

Introduction
Conceptions of Liberalism in Imperial Russia

By focusing on the Russian aspect, this study adds an important and neglected element to the intellectual history of liberalism. It does so at a time when transnational conversation about liberalism and its philosophy is important in areas beyond academia, and can be expected to become even more so in the near future. On the one hand, we are increasingly aware of the fragility of liberal-democratic practices and institutions (both in countries with long-standing liberal traditions and those without), and, on the other, liberalism has consolidated its status as the ‘least bad’ political ideology. The Russian part of this history, in the decades leading up to the October Revolution, offers fascinating insights into liberalism’s internal contradictions.

This book examines the Russian engagement with liberal ideas during Russia’s long nineteenth century, the period stretching from the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–96) to the Russian Revolution of 1917. It identifies Russian thinkers with liberal sympathies and differentiates them from both conservatives and socialists, though boundaries between these groups are blurred, as they are elsewhere. The methodology used means that I discuss the ideas of some thinkers who were critical of liberalism or even dismissed it outright, in favour of Russian variants of socialism or loyalty to the Tsar. While it discusses pre-twentieth-century developments, this study focuses on the high point of Russian liberalism in the years roughly 1900 to 1914. It was then that a self-consciously liberal movement took shape, followed by the founding of Russia’s first liberal (Constitutional-Democratic, or Kadet) Party in 1905. For a brief but revelatory period, some Russians, an eclectic group of academics, politicians, and public figures, drew on liberal ideas of Western origin to articulate a distinctively Russian liberal philosophy, shape their country’s political landscape, and were themselves partly responsible for the tragic historical experience of 1905.

This study, therefore, pays particular attention to the views and experiences of prominent figures of late imperial Russian liberalism including

Russia's best-known liberal politician Pavel Miliukov (1859–1943), the philosophers Pëtr Struve (1870–1944), Semën Frank (1877–1950), Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866–1924), Bogdan Kistiakovskii (1868–1920), and sociologist Maksim Kovalevskii (1851–1916). Academics by training, these men laid the foundations for the emergence of liberalism as a social philosophy in Russia, while their simultaneous involvement in political movements gave them first-hand experience of the potential tensions between personal autonomy and the well-being of a community, order, and justice. For all these figures, the violence and disorder at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as the prospects offered by Russia's first, flawed parliamentary system in 1905, acted as a watershed in their intellectual development. In the period covered, their views of how a liberal model could work in the Russian context were constantly evolving. As we shall see, the period witnessed increasing divisions between thinkers who were deeply concerned with the necessity of achieving a balance between individual autonomy and social solidarity, and those who sought to downplay this tension and associated individual freedom with a belief in a single path of progress, achievable through industrialization, democratization, and Westernization.

Russia makes a good case study for liberalism precisely (and ironically) because historically it has been an illiberal polity. From the outset, the particular circumstances of Russia's history – the most absolutist regime of nineteenth-century European powers, a society predominantly composed of serfs (emancipation occurred in 1861) – hindered the development of liberalism there. While liberals in the West were mainly hostile to revolution, in Russia the advocacy of a rule-of-law state could imply overthrowing the existing regime, thus placing liberals on the side of revolutionaries. The fact that the country had certain successful instances of top-down modernization overseen by an autocrat, and the ways that constitutionalism and laissez-faire economics risked perpetuating the dependence of Russia's rural population support Daniel Fields's view that 'doctrines that naturally clustered together in Western Europe were in conflict in Russia'.¹ The historical experience of Russia's liberals contributed to their strong attraction to the civil and political rights they saw as a necessary protection from tyranny and autocratic rule, while their awareness of the plight of the peasant population made them wary of approaching freedom in excessively individualistic, materialistic, and

¹ 'Kavelin and Russian Liberalism', *Slavic Review*, 32 (1973), 59–78 (60).

free-market terms. Roughly speaking, Russian thinkers were always sympathetic to a conception of liberty that contained certain aspects they hoped might redress economic inequality and restore social cohesion in a divided country.

Oppressive political realities meant that Russian liberals had to defend their ideals and values with particular persuasive force, clarity, and sophistication. The intricate, dynamic, and highly instructive intellectual history they left behind is a testimony to their achievements. At the same time, when judged in terms of concrete, practical outcomes, the contributions of Russia's liberal tradition were more limited. It is possible to argue that the liberal desire for a reasonable compromise between individual freedoms and social well-being was itself a kind of unrealizable idyll in Russian history; from the perspective of the 1920s, the philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev characterized the wishes of Russia's constitutional democrats to install a regime based on the rule of law and civil liberties as 'unrealizable utopias' and 'senseless dreams'.²

While the word *liberal* and its derivatives (*liberal'nyi*, *liberalizm*) were imported into Russia in the 1820s, it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that they became common in political discourse, and that Boris Chicherin (1828–1904), a seminal figure for Russian liberal theory, devoted significant efforts to highlighting the positive role that Western-style liberalism could play in the Russian context. But as of the mid 1860s the term was predominantly used with qualifiers such as 'gentry' and 'bourgeois', and in a derogatory way to refer to a social class who – in the words of Ivan Turgenev's character Evgenii Bazarov – embraced 'foreign and useless words' such as '[a]ristocracy, liberalism, progress, principles.'³ Partly because of the scorn that the Russian radical movement heaped on those they termed 'liberals', liberalism did not become an actor's category until, broadly speaking, the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ And even then members of Russia's main pre-revolutionary party who clearly sympathized with liberal ideas (the Constitutional-Democrats, or Kadets) did not attach

² *Novoe srednevekov'e: razmyshlenie o sud'be Rossii i Evropy* (Berlin: Obelisk, 1924), pp. 62–3.

³ Ivan Turgenev, *Otsy i deti* (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo detskoï literatury, Ministerstva prosveshcheniia RSFSR, 1950) p. 47.

⁴ This claim is at odds with a trend in recent scholarship to trace the origins of Russian liberalism to the early nineteenth century. See, for example, Julia Berest, *The Emergence of Russian Liberalism: Alexander Kunitsyn in Context, 1783–1840* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Konstantin I. Shneider, *Mezhdû svobodoi i samoderzhaviem: Istoriia rannego russkogo liberalizma* (Perm: Permskii gosudarstvennyi natsional'nyi issledovatel'skii universitet, 2012); 'Was There an "Early Russian Liberalism"? Perspectives from Russian and Anglo-American Historiography', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 7(4) (2006), 825–41.

the label ‘liberal’ willingly to themselves.⁵ But another reason that such actors did not embrace the label of liberal was that they were themselves divided as to what exactly ideas like rights, the rule of law, and a constitution ‘meant’ in an arbitrary autocracy and bureaucratic tyranny. Supporting change via legislative reforms placed them in an uncomfortable alliance with a despotic, capricious regime, while to suggest that the establishment of a legal order meant unseating the current one implied an alliance with revolutionaries. If one defines liberalism as a list of characteristics derived from Western experience – for example, respect for the rule of law and for private property, sympathy for *laissez-faire* economics and limited government – it is next to impossible to find any recognizably Russian liberals.

The difficulty of translating liberalism conceptually into pre-revolutionary Russian culture sheds light on both the origins of the Russian Revolution, and on the nature and limitations of liberal thought. The Russian example illustrates clearly one of liberalism’s fundamental problems: that the different things that liberals value (order and justice, for example) may conflict, at times violently, and this becomes clear as ideals are given concrete embodiment. For that reason, this book approaches the development of liberal philosophy and politics in Russia as part of a transnational conversation about how to accommodate constituent liberal ideas such as freedom, progress, and rights in complex political circumstances. It draws on recent work in liberal theory concerned with recasting liberalism as a congeries of non-dogmatic theories, attempting to strike a balance between almost insurmountable contradictions (the claims of individual dignity and the principle of non-interference, for example, or between community and individualism), and aware that the resulting balance inevitably depends on the constraints of a particular cultural and historical context. This theoretical framework is crucial for moving beyond approaches to Russian liberalism that have tended to downplay the internal tensions within liberal views of freedom and selfhood. At the same time, it also shows the fragility of cohesion among liberal ideas.

As intimated above, Russia is not typically associated with liberalism; indeed, the Russian intellectual tradition is often seen as primarily conducive to social utopias and hostile to the rule of law. Yet while demonstrating both the conceptual and linguistic difficulties of translating liberalism into the Russian Empire, the approach used here nevertheless allows me to

⁵ They did, however, regularly use the term when describing their political sympathies to foreign audiences.

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underscore the wide range of arguments and practices that were influenced by Euro-American liberal theories. Even though few Russian thinkers embraced the label, liberal ideas were foundational for Russian pre-revolutionary politics. The guiding liberal belief in the equal moral worth of each individual animated the political discussions of the day, yet produced no consensus as to the implications of this premise for economic and social realms.⁶ Liberal ideas of progress and perfection fascinated Russian thinkers as they debated whether or not their country's destiny consisted in 'catching up' with the West.⁷ The institutional practices associated with liberalism, including constitutionalism, respect for the rule of law, democracy, and press freedom were instrumental in precipitating the end of the Russian Empire, though Russian liberals struggled to use these institutions to their political advantage. By approaching liberalism as a theory aware of a potential trade-off between rights, we can see better how constituent liberal arguments and practices were repeatedly consumed and reconstructed in the light of Russian realities.

This study provides an anatomy of a locally generated liberalism that seeks to contribute to the received story of the history of liberalism. As Russian thinkers appropriated and cannibalized the thought of European and American liberals, this sometimes produced surprising results. For example, Westernizers of the 1840s used liberal theories of Western origin to justify their Hegelian interpretations of history as developing in the direction of freedom and progress. In another case, that of populists such as Pëtr Lavrov (1823–1900) and Nikolai Mikhailovskii (1842–1904), Russian thinkers were interested in the value liberal theory placed on both positive and negative freedom, but concluded that social injustice was so great in the Russia of their time that resolving it trumped the claims of individual and political liberty. In addition, the intellectual sophistication of several strands of Russian liberal theory deserves a wider audience than it currently has; the social philosophies of neo-idealist liberals such as Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866–1924, for whom no intellectual biography exists in English) and Bogdan Kistiakovskii (1868–1920) stand out for their attempt to engage with Western liberalism and to use its lessons in a

⁶ For recent scholarship on the engagement of the Russian intellectual tradition with human dignity, also one of liberalism's core preoccupations see, for example, G. M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole, eds., *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Aileen Kelly, *Toward Another Shore: Russian Thinkers between Necessity and Chance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁷ I am using the West here as an umbrella term to refer to Western Europe and North America; this was common practice for the thinkers examined here.

country that had no liberal tradition of its own. Their intellectual trajectories serve as both an important source of information and act as warning concerning the limitations of an overly simple and universalizing conception of liberalism.

Finally, this book seeks to contribute to the rapidly developing field of global intellectual history by offering theoretical insights into the dislocated and fractured nature of liberalism. The Russian liberal experience demonstrates to what extent liberalism is a broad church: as Russian thinkers looked to Western liberals for theoretical and practical insights, they found significant disagreements as to whether or not the state should protect and promote the economic and social well-being of its citizens, the benefits of democracy, or the nature of liberty that liberals ought to seek, to take three issues they were interested in. In turn, Russians appropriated what they saw as useful from the liberal canon. One of the reasons they felt justified in doing so is an outsider's awareness that, while liberalism may have universal aspirations in its beliefs about human nature and freedom, its ideals or forms (such as natural law) must be filled with concrete historical-cultural content. This drew some of them to a persistent strand within liberal theory that articulated views of human nature and of freedom in response to the constraints of political practice and insisted that there can be no universal recipe for resolving the conflict between freedom and social justice. But this theoretical flexibility also led to practical obstacles. Russia did not have the political circumstances that permitted important liberal ideas such as limited government, the sanctity of private property, and individual responsibility to coalesce and grow together; its liberal project was plagued from its inception by a lack of cohesion and focus.

0.1 Western Theories

While the controversies surrounding a definition of liberalism are sometimes perceived as of academic interest only, Russian thinkers experienced first-hand the various 'types' and 'competing visions' within liberalism.⁸ What John Gray has identified as the 'discontinuities, accidents, variety, and historical concreteness of the thinkers indifferently lumped together

⁸ The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* begins its article on 'Liberalism' by observing that: 'As soon as one examines it, "liberalism" fractures into a variety of types and competing visions' (Gerald Gaus, Shane D. Courtland, and David Schmidtz 'Liberalism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (2015), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism> [accessed 25 January 2017]).

under the label of liberalism' troubled Russian thinkers as they attempted to apply liberal insights to their own realities.⁹

Indeed, the problems surrounding a 'definition' of liberalism are an unavoidable aspect of attempting to export the ideas associated with liberalism of Euro-American origin to global contexts. Part of the reason for this is what philosopher Bernard Williams has called the 'permanent possibility' of conflict between values, arising from the fact that concepts such as liberty and equality are not the same for all people.¹⁰ Throughout the past two centuries, many of the thinkers we associate with liberalism have consciously tried to address the unresolved tensions between the claims of individual dignity and the principle of non-interference, between the interests of the community and the individual, and their implications for specific policies and institutions. As a result of this process, liberalism has been decisively shaped by the political and cultural contexts where it was articulated.

While recent emphasis has been on its existence as an 'essentially contested concept',¹¹ rather than its doctrinal unity, we can still identify several recurring liberal preoccupations that provide some justification for considering liberalism a single tradition. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, liberalism became associated with the idea that human persons, not social collectivities, are the fundamental units of political life; its proponents favour formal legal and political equality – and more recently some form of economic equality – derived from their conviction that each human being ought to have the opportunity to realize their full potential, or to flourish; the liberal model is underpinned by the ideal of an autonomous agent, capable of self-governance and living their life according to their own choices; liberals formulate their ideas in universal terms, based on a commitment to the existence of universal values and the moral unity of the human species; typical liberal characteristics include tolerance, support for autonomy, and an inclination to deliberate. In a less positive vein, liberals have defended their commitments to equality and the social and political emancipation of dominated groups ambivalently, resulting in recurring instances of hierarchy and exclusion. They have also

⁹ *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 262.

¹⁰ 'Liberalism and Loss', in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Mark Lilla et al. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), pp. 91–103 (p. 95). For a minority view that liberal values can be harmonized, see the work of Ronald Dworkin, for example, his 'Do Liberal Values Conflict?', *ibid.*, pp. 73–90.

¹¹ See W. B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1956), 167–98.

tended to argue that their own culturally informed beliefs, values, and practices constitute the foundation of a universal civilization, that history confirms their triumphalist vision of freedom, and that those who disagree with them are either deluded or depraved.¹² Certain strands of liberalism have been criticized for their inability to deal with the facts of human neediness, dependencies, and accused of excessive individualism and abstraction.¹³ And whatever else liberalism is, it is anthropocentric, in that it places human interests and well-being above those of others (non-human animals, for example).¹⁴ Thus, while it is impossible to pinpoint a single set of theoretical and practical propositions at the heart of liberal ideology, we are nevertheless able to understand what people mean when they talk about liberalism, and to list what Alan Wolfe has called a set of characteristic liberal ‘dispositions toward the world’.¹⁵

If there was some consensus among Russian liberals about the core liberal principles, there was far less agreement about the social, economic, and cultural conditions required for self-realization and flourishing, since these conditions involve ‘essentially contested’ questions about the proper balance between negative and positive liberty. Russian thinkers engaged with the history of liberalism in all its variety and – just as its supporters and detractors did in the West – identified it with a broad range of policy positions and singled out liberal inclinations in thinkers whose body of work is difficult to classify as consistently liberal. Russians read the thinkers who repeatedly appear as figureheads of a ‘liberal tradition’ – figures as diverse as John Locke, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Hill Green – but remained confronted with the problem that there are no definitively liberal positions in relation to any political issue or

¹² For a study that emphasizes the ungenerous aspects of liberalism’s history, see Domenico Losurdo, *Contro storia del liberalismo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2005). On the characteristics of liberalism, see John Gray, *Liberalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. x; Alan Ryan, ‘Liberalism’, in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. Robert E. Goodin et al., 2 vols. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), vol. 1, pp. 360–82, here pp. 361–2; Jennifer Pitts, ‘Free for All’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 September 2011, pp. 8–9; Mark Lilla, ‘Republicans for Revolution’, *New York Review of Books*, 59 (2012), 12–16.

¹³ For an overview of the communitarian critique of liberalism (which includes figures such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor), see Patrick Neal and David Paris, ‘Liberalism and the Communitarian Critique: A Guide for the Perplexed’, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 23 (1990), 419–39. For feminist critiques, see, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Susan Okin, ‘Political Liberalism, Justice and Gender’, *Ethics*, 105 (1994), 23–43.

¹⁴ See Marcel Wissenburg, ‘Liberalism’, in *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge*, ed. Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 20–34.

¹⁵ *The Future of Liberalism* (New York: Knopf, 2009), cited in Pitts, ‘Free for All’, p. 8.

policy, a problem compounded in tsarist Russia where social and political conditions were different from those of the West.

Questions of terminology further complicated the matter: 'liberal' itself contains a basic ambiguity, between its early association with liberality, and therefore magnanimity, tolerance, and freedom from bias, and its later connotation of civil liberties and political rights.¹⁶ Yet the confusion surrounding the meaning of *liberalizm* and its derivatives is not merely terminological: in 1856 Boris Chicherin, Konstantin Kavelin (1818–85) and Nikolai Mel'gunov (1804–67) published an article in which they called liberalism 'the slogan of every educated and sensible person in Russia';¹⁷ in 1859 Pavel Annenkov (1813–87) (who is himself sometimes considered a liberal) complained in a letter to Ivan Turgenev that 'liberalism' embodies the slogans of people in positions of power who purported to subscribe to modish slogans while pursuing selfish aims;¹⁸ and Pavel Miliukov, Russia's best-known liberal politician, boasted in 1905 that his party's programme 'is undoubtedly the most leftist of all those put forward by Western European groups analogous to us'.¹⁹ In part, this reflects the variety of possible social and economic outcomes that liberal conceptions of selfhood and of freedom might entail.

0.1.1 Selfhood

Liberalisms, like any other political philosophy, rest on a specific notion of what human beings are and can become. To cite John Gray: '[a]ny theory of the value of liberty must be part of [a] writer's larger normative theory, and this will express or endorse some vision of human nature or some conception of the essential features of human society'.²⁰ Jerrold Seigel has formalized three interconnected aspects of the self that are helpful for illustrating the major strands of thinking about the self that have inspired liberal theory and the Russian thinkers who sought to interpret it. The first

¹⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), vol. 8, pp. 881–2. On the history of the term liberalism, see Jörn Leonhard, *Liberalismus: Zur historischen Semantik eines europäischen Deutungsmusters* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2001); G. de Bertier de Sauvigny, 'Liberalism, Nationalism, and Socialism: The Birth of Three Words', *Review of Politics*, 32 (1970), 147–66.

¹⁷ Cited in Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Ogarëv, *Golos iz Rossii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), vol. 1 (1856–7), p. 110.

¹⁸ Cited in Field, 'Kavelin and Russian Liberalism', p. 59.

¹⁹ See his 'Vstupitel'naia rech' na uchreditel'nom s'ezde k.-d. partii 14-go oktjabria 1905 goda', reprinted in *God bor'by*, pp. 97–101 (pp. 100–1).

²⁰ 'Introduction', in *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy*, ed. Zbigniew Pelczynski and John Gray (London: Athlone Press, 1984), pp. 1–6 (p. 3).

view of selfhood is of an empirical creature with physical and bodily needs, driven by desires, urges, and inclinations; the second is of a reflexive being that benefits from the ability to take distance from bodies and social bonds and examine them critically, thus participating in its own self-realization; and, third, emphasis is placed on the self as a product of the multitude of social and cultural relations it entertains with others, involving shared identities and values.²¹

By ‘empiricist views of the self’ I mean notions of selfhood that focus on sense–experience, experiment, and observation. The first articulations of the modern, individualist outlook occurred in seventeenth-century England, and particularly in the theory of selfhood of John Locke (1632–1704). Locke’s search for a new understanding of individuality is underpinned by his reaction against the Cartesian tradition which holds that ideas are innately imprinted on the mind and that the self can be known independently of the senses.²² By adopting an empiricist philosophy of knowledge and an inductive approach to politics, his theory of selfhood stresses the fundamental role of experience in acquiring knowledge, and the human body as the means through which individuals implement rational choices. Rational consciousness, in Locke’s view, takes on a universal dimension through its links with the everyday, bodily existence of an individual agent; in John Yolton’s words, Lockean selfhood is always embodied, never disembodied.²³

Lockean empiricism rejects the subordination of the senses to reason in favour of a balance between the two. While the experience of the world plays a powerful role in shaping the human personality, the individual capacity to use reason limits the powers of animal needs and social determination, which makes citizens happier and increases their capacity to engage in moral behaviour. For Locke, objective moral principles discoverable by reason are crucial for ensuring that liberty does not degenerate into licence.²⁴ Reason allows individuals to discover their

²¹ *The Idea of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 3–44.

²² Locke’s most extensive discussion of personal identity occurs in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1959 (1690)), vol. 1, book II, ch. 27, pp. 439–70; see also *ibid.*, ch. 21, pp. 308–80. On Locke’s theory of selfhood, see, in particular, John Dunn, *Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 63–4, 68–70; A. J. Simmons, *The Lockean Theory of Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 14–67.

²³ *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding: A Selective Commentary on the ‘Essay’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 150–1.

²⁴ Acting in accordance with the precepts of reason and morality, Locke writes, is not in any way ‘a restraint or diminution of freedom’, but rather ‘the end and use of our liberty’ (*An Essay*, ch. 21 § 49, p. 345). In Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge