power, and, above all, a valuable source of income. Through the fruits of office a significant proportion of the payments imposed on the taxable population flowed to the nobility. They made Peter's creation their own.

The symbiotic relationship between State and nobility limited the scope of state power and conditioned government policy. The most fundamental limitation concerned jurisdiction over private serfs. Provided the landlord ensured that his serfs' poll-tax did not fall too far into arrears, he was left to his own devices. During the eighteenth century the State acknowledged his right to punish to the point of death a serf who displeased him, to enrol him in the army, to exile him to Siberia, to trade and dispose of his human property as he pleased. Catherine explicitly denied the serf's right to appeal to the State against his master's treatment. Private serfs, some 46 per cent of the total peasant population at Nicholas's death and concentrated in the most fertile areas of the Empire, were beyond the reach of the State.

A large portion of the State's scarce resources was absorbed in upholding the serf-owners' authority and subsidizing their income. Throughout the eighteenth century peasant flight, resistance, murder, and revolt were endemic, and the incidence of peasant disturbance began to rise again soon after the Napoleonic Wars. Government forces had constantly to be at hand. Nor was government aid to the landlord restricted to armed assistance. Despite the opportunities opened out from the late eighteenth century by an expanding grain trade, a marked increase in the land available, and a steady rise in labour and money dues extracted from the peasantry, the nobility found it difficult to make ends meet. Through the agency of the Nobles' Bank established in 1754, and later the State Loan Bank, the State issued massive loans to sustain them. In 1762 commoners were forbidden to purchase serfs, thereby giving noble industrialists a temporary advantage since hired labour was still scarce. By steadily eroding the townsmen's monopoly over urban trade and craft, the State assisted not only serf entrepreneurs but also their noble masters who claimed much of their profit in the form of quit-rent. Since noble interests were not always uniform, deference to their wishes did not dictate all the Tsar's major decisions, but it did inform every sphere, including the fiscal, commercial, and, very often, the tariff policy of the State.

Dependence on the nobility was not the only constraint upon the

3.2 Catherine the Great. A nineteenth-century lithograph marking the centenary of Catherine's Legislative Commission (1766–68).

'absolute monarchy'. Even where noble interests constituted no barrier, the government's effective power was severely limited by the rudimentary nature of the bureaucratic apparatus available to it. The Tsarist Civil Service was small, ill-trained, and corrupt. Peter almost doubled Muscovy's few thousand administrative posts, but his successors cut the number so that in the mid-eighteenth century the total was still little over 10,000. Catherine II sharply increased the number, which reached about 38,000 by the end of the century, and in the nineteenth century steady expansion set in, bringing the total to some 114,000 by Nicholas I's death. Yet, although the number of officials for every 2,000 head of population rose from one in the 1750s to about four in the 1850s, the proportion was still incomparably lower than that prevailing in the West. Even in the towns, where officials were concentrated, the government had to rely right into the nineteenth century on reluctant elected townsmen to carry out a host of fiscal, economic, and general administrative functions. Although the government found the 'service city' far from satisfactory, it was not until Catherine II's reign that centrally appointed officials began to take over many of these functions. Some strata of the urban population were still apportioning and collecting their own tax dues in Nicholas I's reign. As for rural Russia, although local officials did begin to relieve landlords of some of their policing duties in the early nineteenth century, it remained palpably undergoverned.

Officials underwent no formal education in the eighteenth century, and in the early nineteenth the level of education in the provincial offices remained very low. Efforts by Alexander I's reforming minister, Speransky, to make promotion dependent upon examinations were frustrated by opposition from officials. Not until the end of the Napoleonic Wars did increased specialization effect a sharp drop in the number of transfers from military to civil service. The preference given to hereditary nobles, and the free exercise of patronage, retarded the establishment of administrative ability as the major criterion for promotion.

What aggravated the problem of developing a genuine bureaucracy was the paltry level of salaries. Catherine laid it down that every post should be paid, but the limited funds set aside by the government were rapidly eroded by inflation. The result was a level of corruption which became proverbial. Officials from the highest to the lowest subsidized themselves by creaming off state revenue and taking bribes – a modern version of Muscovy's 'feeding' system. In the absence of any clear division between administrative and judicial functions, even the humblest official enjoyed arbitrary power. The haphazard state of the law left bribery the only effective method by which individual commoners could cushion the action and demands of officials.

The result was a morass of confusion. It was impossible for the government to derive any clear picture of its own administrative apparatus, let alone of the distribution of resources in the Empire. When under

Nicholas the governor of each province was instructed to draw up an annual report, the information supplied was hopelessly vague and did nothing to identify the major weaknesses and problems of the administration. Nicholas frankly admitted that for the most part the reports were a pack of lies. As late as the 1850s local offices kept no regular accounts. Even where it was possible to draw up useful statistics, local officials were reluctant to forward information which might increase the demands made upon them by their superiors in St Petersburg.

Repeated attempts were made to rationalize the system. Building on Peter's efforts, Catherine II restructured local government (1775) by dividing the Empire into fifty tidy provinces, subdivided into districts, each with its own administrative centre. Admirable as such schemes seemed from St Petersburg, they looked very different on the ground: it was reported from one 'city' designated an administrative hub that no one had entered or left it for three months. At the centre some progress was made. Alexander's ministries, each with a clearly defined function and headed by a single official, represented a distinct improvement on the old colleges. Perhaps the most important achievement of Nicholas's reign was the codification of the laws: the publication of an authoritative digest in 1835 made it possible at least to begin to impose standard procedures on the bureaucracy. The institutes of higher education and jurisprudence established in the early nineteenth century began to train a small number of highly competent officials who consciously broke with the haphazard approach of the past.

Yet to the end of the period the central government expressed intense frustration at its inability to carry out its policies. Tsar after tsar resorted to officials outside the regular hierarchy or appointed 'watchdogs' – fiscals, procurators, inspectors, Nicholas's notorious police of the Third Section – to supervise and expose maladministration. One motive behind the efforts of both Peter and Catherine to enhance the role of elective institutions among nobility and townsmen was to discipline appointed officials. But the impossibility of relying upon orderly execution generated a mass of unproductive paper-work. Much of the bureaucracy's time was absorbed in checking and double-checking its own work.

Backed by the army, the administration was generally able to keep a semblance of order, to crush peasant insubordination, and to gather at least a proportion of the taxes decreed. But it could not begin to realize the grandiose schemes dreamed up in St Petersburg to establish schools, orphanages, hospitals, clinics, veterinary services, insurance funds, grain stores, and so forth. Viewed from the Winter Palace the much-vaunted power of the monarchy seemed distinctly overrated.

For Russia's commoners, of course, the frustration experienced by the central government did nothing to make the burdens imposed by the State any less onerous. In many ways the capricious and unconstructive nature of the administration made its demands weigh even more heavily. For the

government gave so little in return: the roads remained abysmal, the judicial system tortuously slow and arbitrary, the educational and health facilities minimal. And the constant drain from the cities, in cash and service, retarded capital accumulation, technical advance, the development of independent urban culture, institutions, and political assertiveness.

It is true that despite her natural handicaps and the overriding barrier to mobility and enterprise represented by serfdom, Russia's non-agricultural economy did expand substantially in the period. The military-oriented industries founded by Peter on forced labour gradually gave way to more diversified manufacture based on hired labour (generally serfs still sending payments back to their villages). The domestic market grew as the demands by government and nobility for cash forced increasing numbers of peasants into handicraft production and petty commerce. The abolition of internal customs tolls in 1775 provided a major stimulus. Regional specialization developed, the major division of labour being between the grain-surplus areas of the south and the grain-deficit areas of the north and centre. Foreign trade responded to the opportunities opened up by the outlets to the Baltic and later the Black Sea, grain becoming the major export. The quickening pace of commerce increased the urban population: a mere 3 per cent of the population in 1700, it rose to about 8 per cent in 1800 and reached around 11 per cent by the 1850s.

But this urban growth was not matched by commensurate development of a bourgeoisie comparable to that of many parts of the West. Leadership might have been expected from the more substantial merchants, members of the elite merchant guilds established by Peter and reformed by Catherine. Instead their political energy was absorbed in enhancing the privileges of guild membership, seeking exemption from as many of the burdens of the 'service city' as possible, and distancing themselves from petty traders. In any case, during the eighteenth century the basic manufacturing sectors were dominated by noblemen, socially far removed from the merchants. The ravages of the Napoleonic Wars hit the merchant guilds particularly hard. And when their membership began to recover and expand, and the noble grip on industry to slip, the influx came largely from successful peasant entrepreneurs. Culturally deprived and still closely tied to the village, the latter did nothing to raise the level of sophistication or political consciousness of the proto-bourgeoisie.

The most dynamic economic growth took place on the periphery of the Empire – in Poland and the south – and here ethnic divisions and sheer distance from the political centre acted as further constraints. A high proportion of merchants in the textile-dominated Moscow region belonged to the inward-looking Old Believer tradition. Many of the most wealthy merchants and industrialists were to be found in St Petersburg, where Peter had done his best to concentrate commercial activity. It was here that in 1846 a revised version of Catherine's largely unsuccessful Charter to the Towns

(1785) created the first urban institutions capable of significantly improving local amenities. Yet the capital's merchants were made particularly conscious of their dependence upon government favour and contracts, and this inhibited any coherent assertion of non-noble interests. The one issue upon which the merchants felt most sure of their ground in petitioning the government concerned the stranglehold on foreign trade by foreign companies. Yet as late as the 1840s foreign entrepreneurs controlled 90 per cent of Russia's imports and 97 per cent of her exports, besides making considerable inroads into domestic commerce. Even here Russia's middle class could not mount a significant campaign. Their political weight remained minimal.

If the townsmen found difficulty in making their voice heard, unyielding resistance to pressure from the rural masses was the primary domestic function of the State. Worst off were the private serfs, whose numbers grew with the extension of serfdom to the Ukraine and the newly settled lands of the south. Since the State virtually abdicated all responsibility for their welfare, they were at the mercy of their masters. There was a remorseless rise in the demands made upon them, especially from the late eighteenth century. State peasants, who as a percentage of the rural population grew to about 54 per cent by the time of the Crimean War, fared little better. They continued to enjoy rather more autonomy in running their own affairs, but the state officials who dealt with them were scarcely less rapacious than landlords. Theoretically the government had greater leeway to introduce reforms to improve their conditions and increase their productivity. But the efforts in this direction of Nicholas's Minister for State Domains, Kiselev, foundered on the chronic inability of the central government to discipline its local officials.

Both government and landlords continued to uphold the peasant commune as a convenient instrument for apportioning tax, labour dues and, in many areas, allotments of land. As the tax burden rose and the shortage of land available to peasants worsened, the practice of land repartition became increasingly widespread and entrenched. The effect was to weaken further the peasant notion of household or any other form of private landownership, strengthen their egalitarianism, and deepen their resentment against the rights and property of landlords. The commune continued to provide some marginal bargaining power for the peasantry at the local level. It was in the landlord's interest not to press his demands beyond what his serfs considered tolerable: organized go-slows were expensive to overcome and the agents whom absentee landlords employed to supervise the peasantry were themselves notoriously unreliable. Concerted resistance by the commune and refusal to meet taxes and dues could be even more costly: neither landlord nor state official relished resorting to calling in the military, whose help would not be given gratis. But in conditions of serfdom, the group pressure exerted by the commune system also served to discipline individual peasants and it continued to act as a major obstacle to the emergence of any

substantial stratum of better-off and potentially more assertive peasants. In the less fertile north and central regions, where peasant trade and crafts developed most rapidly, a measure of differentiation did develop as successful petty peasant entrepreneurs hired their fellows. In the 'black-earth' regions, however, the great majority remained close to the breadline. In the absence of any significant improvement in agricultural techniques the peasantry were acutely vulnerable to harvest failure, and living standards in many areas actually declined in the period.

The only method by which the peasantry could bring serious pressure to bear upon their masters was through flight or outright resistance. In the 1720s a government survey counted almost a quarter of a million fugitives, and the opening out of new lands to the south and east continued to attract desperate peasants throughout the eighteenth century. In Moscow province alone, between 1764 and 1769 some thirty noblemen were murdered by their serfs. Generally the government was able to contain such local outbreaks. But when endemic peasant resentment fused with numerous cross-currents of resistance, the situation could easily get out of hand. The most important rebellion was that of 1773–74, named after its Cossack leader Emilyan Pugachev. Beginning as a Cossack revolt against government encroachment on their traditional liberties, the uprising rapidly attracted support from Old Believers, minority nationalities trying to shake off Russian colonization (most notably the Bashkirs), serfs assigned to work in the mines and factories of the Urals, and tens of thousands of peasants. The rebellion spread across a vast stretch of eastern European Russia and severely shook the government and nobility alike. It was successfully repressed, and integration of the Cossacks into the regular army deprived subsequent risings of similar leadership. But soon after the Napoleonic Wars the incidence of peasant disturbances began to rise again: there was a serious outbreak in the Urals in 1835 and widespread violence in 1847.

The peasantry never became resigned to their condition. Government actions were repeatedly misinterpreted as portents of imminent relief. The abolition of compulsory service for the nobility (1762) appears to have been widely read as an indication that freedom for serfs would follow shortly. Countless rumours of noble treachery against the generous wishes of the Tsar, and an astonishing number of 'false tsars' believed to be coming to their aid, kept peasant hopes alive. Their trust in the Tsar himself remained unshaken: but it never entailed acceptance of their subordination to officialdom, the army, or the nobility. If anything, the gulf separating them from an outside world which uprooted families and whole villages for labour on distant farms, or worse still in factories and mines, which

3.3 Pugachev in chains. A contemporary portrayal of the rebel leader brought in a cage to Moscow where he was beheaded.

extracted taxes, recruits and grain, and which subjected them to constant brutality and humiliation, grew steadily wider.

The most striking new manifestation of the gulf between the villages and the outside world was cultural. While the peasantry remained loyal to traditional customs, dress, idiom, and primitive Orthodoxy, the nobility and officials underwent a cultural transformation. Peter the Great gave dramatic impetus to the westernization which had begun to affect Muscovy. He himself made an extended visit to the West at the outset of his reign and on his return he created consternation – and a legend – by his impatience to change the face of Russia. With his own hands he cut off the beards of leading courtiers and ordered all noblemen to abandon this ancient symbol of Orthodox manhood. Russia was to stop numbering the years on the calendar from the creation of the world; the elite were to adopt Western dress, to refine their manners, to refrain from belching, spitting, and picking their noses in public; and the traditional seclusion of noble women in the *terem* was to be abruptly terminated. Peter's efforts were epitomized by the new European-style capital of St Petersburg. He increased significantly the number of Russians travelling to the West and the number of skilled foreigners settling in Russia. Despite very limited success in establishing schools, he did his best to compel young noblemen to gain a basic education by making it a condition of securing a marriage certificate. He simplified the alphabet and gradually, as the everyday speech of the elite was given new literary form, Church Slavonic was displaced. The basis was laid for the flowering of secular literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Under Elizabeth and Catherine the sumptuous, French-speaking court was the inspiration for westernization in architecture, furniture, art, music, dancing, theatre, and cuisine. In 1764 Catherine founded the first boarding school for girls of noble birth, the Smolnyi Institute in St Petersburg, and she took the first steps in providing public schools for a few lower-born girls. By degrees the new mores spread from St Petersburg and Moscow to the provincial cities and in time affected the humblest noble homes.

A mere fraction of the population shared in the cultural revolution. In 1801 students enrolled in schools of all kinds numbered no more than one in a thousand, and by Nicholas's death this figure had only risen to six. The government deliberately concentrated its efforts on higher education: by the 1850s there were six universities, with a total of some 3,500 students. For the autocracy the aim was not to spread general enlightenment but to improve the quality of the civil and military leadership, to train men capable of developing administrative, military, and technological skills. Both Peter and Catherine II were also consciously seeking to raise Russia's international prestige by bringing her court, her diplomatic corps, and the cultural life of her elite abreast of more refined rivals. In many ways the results were gratifying. The style of the elite was westernized, secularized, 'civilized' in an astonishingly brief period. A country that could boast the encyclopaedic

knowledge of Lomonosov (1711–65), the elegance of Karamzin's (1766–1826) *History of the Russian State*, and above all the poetic genius of Pushkin (1799–1837) found its sense of cultural inferiority fading. Following the defeat of Napoleon in 1812, polite society gradually abandoned its eighteenth-century preference for French over Russian and there was a growing sense of national identity. But the autocracy paid a heavy price. For the sophistication which benefited the State also made possible the articulation of ever more intransigent criticism of the whole structure of Russian society.

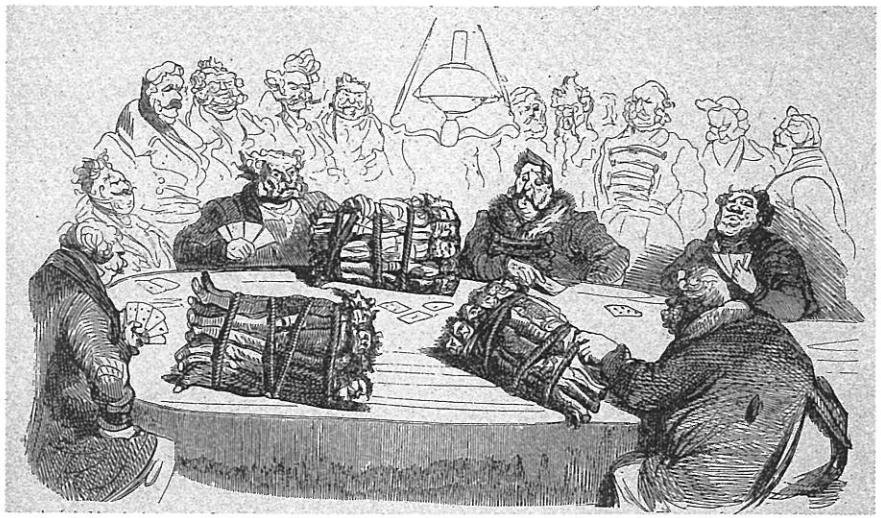
The government did its best to stifle such criticism. Catherine reacted furiously to the first major attack on serfdom and autocracy, *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) by A. D. Radishchev (1749–1802). Exiling the author to Siberia, she pronounced such sedition 'worse than Pugachev'. The upheaval of the French Revolution made her increasingly hostile to the ideas of the Enlightenment which earlier she had actively promoted in Russia. After the first decade of Alexander I's reign censorship became progressively more heavy-handed, and under Nicholas I travel to the West was curtailed and efforts made to prevent the import of seditious books. Nicholas's government mounted a counteroffensive, using press and pulpit to reinforce loyalty by propagating the doctrine of so-called 'official nationality', with its celebration of the supposed Russian national values of autocracy and Orthodoxy. During the 1830s and 1840s, encouraged by the Minister of Education, S. S. Uvarov, conservative professors sought to stimulate patriotism and identify it with the regime by glorying in Russian history, and in the country's military and cultural achievements. Yet these measures enjoyed no more than limited success. Effective censorship and monitoring of Western contacts was beyond the capability of the administration. And whatever attractions Church and throne may have had for the peasantry, their hold on educated society was being slowly eroded. The political subservience and intellectual torpor of the Church's hierarchy prevented Orthodoxy from rebuffing new currents of scepticism and secularization. Autocracy appeared the very linchpin of everything that offended a small but intellectually dynamic intelligentsia which was breaking away from the traditional values of the nobility.

To conservative opinion the emergence of a critical intelligentsia from within the womb of privileged society was puzzling. It was simply incomprehensible that some of these writers, teachers, students, and independently minded landowners should go beyond reformism to full-blown visions of social transformation. Yet the formation of the intelligentsia, that most elusive of Russian social phenomena, is explicable without attributing any peculiar, inborn extremism or heroism to Russia's educated youth. In a society rigidified by autocracy and serfdom, the educated could easily find their ambitions thwarted, and their sensibilities offended. The caprice and incompetence of the bureaucracy, the arbitrary administration of justice, the

seemingly ubiquitous police could not fail to affront at least some among an elite increasingly conscious of their own dignity. Life as an officer in the army was barbaric, life as an official was corrupt, humiliating, and, in the words of the radical young Dostoevsky, 'as boring as potatoes'. The culturally conservative world of commerce and industry was hardly more attractive, and relatively few noblemen combined the capital, the ability, and the inclination to find satisfaction in serf-based farming.

It was upon serfdom that the critics of Tsarism rapidly came to focus their attention. Serfdom seemed to lie at the root of many of their own frustrations, to preclude progress, be it economic, social, or political. Even the most loyal officials found it increasingly difficult to defend serfdom on moral grounds. To the emergent intelligentsia the moral iniquity of 'baptized property' was intolerable. Acquaintance with social progress in the West highlighted what V. G. Belinsky (1811–48), the foremost literary critic of the 1840s, called 'cursed Russian reality', and added a sense of national humiliation to their indignation.

Yet this discontent was denied political or institutional expression. Aspirations which in many Western countries attached themselves to autonomous organizations, pressure groups, and even political parties found no outlet in Tsarist Russia. In the absence of a vigorous middle class the intelligentsia lacked any effective levers through which to bring about change. Deprived of other outlets, they brought all their compressed energy to bear on the world of literature and ideas. Hungrily devouring the latest fruits of



3.4 'Gambling for souls'. Gustave Doré's mid-nineteenth-century caricature depicts Russian landowners gambling not for money but for bundles of serfs. For the intelligentsia, the humiliating treatment of serfs symbolized the moral iniquity of the entire system.

Western thought – Romanticism, German philosophical idealism, French socialism – they adapted this intellectual harvest to express and grapple with their own problems. In doing so they invested Russian literature with a moral passion and intensity which remains breathtaking.

The most creative artists were by no means always preoccupied by social criticism. Much of Pushkin's poetry exuded an almost Renaissance delight in the richness and beauty of life. N. V. Gogol (1809–52), whose novel *Dead Souls* (1842) painted a devastating and influential picture of provincial life in Russia, discovered on reflection that his political views were distinctly reactionary. A favourite theme of early nineteenth-century literature was the personal ordeal of the 'superfluous man', the quest of the young, educated Russian for a meaningful role in life. Yet in Russia's polarized society neutrality was impossible. Even when no political or social statement was intended, the most abstruse philosophical inquiry, the most obscure historical research, the narrowest psychological study took on political meaning. And where a subversive message was intended, it was easily woven into any subject-matter. No amount of censorship could hold back the rise of a new social consciousness bursting to find expression.

Before Nicholas's death few of Russia's disaffected minority went beyond a loosely conceived commitment to liberty and justice and fewer still took their protest to the point of action. The major exceptions were the Decembrists. The march to Paris at the end of the Napoleonic Wars had stimulated the imagination of a significant number of Tsarist officers. Taking pride in the military feats which raised Russia's prestige, they aspired to erase the features which most disfigured their homeland: autocracy and serfdom. Six hundred men, some from the most distinguished aristocratic families, went on trial for the quixotic rising of December 1825. The affair was venerated by later revolutionaries as the opening round in their battle against the autocracy. More indicative of future trends than this rising from within the officer corps were the activities of the *Petrashevtsy* in the 1840s. Several overlapping circles of young officials, junior officers, teachers and students in St Petersburg began to take up French socialist ideas, particularly those of Charles Fourier. Before being struck by a wave of arrests in 1848, the most audacious among them – including the flamboyant M. V. Petrashevsky himself – were on the brink of establishing a radical organization.

For the most part, though, the energy of the first generation of intelligentsia was absorbed in the ideological quest which blossomed in the 1840s. The major division among the exceptionally gifted intellectuals of Russia's 'marvellous decade' (1838–48) was between the so-called Slavophiles and the Westerners. Their debates encompassed the whole range of problems which would preoccupy successive generations of the intelligentsia, from the legal and social status of women to the destiny of Russia. Both groups were predominantly drawn from the nobility and both were

critical of serfdom and political oppression, but they looked to very different solutions. The Slavophiles, the most prominent of whom were leading and innovative landowners, sought a way forward which would draw on what they perceived as Russia's peculiar strengths: the social solidarity expressed in both the Orthodox faith and the traditional peasant commune. They regarded the reign of Peter the Great as a fateful rupture in Russia's organic development. It had introduced alien values into court and nobility and opened a cultural chasm between educated society and the timeless virtues of Orthodoxy and unique customs and folklore of the Russian peasantry. The Westerners, on the other hand, whose leading figures were men of letters rather than active farmers, envisaged progress towards civil liberty and economic justice along Western lines. They had greater respect for the progressive role of the State, for the rule of law, and for what the Slavophiles denounced as the vulgar western bourgeoisie. The most radical Westerners, following a path very close to that of the *Petrashevtsy*, aspired to something more than liberalism and embraced socialism. It was Alexander Herzen (1812–70) who, having emigrated to the West in 1847, began to give currency to what was to be the dominant theme of the revolutionary wing of the intelligentsia for the next four decades. He fused the dreams of western socialists with the egalitarian and democratic potential he saw in the peasant commune to create a unique brand of Russian socialism. The revolution, when it came, must be a peasant revolution, transforming autocratic, serf-ridden Russia into a land of autonomous and free village communes.

The immediate impact of the founding fathers of what came to be called revolutionary 'populism' was minimal. Lacking any organization and completely out of touch with the peasant masses in whose interests they sought to speak, they were easily dealt with. Yet the peasantry represented, at least potentially, a lever of social change which the more moderate intelligentsia lacked. The danger of a conjuncture between the heirs of Pugachev and those of Radishchev haunted the government and fired the desperate efforts of Nicholas's last years to silence all criticism.

Chapter 4

The Great Reforms and the development of the revolutionary intelligentsia (1855–1881)

From the mid-nineteenth century the pace of change in Russia rapidly accelerated. The decade following the Crimean War saw the most dramatic social and institutional upheaval that the Empire had ever undergone. Central to the so-called 'Great Reforms' of the period was the abolition of serfdom. By the Statute of 1861 the 22 million serfs owned by private landlords were set free from personal bondage. The fundamental relationship upon which the economic, social, and political structure of the Empire had been based was to be dismantled.

So profound were the changes implicit in the statute that historians of all schools of thought have recognized its promulgation as an epoch-making event. In the Soviet view it marked off an entire millennium of 'feudalism' from the capitalist phase which it inaugurated. The long-term repercussions fully justify the significance attached to Emancipation. For the serfs themselves it brought to a close the degradation of chattel status and subordination to serf-owners' authority, and opened the way to the rehabilitation of human dignity. As Emancipation took effect it would loosen many of the constraints which handicapped the economy, accelerating the replacement of forced labour by wage labour and the spread of market relations. Conditions would become more conducive to entrepreneurial initiative, capital accumulation, the division of labour, technological innovation, and industrialization. In time the development of the market would speed up the rate of urbanization and reshape the social structure, thereby undermining the traditional dominance of the landowning nobility and the monarchy itself.

The immediate impact of the statute was much less dramatic than this longer-term picture might suggest, not least because of the economic terms and administrative arrangements under which the peasants were set free. These terms preserved, if in milder form, many of the obstacles to economic growth and social change characteristic of the pre-reform era. The principle