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Introduction

Leibniz, the great German philosopher and scientist, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, once expressed his envy of Russia. He argued that, because Russia had neither civilization nor history, the reforming tsar, Peter, could start with a tabula rasa. His line of reasoning was based on the assumption that people and institutions are infinitely malleable. Of course Leibniz lived in an age more innocent than ours, and no one today would make such a naive statement. We know that history never starts completely anew and that the past not only matters, but sometimes weighs heavily on the present.

Obviously both change and continuity are real. Modern Russia is not what it was a hundred or two hundred years ago, and to believe that Russians are condemned to repeat the past forever is a crude error. But, at the same time, there are trends and mental attitudes which continue for a long, long time. Church historians, for example, have shown that some unique tenets of the Orthodox faith and ideas held by such major authors as Tolstoi and Dostoevskii reflect features of Russian paganism, even though the people had converted to Christianity more than one thousand years ago. Stalin consciously modeled himself on the sixteenth-century tsar Ivan the Terrible, and Soviet propagandists at the time of the Second World War reminded Russians how Teutonic (i.e., German) warriors had behaved in the thirteenth century. Such examples could easily be multiplied.

We often hear the opinion that democracy in today's Russia is doomed because the nation has no democratic traditions. The implication is that, since Russia has always been autocratic, it is bound to remain so forever; the people want strong rulers and willingly accept tyrants. By contrast, some nineteenth-century historians argued that the Russians are basically anarchistic people. They pointed out that Russians did not even form their own state, but needed the services of foreigners, the Vikings. Sometime in the ninth century these nomadic traders and warriors came from Scandinavia on

their own or, according to the Russian chronicle – that beautiful but not always reliable source – were invited by the Slav tribes living in the territory of modern Ukraine. Before that time the Slavs in this territory had lived under the rule of nomadic empires and paid tribute to them. These empires disappeared one after another, and it is an irony of history that a fundamentally agricultural people, knowing only the loosest form of political organization, managed to prevail while others, much better organized, possessing far more powerful armies, disappeared, often hardly leaving a trace behind.

The Vikings who arrived in modern-day Ukraine using the extensive north–south river system for trade could not have been very numerous, and they were soon absorbed into the Slav population. The kind of state that they created hardly deserves the name "state," for it was a loose federation of cities, headed by the prince in Kiev, the most important of the towns. The city-states collaborated with one another in order to protect the valuable trade routes from Scandinavia to Byzantium, the richest and culturally most advanced country outside the Orient in the early Middle Ages. Although the city-states were headed by princes from the same family, they spent as much time fighting one another as they did fighting foreigners. Both Ukrainians and Russians proudly claim the heritage of that Kievan state, and they regard this period of their history as a golden age. Indeed, during that period Russia, which became Christianized in 988, came to be accepted into the European family of nations, and by no definition could it be described as "backward." This fact is demonstrated by the degree of intermarriage between the Kievan princely family and other European ruling families. Several centuries passed before the Russian ruling family would once again be accepted as equal by European royalty.

In the Kievan political system, the city assembly, the *veche*, in which all heads of families participated, greatly limited the power of the prince. This was a participatory democracy that could best be compared to the Greek city-states of antiquity. It is therefore not quite correct to say that Russians have no democratic heritage. (To what extent it matters that a thousand years ago a rudimentary form of democracy existed in Kievan Russia is another issue.)

Given the nature of the Kievan state, it is not surprising that it was short-lived. As a result of internal dissension, the changing of trade routes which made the maintenance of the state less important, and the constant attacks from nomadic tribes from the southeast, the Kievan state fell apart even before the coming of the Mongols in the middle of the thirteenth century. The Mongol conquest was an event of epochal significance in the history of Eurasia. What emerged after the 250-year-long Mongol occupation of Russia was something profoundly different from what had existed before. First of all, the country broke apart, never to be completely reunified. Instead of Kiev, three new centers emerged: the southwest, which came to be dominated by pagan Lithuanians and was ultimately absorbed by powerful

Poland; the northwest, in which the Novgorod city and commercial state was able to maintain longest the Kievan political heritage (until that city was subjugated by Moscow at the end of the fifteenth century); and, ultimately most important, Moscow in the northeast.

Moscow, which started out as an insignificant principality within the Kievan realm, grew quickly during the period of Mongol rule. It did not become a copy of the Kievan state, but its dialectical opposite. In the new political system the *veche* had no place. People came to settle on lands that were already the prince's property, and consequently he could set the terms; there was no power to challenge his authority. The Muscovite prince ruled over an ever-larger area as if it were his own property. It is not important to decide whether the Russian princes learned autocratic habits from the Mongols, or autocracy was the consequence of domestic developments. It is, however, clear that the political system of Muscovite Russia was profoundly different from that of the pre-Mongol era.

A country's political system is inseparable from its social structure. Autocracy came into being because there was no social force capable of restraining the arbitrary power of the prince. Our terms for describing social classes and groups come from West European experience, and we apply these concepts to Russian history because we have no better ones. At the same time historians are aware that these terms fit the Russian situation only imperfectly. Russia had no feudalism, narrowly understood – that is, relationships in which more or less independent local lords owed service to the central ruler in exchange for protection. The Russian nobility was not as strong as its European equivalent; it never even attempted to act in unison to defend its class interests. There is no equivalent in Russian history of the Magna Carta, or of the Golden Bull that the Hungarian nobility managed to impose on their king in 1222. Status in Russia meant no more than closeness to the tsar, and nobility was largely acquired in service.

The Russian rulers time and again succeeded in defeating the aristocracy. The princes – or tsars, as they came to be called in the sixteenth century – went to great lengths to prevent the development of an independent aristocracy by confiscating their holdings, and by moving them from one part of the country to another to prevent the development of strong local ties. The Russian privileged classes had no unity: some were rich in landed wealth, while others had very little; some came from ancient Kievan princely families, and others had Mongol backgrounds; some achieved power and influence by serving a tsar, others attempted to stay aloof from the court. In modern times the country was not ruled by the nobility, which gradually lost influence in the army and in the administration, but by a socially heterogeneous bureaucracy. Although the top levels of this bureaucracy were constituted by people from noble families, the bureaucrats nonetheless considered themselves separate from the nobility, and they by no means acted always in defense of class interests. The state was poor and therefore could not pay

those who worked for it decently; the concept of public service was largely absent. Under the circumstances it was not surprising that corruption was widespread.

The single most important fact in Russia's social history was serfdom, an institution that existed until 1861. At the time of the revolution of 1917, there were still people alive who had been born serfs, and a large majority had parents who had not been full-fledged citizens of their country. The memory of serfdom made a considerable impact on Soviet history.

Serfdom developed late. Russia was moving in the opposite direction from the rest of the continent. This institution became part of the social structure in Russia only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at a time when in Western Europe the obligations imposed on serfs were becoming less and less onerous. Although the institution of slavery did exist in Kievan Russia, the vast majority of the population consisted of free peasants – free in the sense that, even when they cultivated land that belonged to others, they retained the right to make contracts and, most importantly, the right to move.

Peasants came to be tied to their landlords as a consequence of two interrelated factors: the development of the centralized state and the duration of hard economic times. Kievan Russia was situated in an area favorable for agriculture, but the new Russia dominated by Moscow was not so blessed: in the northeast the climate was severe and the growing season short, while the southeast did not get enough rain. Russia was an agricultural country in a region that was not well suited to agriculture. In the best of circumstances the peasant lived a marginal existence. The sixteenth century, the time of Ivan the Terrible, was an age of constant and devastating wars; and wars and famines often went hand in hand. Peasants were compelled to borrow from their landlords to survive, even knowing that they would not be able to repay their loans, and thereby would lose their freedom.

The economic downturn endangered the livelihood of the lesser noble landlords – let us call them "gentry." The land was plentiful, but the country was thinly populated and labor scarce. In bad times people escaped from the center of the country to the thinly inhabited south, which after the disintegration of the Mongol Empire was a kind of no man's land. The large landlords – let us call them "aristocrats" – could protect themselves because they could attract peasants from the land of the smaller landlords (the gentry) by offering them better terms. The gentry faced ruin. This was a threat to the state, for it was precisely this element that made up the bulk of the armies of the tsar. In this subsistence economy, the state could pay its soldiers only by giving them land. However, the land was worthless if there was no one to cultivate it while the lord was away fighting in the armies of the tsar. The economic ruin of the poor nobility threatened the military strength of the state. Gradual limitations by the state on the ability of the peasants to leave their masters were introduced for the mutual advantage of

the gentry and the central power. This alliance between the gentry and the tsar against the aristocracy and the peasantry was an enduring one. Russian autocracy and serfdom, the two most significant institutions of the premodern Russian state, were its consequences: the nobility gave up interest in politics, and the state guaranteed them unlimited rights over the serfs.

Muscovite Russia differed from Europe not only in its social and political institutions, but also in its religion. Kievan Russia was a state of free peasantry, democratic institutions, and a flourishing culture. By accepting Christianity from Byzantium, Kiev came under the influence of the most civilized country in Europe. Greek missionaries had already translated religious material for their proselytizing efforts among the Slavs of the Balkans and in Moravia; they therefore possessed an alphabet suitable for a Slavic language, and religious works comprehensible to the Russians. Having immediate access to a significant body of written material allowed a quick flourishing of culture – as is shown, for example, by the Primary Chronicle – but there was a price to pay. In the West, where priests and monks had to learn Latin and Greek, some learned men became acquainted with the great culture of the ancient world. This knowledge was a precondition of the Renaissance. The Russians were excluded, and their intellectual world remained limited for a long time to the material that happened to be translated for them. Although the Russians accepted the Greek form of Orthodoxy and the superior authority of the patriarch in Constantinople, nevertheless, perhaps unconsciously, they transformed Christianity to suit their own spiritual needs. The Russian image of Christ was a more human and suffering figure than the original Greek, which was severe and remote. The Russians particularly admired humility, and the idea of suffering for Christ.

During the Mongol period the church in effect freed itself from Byzantine tutelage and, when Constantinople itself fell to the Turks in 1453, it became fully independent. In Byzantine history there was no competition between worldly and religious authorities; the emperor was the head of the church. The Russian church inherited this ideology of cesaropapism: that is, it was content to act as ideological supporter of Muscovite autocracy. It was this tradition which allowed Peter the Great at the beginning of the eighteenth century to reduce the Orthodox Church simply to one department of the government. Separation of church and state would not happen in Russia until 1917.

Up to the seventeenth century Russian culture was essentially religious. From that time on, however, there were ever-increasing contacts with the West; and in the eighteenth century, at the time of Peter and Catherine, these contacts made an ever more powerful impact. At first the court, and later a growing number of nobles, became acquainted with Western ideas, customs, and art and acquired a taste for foreign possessions and a European lifestyle. The consequences were profound. An increasing but still small group of

people came to live in a different world from the vast majority of the Russian people, and the unity of culture was broken. In the nineteenth century, great intellectual sophistication in the realm of art and science came to coexist with a rich but static traditional Russian peasant culture and illiteracy.

A vague awareness on the part of at least some Russians that their country was not as rich and powerful as some others (i.e., that it was backward) resulted from the encounter with Western military strength and wealth. Since that time, there have always been two points of view: some argued that Russia must and would follow the Western path and had much to learn from the advanced countries, while others saw in Western influences primarily a danger that would undermine Russia's distinctiveness and spiritual values. The two groups at different times had different names, but the fundamental difference in Russian intellectual life remained. In the first half of the nineteenth century "Slavophiles" and Westerners confronted one another with distinct visions of Russia's past and future.

In a grand effort of social engineering, serfdom was abolished by the state in 1861. Since the military, judicial, and educational institutions were all based on that outdated institution, all had to be reconsidered and reformed. In the following two decades, within a remarkably short time, the statesmen serving Alexander II, the reforming tsar, created the rudiments of a modern military and judiciary. They also established institutions of local government, the *zemstva* (sing. *zemstvo*), and thereby brought government closer to the citizens. But of course, the most significant of the reforms was giving personal freedom to the peasants, freeing them from feudal obligations to their landlords. The great spurt in industrialization which took place at the end of the century could not have happened without these reforms. At the same time, it is clear that bringing about economic growth was not uppermost in the minds of the reformers. The peasants assumed a heavy financial obligation to the state for the land they received, which robbed them of resources.

The emancipation manifesto preserved that peculiar Russian institution, the peasant commune. Whether the peasant commune was an ancient institution, as Slavophile thinkers believed, or relatively modern in its nineteenth-century form, does not much matter. It is clear, however, that this institution played a crucial role in the life of the nineteenth-century Russian peasantry. In most instances these institutions of peasant self-government periodically redistributed land among their members to accommodate ever-changing family sizes and available land. The government supported the communes by assigning collective responsibility for taxes and redemption payments, and thereby, in fact, tied the peasants to the land. Even after the liberation of the serfs, the peasants could leave their villages only with the permission of the commune. The reformers were moved only partly by Slavophile sentiment – that is, by the belief that this institution best corresponded to the "naturally collectivist mentality of the Russian people." The government tied

the peasants to the land because it believed that the communes would prevent formation of a landless proletariat and thereby would ensure stability. There was a price to pay, however. At a time of great agricultural overpopulation, the communes delayed economic growth.

Delayed, but not prevented. In the 1890s, under the able and pragmatic leadership of Finance Minister Sergei Witte, the Russian economy enjoyed extremely high growth rates. Witte, a conservative man, succeeded in persuading the reactionary Tsar Alexander III that without modern industry the country would be at the mercy of stronger powers. Industrialization was a precondition of military strength, and those who did not modernize would fall victim to those who did. In the industrialization that took place at this time, the state played a major role: it heavily taxed the peasantry, reduced imports and encouraged exports, and thereby achieved a favorable trade balance. This made possible the adoption of the gold standard in 1897, which made Russia attractive to foreign investors. The state subsidized the building of railroads and provided protective tariffs. Tsarist industrialization was similar to what would take place decades later under Stalinist auspices: heavy industry benefited most, and the production of consumer goods was neglected. The industrialization drive favored large factories and major projects, rather than small entrepreneurs.

The establishment of new factories, of course, created an urban proletariat. Most of the new workers retained their ties to the village: they remained members of the commune and often left their wives and children behind, sending them money periodically. Living and working conditions were abominable. This proletariat would play a major role in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

The tensions increasingly visible in Russian society at the turn of the century were the consequence not of stagnation, but of dynamic change. The tsarist government attempted to preserve autocracy undiminished at a time of profound economic and social transformation. The country needed educated people to run the new industry; it needed engineers, lawyers, and doctors; but the tsarist ministers so feared the subversive power of education that they refused to support general education. The contrast with the other important modernizing country, Japan, could not have been greater. The revolutionary movement was gaining strength. Assassinations of tsarist functionaries and members of the imperial court created an atmosphere of crisis.

As a major power, Russia was neither willing nor able to stay out of the significant international conflicts of the time. It had imperialist ambitions: it was deeply involved in the confused affairs of the Balkans, and the newly completed Trans-Siberian Railroad allowed it to project its strength to the Far East, where it quickly came into conflict with Japan. The Russian government stumbled into a war with Japan, which it undertook lightheartedly, grossly underestimating the enemy's strength, technological sophistication, and

determination. The Russian military, especially the navy, performed poorly in this war, lowering the prestige of the empire.

The social developments in a fast-changing society, combined with the impending defeat in a misconceived and poorly led war, resulted in the revolution of 1905. It was a messy affair. No leadership was able to take control of the revolutionary movement. The waves of revolutionary activities among workers, soldiers, and peasants remained uncoordinated, and therefore could not reinforce one another. Although at times it seemed that the autocracy might be toppled, the government – by a combination of repression and timely concessions, as expressed in the Manifesto of October 1905 – managed to divide the opposition and thereby put off the demise of the tsarist system.

The revolution failed, in the sense that Nicholas II managed to retain his throne, but it was nevertheless an event with far-reaching consequences. On the one hand, it gave much-needed training to the revolutionaries. The workers at the height of the upheaval in October 1905 spontaneously created soviets (a word meaning council). These organizations were one of Russia's most important contributions to twentieth-century revolutionary politics. None of the theorists of the revolution, neither Marx nor the much more practical-minded Lenin, foresaw these workers' councils. Created by striking workers in order to coordinate activities, they turned out to be admirably suited to the requirements of a revolutionary situation. They were capable of quickly mobilizing proletarian forces and thereby channeling revolutionary energies. At least for a moment, in the fall of 1905, the St. Petersburg Soviet seemed almost as powerful as the government.

Although at the outset in 1905 the soviets, including the most important one in St. Petersburg, were genuine working-class organizations, gradually radical socialist intellectuals came to play an important role in them. Leon Trotsky proved his oratorical and organizational talents with the St. Petersburg Soviet. It was this experience that allowed the workers and soldiers in 1917 instantaneously to return to this form of organization.

The revolution changed the character of the Russian state. The tsar, in order to consolidate the situation, was compelled to grant concessions. Preliminary censorship was abolished, which meant that opposition papers could be printed. The Bolshevik paper *Pravda*, for example, although periodically repressed, could be legally published. The workers could organize trade unions, though these were on occasion harassed by the police.

The constitutional system introduced after the revolution would no longer be considered democratic in our time. However, one must avoid being anachronistic: to expect Russia to introduce universal suffrage and a government responsible to a parliament was hardly realistic (no European country at the time had full universal suffrage). The problem was not that the constitutional system was insufficiently democratic, but that the tsar and his government accepted it under duress, in bad faith, with no intention of

observing it. The government was no more respectful of the rule of the law than was the revolutionary opposition.

As soon as the revolutionary wave subsided, the government reduced the concessions it had given just a few months before. In April 1906, it introduced a constitutional system, which with some changes remained in existence until the revolution of 1917. Russia acquired a two-chamber legislature. The lower house, the Duma, was elected on the basis of estate suffrage, meaning that a handful of landowners elected 31 percent of the delegates, while the vast majority of the citizens, the peasants, elected 42 percent. The system treated the working classes especially poorly because the government regarded them as most dangerous. The urban poor (i.e., the workers) elected only 2 percent of the delegates. The upper house came as a surprise to the electorate, for it had not been mentioned in the October Manifesto at all. Half of its delegates were named by the tsar, the other half elected by institutions such as the church, the Academy of Sciences, and the *zemstva*. The legislature could neither remove the government nor override the tsar's veto.

Even this Duma elected on the basis of restricted suffrage was far too radical for the government. Premier Peter Stolypin, in a virtual coup d'etat in June 1907, dissolved the Duma and for the new elections readjusted the percentages assigned to different estates. After 1907 landowners elected more than half of the members of the Duma, and the representation of the peasantry was reduced to 22 percent.

Despite the limited franchise and the limitations on the powers of the assembly, the Duma was not an insignificant institution: important matters were discussed openly in a public forum. The Duma, for example, took an intelligent interest in military and educational reforms. Perhaps most importantly, elections to the Duma implied the legalization of political parties. For the first time in Russian history, politicians were allowed to develop and to present to the electorate political platforms.

The political spectrum ran from the extreme right to the socialist left. The Union of Russian People, a reactionary organization, intended to disrupt the Duma from the inside. Its electoral base was small but significant, for it enjoyed the not-very-covert support of the tsarist court. Arguably, this organization was proto-fascist: it romanticized violence and used the crudest demagoguery to gain support from the urban lower classes. The Union of the Russian People was involved in anti-Jewish pogroms and competed with the revolutionaries in bloody terror, organizing assassinations of leftist politicians.

The liberals, with their political base of professional people, the bourgeoisie, and a segment of the nobility, were well represented in the Duma. In the First and Second Dumas the strongest party was the Kadets (Constitutional Democrats). This was a party of the Westernizing gentry: the party stood for land reform with compensation, concessions to the nationalities,

civil liberties, and further constitutional reform. Its left wing was republican, while the right wing was satisfied with constitutional monarchy. The other major party of liberals was the Octobrist Party, which gained its name from the October Manifesto of 1905. These were people who preferred constitutional monarchy and, as their name implied, wanted to base the political life of the country on the concessions already given by the tsar. The Octobrists were much more willing than the Kadets to cooperate with the government, were dubious about the wisdom of breaking up large estates, and tended to look at matters from the point of view of Great Russian national interests.

The left was made up of two types of Russian socialists: the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and the Social Democrats. The Socialist Revolutionaries were heirs to the rich tradition of Russian populism. They intended to base themselves on the peasantry and attempted to defend the interests of this class. In a genuinely free election they would undoubtedly have received the largest number of votes. The Socialist Revolutionaries, while respectful of Marx and Marxism, saw a different path for Russia than for the West. They made much of Russian institutions, primarily the peasant commune, which they regarded as a germ of Russian socialism and an example of the communitarian mentality of the Russian peasant. A large and heterogeneous party, the Socialist Revolutionaries also included people responsible for some of the worst acts of terror.

Socialist Revolutionaries and Social Democrats both believed in the necessity of revolution, but the Social Democrats, as Marxists, saw industrialization as something inevitable and already changing the face of Russia. They assumed that the workers would be the moving force in the coming revolution. From the very outset the Social Democrats were split between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. The difference between the two trends in Russian social democracy was not yet clear to the Russian electorate.

The Bolshevik Party was the left wing of Russian social democracy. The party to an extraordinary extent was the creation of V. I. Lenin, who from the very outset tolerated only those who deferred to him. He not only created the party by causing a split with the Mensheviks at the 1903 "founding" party congress, but he also laid the theoretical basis that distinguished Bolshevism from other Marxist currents. Lenin's starting point was that the workers left to their own devices could see no further than their immediate economic interests. Therefore, in order to bring about the transformation of society, the proletariat needed a disciplined organization, the party, which could channel the energies of the workers to bring about the revolution. Revolutionaries educated in Marxist theory had the task of bringing class consciousness to the workers. The stress on organization and discipline helped the Bolsheviks when they were struggling underground, and would help them again during the years of upheaval, 1917–21. The Mensheviks, who considered themselves just as revolutionary as the Bolsheviks, differed