Introduction

Imperial Russia in the last decades of its existence provides an intensely fascinating field of inquiry for the historian and for anyone with an interest in the manifestations of the human spirit. Russia at the turn of the century was a country and a civilization of astounding cultural complexity and wealth. The Empire, with its vast expanse and the multitudes of peoples it held in its sway, was an entire world in its own right. Morever, this world encompassed the extremes of historical development, producing arts and sciences of the most advanced and innovative sort, while allowing for the continued existence of traditional cultures of the most archaic nature. The vitality and intricacy of the Empire's civilization arose from the interaction of the dynamic principle of modernization with the more passive yet extremely resilient force of tradition. The thought and activity of Russia's Westernized elite in that period has been the subject of extensive study. This work is meant to be a contribution to the contemporary scholarly effort to fill the great gap in the historical picture by bringing to light the beliefs and ideas of the great mass of the Russian population which continued to live within the traditional culture.[1]

THE PERSISTENCE OF TRADITION

Russia's place in twentieth-century consciousness has been determined by the Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent decades of Communist rule.

[1] Since the great majority of these people were villagers, most of the material examined in this study will be of peasant provenance. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that traditional society in this period did not consist exclusively of peasants. A large segment of the town population had not been brought into the modern culture by this point, and many urban dwellers were recent arrivals from the village. Expressions of the thinking of these subgroups within the traditional culture will also be included in this study. In addition, materials from the Eastern Ukraine (Chernihiv, Poltava, Kharkiv provinces) will be used. Although the Ukrainian villagers and townsmen of this cultural zone differed in some respects from their Great Russian counterparts, they may be included in our analytical unit by virtue of their Orthodox religion and centuries-long historical experience as subjects of the Tsars.

Inevitably and understandably, people's interest in Russia's past has centered on identifying the causes of the revolutionary upheaval. Several generations of inquiry and debate on the origins of the Revolution have produced a wealth of valuable material on political development and socio-economic change in Imperial Russia. However, the focus on identifying the forces for change has obscured the crucial factor for understanding turn-of-the-century Russia on its own terms, namely, the remarkable power of tradition and cultural inertia.

Of course, almost all observers of late-Imperial Russia have stressed the country's "backwardness" in comparison to the West, and it has been the common practice to identify the peasantry as the embodiment and prime manifestation of that aspect of Russia's sorry condition, and to provide telling statistics on peasant illiteracy and vivid anecdotes illustrating popular superstition, with the argument usually being that rural benightedness and immiseration generated the negative energy necessary for the revolutionary explosion. In the work of generalists, the peasantry has been presented as a rather simple and straightforward phenomenon, albeit one which is alien and ultimately unknowable. In fact, thanks to the work of turn-of-the-century Russian observers and of more recent cohorts of scholars in Russia and in the West there exists a substantial body of knowledge about the Russian peasantry in the period in question, and it depicts a traditional culture of complexity, vigor and great resilience.

For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to stress that recent studies have shown that traditional patterns and practices continued to dominate Russian peasant life at the beginning of the twentieth century. To take just a few examples drawn from disparate areas of culture, if one looks at decorative arts,[2] at drinking practices,[3] at perceptions of witchcraft,[4] at legal notions and practices,[5] and, most important of all, at the peasant commune, the basic form of social organization,[6] one finds that on the eve of the Revolution the Russian peasantry believed, thought, and

[2] A. Netting, "Images and Ideas in Russian Peasant Art," *Slavic Review* 35, no. 1 (March 1976), 48–68.

[3] P. Herlihy, "'Joy of the Rus': Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking," *Russian Review* 50, no. 2 (April 1991), 131–147, and the same author's *The Alcoholic Empire: Vodka and Politics in Late Imperial Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[4] C. Worobec, "Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Prerevolutionary Russian and Ukrainian Villages," *Russian Review* 54, no. 2 (April 1995), 165–187.

[5] Stephen P. Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia, 1856–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[6] B. Mironov, "The Russian Peasant Commune after the Reforms of the 1860s," *Slavic Review* 44, no. 3 (Fall 1985), 438–467.

acted in accordance with ancient tradition that extends as far back in time as the historical record takes us.[7]

To comprehend the full import of such findings of cultural persistence, one must be aware of the integral or "holistic" nature of traditional culture, not only in Russia but throughout the world. In contrast to modern life with its various independent spheres or "compartments," in traditional society all aspects of belief and behavior form a unified whole. This "interconnectedness" of the elements of peasant culture was a primary fact in the persistence of tradition in Russia. The old way of life provided a comprehensive guide to thought and action, and proved to be very resilient in the face of various challenges. The "integral" quality of the traditional culture will also be very important to the argumentation of this book. Given the paucity in early twentieth-century Russia of opinion polls and other modern devices (or semblances of devices) for ostensibly measuring popular opinion,[8] I will not be able to prove quantitatively that this or another belief was general in the peasantry; however, if I can show that it fits with other things we know, and if we accept the "interconnectedness" of the elements of the traditional worldview, I will be able to argue plausibly that specific examples illustrate broader themes.

The primary challenge to the traditional culture came from the forces of the modern world, chief among them the state apparatus, the educated classes, and the urban economy. Until very late (arguably, until Stalin's First Five Year Plan), these forces were not strong enough to challenge the foundations of peasant existence. In fact, for the period examined in this work, the "modernizing" forces had the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the traditional culture. All of the topics sketched out below will be dealt with in detail in the body of the book, but for now it should suffice to outline the main points.

In any discussion of "modernization" in the European context an "enlightened" bureaucracy is seen as playing a primary role in cultural transformation. Russia would seem to be a classic example of this pattern. The autocracy initiated the process of "Westernization" in Russia, and till the very end the Imperial Russian state was animated by a spirit of

[7] Although some of the scholars cited point to indicators of incipient cultural breakdown or transformation, they all agree that traditional patterns remained overwhelmingly predominant in the period in question. Also, it might be suggested that perceptions of change could be an optical illusion resulting from the post-1917 perspective – tremendous change came with the Revolution, so we see foreshadowings of it in the pre-revolutionary period.

[8] Here I should stress, however, that the non-specialist reader may be surprised to discover below that a number of very useful systematic surveys of popular culture were in fact carried out in turn-of-the-century Russia.

enlightened absolutism and viewed itself as the only force possessing the reason and understanding necessary for the country's advancement.[9] The Empire succeeded in creating a modern educated society. Moreover, it projected a mystique of autocratic power, and was in fact capable of causing grief to its open political opponents. The image of Tsarist Russia as an all-powerful autocracy and tyrannical police state obscures the fact that the Imperial regime lacked the means of exerting day-to-day control over its subjects at the local level. Compared to their West European counterparts, the Russian peasants were relatively free of the ministrations of bureaucrats: at the beginning of the century, for every thousand inhabitants there were 17.6 government officials in France, 12.6 in Germany, 7.3 in England, and only 4 in Russia.[10] If one leaves aside the cultural/enlightening activities of ideal bureaucrats and looks only at the most basic state function of maintaining public order, the figures are equally shocking: in 1900, 1,582 constables (*stanovye pristavy*) and 6,874 sergeants (*uriadniki*) – themselves villagers and not Frederician enlightened state servants – policed a rural population of approximately one hundred million.[11] Indeed, an early twentieth-century commission investigating the legal condition of the peasantry concluded that until very recently "peasant life was left almost entirely to go its own way [and] remained outside all supervision by the government."[12] Although the Empire lacked the means to "modernize" the peasantry, it was capable of exercising extractive functions. For the villagers, government officials existed to draw blood (recruits) and money (taxes) from the community, and interaction with them served as a periodic reinforcement and exacerbation of their hostility toward "lordly" outsiders.

In the historiography of modernization and nation-building in Europe, military service is usually depicted as having a decisive cultural effect on the rural population. According to this line of analysis, the army, in many ways the quintessence of rationalistic/mechanistic modernity, takes

[9] On the origins of the modern state idea and its introduction to Russia, see M. Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); on the development of the autocracy and state apparatus, see R. Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribner's, 1974).

[10] O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy: a History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1997), p. 46. These statistics are even more remarkable if one considers that they are for the population as a whole, and that officialdom was concentrated in cities.

[11] S. Frank, "Cultural Conflict and Criminality in Rural Russia, 1861–1900," Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1987, p. 157.

[12] *Trudy redaktsionnoi kommissii po peresmotru zakonopolozhenii o krest'ianakh* (Saint Petersburg, 1903), vol. 1, p. 5, cited in Mironov, "Russian Peasant Commune," 464.

peasant boys out of the self-contained village community and exposes them to the wide world. In the case of Russia's adoption of the Prussian system of universal service, the reforming autocracy of Alexander II hoped that the new army would serve as a giant schoolhouse of enlightened citizenship for the newly emancipated peasantry.[13] Although military service did have a great disruptive impact on the life of peasant men, it did not succeed in transforming the village culture. By all accounts, the Russian officer corps was ill-suited for an educational role and kept strictly apart from the soldiers,[14] and in cultural terms the men were left to their own devices, free to create an approximation of a peasant community, preserving village attitudes and practices.[15] As we shall see in the chapters on the Japanese War and the First World War, it was precisely within the peasant army that many of the most intense manifestations of traditional thinking occurred.

One would assume that cultural modernization in its most direct form would take place in schools, and that the acquisition of literacy by peasants would be their decisive first step away from the traditional world and towards the realm of light and reason. Although Imperial Russia had made substantial progress in providing primary education to the rural population by the beginning of the twentieth century, one cannot make a direct equation between that schooling and modernization, and one cannot use basic literacy even as a rough indicator of the adoption of modern attitudes. In many (but by no means all) villages, peasants expressed a strong desire for education, but that desire should not be interpreted as apostasy from traditional culture. On one level, villagers showed a utilitarian attitude toward schooling – they saw the concrete practical benefits of knowing how to read and do arithmetic, but at the same time they were hostile to the cultural content offered by teachers.[16] Up to a point, peasants could have it both ways, acquiring useful skills without giving up their old ways,

[13] For the motivations of the reform, and especially for its cultural/educational aspects, see G. Dzhanshiev, *Epokha velikikh reform: Istoricheskie spravki* (Moscow, 1900), part VII.

[14] For an excellent treatment of officer culture and values (and the very low place of "enlightening" recruits among them), see A. Denikin, *Staraia armiia* (Paris 1929–1931) (better known as commander of the White Armies of the South during the Russian Civil War, Denikin was also a military journalist and a very fine and perceptive writer). For a vivid account of the difficulties of educational work in the army, see the passage on "book-learning" (*slovesnost'*) in Kuprin's novel *The Duel*.

[15] This is the argument of the best contemporary specialist on the culture of the late-Imperial army. J. Bushnell, "Peasants in Uniform: the Tsarist Army as a Peasant Society," in B. Eklof and S. Frank, eds., *The World of the Russian Peasant: Post-Emancipation Culture and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 101–114.

[16] This insightful generalization was made by S. Frank in "Cultural Conflict," p. 43.

for, as an American specialist on rural education in Russia has argued, literacy can be made to fit into traditional cultures without necessarily causing disruption.[17] Indeed, numerous turn-of-the-century surveys of peasant tastes in reading are unanimous in concluding that literate villagers ranked religious material first in their order of preference.[18] Thus, literacy, rather than opening peasant minds to the truths of positivism or Marxism, often had the effect of reinforcing the values of the old culture, and the role of the written word – both in the form of traditional religious texts *and* the modern medium of the newspaper – in the development of traditional attitudes will be a major theme of this book.[19]

In many strands of scholarship, there is a fundamental assumption, based ultimately on the notion that economic "existence determines consciousness," that capitalist or market relations are by their nature destructive of traditional cultures. Contemporary economic developments and the global monoculture whose ghastly visage is now coming into view suggest that this understanding is ultimately true. However, the extent to which rural and provincial Russia had been brought into the modern urban-based economy is very much open to debate.[20] Without denying that the market and money were making deep inroads into many areas of rural Russia, I would argue that at the turn of the century the situation was not yet critical and that peasant relations to the modern urban economy were in many ways actually reinforcing the traditional culture. On the level of economics, money earned by peasants who had gone to the cities for work (usually seasonal or temporary) served to bolster and sustain village households.[21] While in the cities, peasants tended to remain apart

[17] B. Eklof, "Worlds in Conflict: Patriarchal Authority, Discipline, and the Russian School, 1861–1914," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 4 (Winter 1991), 793.

[18] For a summary and analysis of survey findings, see M. Gromyko, *Mir russkoi derevni* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1991), pp. 295–311. Many contemporary Western scholars have reached the same conclusion, see, for example, J. Morison, "Education and the 1905 Revolution," *Revolutionary Russia* 1, no. 1 (June 1988), 6–7.

[19] Other writers, most notably J. Brooks, in *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton, 1985) have stressed the modernizing effects of literacy. Brooks's work provides an abundance of valuable information, but the overall picture of incipient secularization is achieved by the author's highly problematic (given what we know of Russian popular preferences) decision to exclude religious literature from his analysis.

[20] For an overview of the enormous literature on the question, and for an interpretation which differs from my own by stressing the element of cultural change wrought by the market, see J. Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861–1905* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

[21] See, for example, R. Munting, "Outside Earnings in the Russian Peasant Farm: Tula Province, 1900–1917," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 3, no. 4 (July 1976), 428–446, A. Baker, "Deterioration or Development?: The Peasant Economy of Moscow Province Prior to 1914," *Russian History* 5, part 1 (1978), 1–23.

from other social classes, and maintained village-based social relations and cultural forms.[22] Rather than causing a cultural "citification" of the countryside, Imperial Russia's industrialization was imbuing the cities with a pronounced rural coloration. In addition, most peasants went back to the village as soon as was feasible,[23] which suggests that Russian cities did not yet possess the irresistible attraction which urban areas have exerted throughout the world in recent decades. At the same time, the village community evinced great anxiety over the corrupting effects of its members' exposure to city life,[24] and economically motivated contact with the city acted as a negative stimulus reinforcing traditional attitudes.

The purpose of the preceding discussion has not been to negate the intrusion of new forces into the life of the Russian people at the turn of the century. Rather, by stressing continuity and challenging stereotypical indicators of "modernization" or incipient transformation I have sought to provide context for my study of the vitality of the traditional worldview, which is intended as a corrective to the Revolution-induced analytical fixation on change and as a modest contribution to the creation of a historical picture worthy of the complexity and richness of late Imperial Russia.

RELIGION AS THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE TRADITIONAL WORLDVIEW

This work will focus on what is, relatively speaking, the least developed aspect of the study of pre-revolutionary Russia, namely, the traditional worldview of the Russian peasantry, and specifically the ways in which the carriers of that worldview made sense of historical events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It will be argued throughout that religion offers the key to understanding that worldview.

The question of religion is among the most stridently debated and divisive issues of Russian studies (and, for that matter, of the analysis of human affairs in general). On the one hand, historians – usually generalists

[22] R. Johnson, "Peasant and Proletariat: Migration, Family Patterns and Regional Loyalties," in Eklof and Frank, eds., *World*, pp. 81–99.

[23] See, for example, J. Bradley, "Patterns of Peasant Migration to Late Nineteenth-Century Moscow: How Much Should We Read into Literacy Rates?," *Russian History* 6, part 1 (1979), 22–38, and I. N. Slepnev, "Novye rynochnye realii i ikh prelomlenie v mentalitete poreformennogo kres-t'ianstva," in *Mentalitet i agrarnoe razvitie Rossii* (*XIX–XX vv.*): *Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii. Moskva. 14–15 iiunia 1994 g.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1996), p. 227.

[24] B. Engel, "Russian Peasant Views of City Life, 1861–1914," *Slavic Review* 52, no. 3 (Fall 1993), 446–459.

or those concerned primarily with issues other than the peasant culture itself – can boldly assert that "the religiosity of the Russian peasant has been one of the most enduring myths . . . in the history of Russia,"[25] following the line of the great nineteenth-century radical thinker Vissarion Belinsky, who argued that the Russian peasant was basically materialistic and atheistic, and that his supposed piety was largely a matter of custom and ritual. On the other hand, many of those who try to understand the peasantry on its own terms reach the opposite conclusion, namely, that the peasantry as a whole was fervently attached to its religion, and attempt to use that religion as a means of analyzing the peasant culture.[26]

The traditional religious worldview will be the subject of this book, and the reader will see the relationship between my approach and the work of scholars who accept the fact of popular religiosity. At this point it is necessary to make a number of critical remarks about the "peasant-piety-as-myth" tendency. In their treatment of religion (and not just traditional Russian religion), many modern scholars have evinced attitudes ranging from indifference to hostility, and from what might be called tone-deafness all the way to utter incomprehension. Scholarly difficulties in dealing with religious matters stem from an intricate and tightly wound knot of philosophical, psychological, and political factors, and the Russian case offers a useful illustration of the general problem. In large measure, the rejection or dismissal of the reality of Russian peasant religiosity arises from the fact that educated Russian observers in the past as well as more recent generations of scholars have viewed the question across the deep divide separating the modern and traditional worldviews. The underlying assumptions for modern assessments of religious phenomena were created by the Protestant Reformation, which, as many have argued, opened the way for modernity by attempting to distinguish between essential and supposedly superficial elements of religion and in the process shattered the traditional, "holistic" culture of Medieval Europe. Keith Thomas opened great opportunities for historical analysis when he argued that the Protestant definition of religion in terms of individual belief "helped to form a new concept of religion itself," and one that did not fit medieval

[25] Figes, *People's Tragedy*, p. 66.

[26] To cite only a few of the most useful of numerous possible examples, I will point to three specialists of widely divergent scholarly formation and outlook who stress the centrality of religion to the understanding of the peasantry: Moshe Lewin, "Popular-Religion in Twentieth-Century Russia," in Eklof and Frank, eds., *World*, pp. 155–168, M. Gromyko, "Pravoslavie v zhizni russkogo krest'ianina," *Zhivaia starina*, no. 3 (1994), 3–5, and C. Chulos, "Myths of the Pious or Pagan Peasant in Post-Emancipation Central Russia (Voronezh Province)," *Russian History* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 181–216.

popular Catholcism or other traditional cultures, in which "religion was a ritual method of living, not a set of dogmas."[27] As anyone familiar with the Russian field will quickly recognize, Thomas's position goes to the heart of much of the discussion of Russian peasant religiosity (and towards Belinsky's framing of the entire debate). In effect, many observers past and present, although far from religion themselves, have applied the standards of evangelical Protestantism to the Russian case: Russian peasants knew little of formal theology, they were devoted to ritual observance, and often behaved in a less-than-saintly manner; therefore, they were not Christian, or they did not take religion seriously. Viewed on its own terms, however, the traditional Russian culture was subjectively, i.e. by self-definition, Christian, as will be demonstrated throughout this book. Moreover, Christianity, specifically Eastern Orthodox Christianity in its Russian redaction, was the source of almost all of the basic categories and images of the traditional culture.

The development of modernity into materialism in the nineteenth century has intensified our difficulties in understanding religion-based traditional cultures. For the various materialist schools of thought, religious ideas have no existence in themselves, but are merely reflections of socio-economic realities, and they represent an inferior mode of comprehension or a "false consciousness." Although interpretations based on this assumption have reached great heights of subtlety and insight, in the Russian case the results have usually been more meager and crude. Present-day Western scholars might be tempted to lay all the blame for "vulgar materialism" on now-discredited Soviet Marxism and to minimize the extent to which we are all living "in an age in which the understanding of anything that surpasses the material level has practically ceased to exist."[28] If anything, Marxism, with its fundamental humanism, does not even approach the utter materialism of present-day Western trends such as neoliberal economic theory, "rational choice" political science, neurochemical psychology, and reductionist Darwinist/geneticist sociology. Given the pervasive materialism of our contemporary worldview, we must make a great effort of empathy to understand the culture of people vitally concerned with things which mean nothing to us. Many of the ideas and attitudes examined in this study have a direct link to the material world and the needs of physical existence; however, the key elements of the

[27] K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), p. 76.
[28] P. Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: a Study in the Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 50.

traditional Russian culture are to be found in an autonomous religious sphere of human life.

Related to the problem of cultural materialism is the fact that sensitivity to religious matters is to a certain extent the product of personal religious experience. This is true regardless of how one defines the reality of such experience – even if it is merely the product of chemical reactions in the brain, only those in whose cranial cavities such processes have taken place can have a feeling for it. The point can be illustrated by contrasting "inter-faith" and secular interpretations of religion. Although the adherents of various religions have manifested hostility toward traditions other than their own (and this is not just the case with the monotheist faiths, as any acquaintance with the real, as opposed to the idealized, histories of Buddhist or Hindu societies shows), by virtue of their own belief they can at least perceive that religion motivates the others, and interaction (whether positive or negative) is on the same plane. In contrast, most observers of a purely secular formation apply non-religious criteria to religious phenomena. For them, religious texts are either meaningless gibberish, or records of humanity's fantasy life, religious movements the secondary and superficial manifestations of processes occurring in the "real," which is to say physical, world.

The assessment of Russian popular religiosity has been severely affected by the intense political struggles (pro- and anti-Tsarist, pro- and anti-Soviet, now pro- and anti-"reform") which have provided the underlying framework for most scholarship on Russia. The Russian autocracy was rooted in traditional religious conceptions of monarchical authority, and perceptions of the degree of popular piety (particularly within the bounds of Orthodoxy) have inevitably been influenced by the observer's attitude toward the legitimacy of Tsarist rule. At a very basic level, Western study of Russia is largely dependant on the insights of turn-of-the-century Russian liberalism (and to a much lesser extent on those of Russian Marxism), and it was this profoundly secular movement with its all-consuming political drive which created the standard historiographical picture of traditional Russian culture.

In terms of fundamental sociological and cultural categories the author has relied on the conceptual model offered by Max Weber and his successors. Specifically, the basic dichotomy will be that of modernity and tradition, the former being defined as the adherence to scientific reason as the basic guide to understanding the world and determining action and its application to ever-widening spheres of life, the latter in the sense of a religious/supernatural conception of the universe and its phenomena. The