Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform 1801-1881

David Saunders

Longman History of Russia

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Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform 1801–1881

DAVID SAUNDERS

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Contents

List of abbreviations

AHR	*American Historical Review*
AJPH	*Australian Journal of Politics and History*
CASS	*Canadian-American Slavic Studies*
CMRS	*Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*
CSP	*Canadian Slavonic Papers*
CSS	*Canadian Slavic Studies*
CSSH	*Comparative Studies in Society and History*
EHR	*English Historical Review*
EKO	*Ekonomika i organizatsiia promyshlennogo proizvodstva*
ESR	*European Studies Review*
FOEG	*Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte*
HJ	*Historical Journal*
IA	*Istoricheskii arkhiv*
IHR	*International History Review*
IRSH	*International Review of Social History*
IZ	*Istoricheskie zapiski*
J Ec Hist	*Journal of Economic History*
J Eccl Hist	*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
JFGO	*Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*
JMH	*Journal of Modern History*
JSH	*Journal of Social History*
KA	*Krasnyi arkhiv*
OSP	*Oxford Slavonic Papers* (new series)
P & P	*Past and Present*
PSS	*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*
RA	*Russkii arkhiv*
RH	*Russian History*
RR	*Russian Review*
RS	*Russkaia starina*
SEER	*Slavonic and East European Review*
SIRIO	*Sbornik imperatorskogo russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*
SPB	St Petersburg
SR	*Slavic Review*

SS	*Soviet Studies*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
VI	*Voprosy istorii*
VPR	*Vneshniaia politika Rossii XIX i nachala XX veka: Dokumenty rossiiskogo ministerstva inostrannykh del,* ed. A. L. Narochnitskii et al. (Moscow, 1960–)

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Preface

The Russian Empire in the nineteenth century was a land of extremes – extreme poverty and extreme wealth, extreme ignorance and extreme sophistication, extreme size and extreme parochialism, extreme arrogance and extreme deference, extreme administrative uniformity and extreme cultural diversity, extreme might and extreme frailty. The extremes were too great to be reconciled. The last sentence of this book accuses populist revolutionaries of making compromise impossible, but the book as a whole spends most of its time trying to explain why compromise was difficult. The reasons included the personal failings of tsars; the regime's unjustifiable emphasis on maintaining its international standing; the reluctance of nobles to accept the loss of control over the countryside or the transformation of their sources of income; the consolidation of a bureaucracy which thought it knew better than the people for whom it was responsible; the desire to educate people without permitting the educated to express their views; the obsession of the educated with the values and material achievements of western Europe; the multiplicity of non-Russian cultures; and above all, the lack of resources to support innovation. Faced with these sources of combustion, tsars often gave the impression that strong-arm tactics were the only way forward. The terrorists of the late 1870s appeared to agree. Subsequent developments revealed that violence solved nothing, but it is still unclear whether Russians can accept the notion that politics is the art of the possible. In a part of the world where absolutes have attracted so many for so long, the temptation to run before walking remains powerful.

If it had been less of a mouthful I would have added a word to the title: not 'Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform', but 'Russia in the Age of *Reform*, Reaction and Reform'. The unwieldy longer title would have emphasized my view that the keynote of the years 1801–1881 is swings of the pendulum. Perhaps the absence of a linear theme ('the making of Russian absolutism', for example, or 'modernization and revolution') explains why the first eighty years of the nineteenth century have been less attractive to historians than earlier and later periods of Russian history. There may, however, be other reasons. In the Soviet Union, scholars were permanently

discouraged from considering whether the Romanovs ever had practical ideas for solving their problems. Western scholars, meanwhile, have often had difficulty categorizing nineteenth-century Russia because it was out of step with the rest of the European continent. The Romanovs of the period 1801–1881 were still trying to answer a question which other European rulers had stopped asking themselves after the coming of the French Revolution. 'Can an absolute ruler promote enlightenment without reaping the whirlwind?' In central and western Europe kings and bureaucrats knew that the answer was 'No'. They responded to their knowledge by becoming die-hards or accepting that change was inevitable. In Russia, tsars havered. The key point is their indecision. It is not true to say that some of them were reformers and some of them reactionaries. All of them doubted. The doubts gave rise to 'stop-go' policies which create the impression of reform, reaction and reform. Whether the cycle should be seen as an ascending or a descending spiral depends on the view one takes of the 1917 revolutions, but 1917, I am pleased to say, is not my subject.

My greatest debt in writing this book has been to the dedicatees, but I am also extremely grateful to the following: Tony and Ruth Badger (for friendship), Professor J. L. Black (for assistance with Karamzin), Mark Evans and Michael Holmes (for getting the show on the road), John Gooding (for assistance with Speranskii), Julian Graffy (for kindnesses too many and various to relate), John Klier (for sending me his work on Russian Jews), Andrew MacLennan of Longman (for enthusiasm, patience and extremely constructive criticism), David Moon (for insisting on the intelligence of Russian peasants), Professor Marc Raeff (for reading and commenting on four chapters at a rate I found inconceivable), Patrick Salmon (for guidance in respect of international relations and reminders that the Baltic provinces of the empire were a place apart), Harold Shukman (for knowing how to temper the wind to the shorn lamb), the Small Grants Committee of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne (for money), Vladimir Somov (for proof that moderate intellectuals may occasionally be found in St Petersburg), the Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia (for allowing me to read a number of papers), Evgeniia Taratuta (for drawing my attention to the work of N. V. Minaeva) and Julian Walker (for hospitality). None of these bears any responsibility for my mistakes.

Except in respect of tsars, one or two other well-known individuals and a few geographical phenomena, I have transliterated Russian proper names and references to Russian sources in accordance with the system employed by the Library of Congress. Owing to the difference between the Julian and Gregorian calendars, dates in the nineteenth-century Russian Empire were twelve days behind dates in the west. I give Russian dates throughout, but add the western date in sections which deal with international relations.

DAVID SAUNDERS
March 1992

To my mother and father

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CHAPTER ONE

The Enigmatic Tsar, his Friends and his Inheritance

WERE RUSSIA'S RULERS THEIR OWN WORST ENEMIES?

'Every state or civil society', wrote the Slavophile Aleksei Khomiakov towards the middle of the nineteenth century, 'is made up of two elements: the living historical element, which embodies all the society's vitality, and the rational or speculative element, which can achieve nothing by itself, but gradually imparts order to the fundamental or living element, sometimes pushing it aside and sometimes developing it'.[1] Not many Russian tsars would have understood abstractions of this kind, but even the intellectuals among them would have rejected the idea that the 'rational or speculative' part of Russian society – the government, the bureaucracy, the educated section of the community – could 'achieve nothing by itself'. Some tsars believed that they could radically transform their realm. Some were so far divorced from reality that they expected to reproduce in the Russian Empire the administrative successes of the countries which served them as models. Others sensed the near-impossibility of solving the problems which confronted them, but felt they must act dramatically if they were to make any progress at all. Others again, disdaining the idea of improvement, attempted to stop Russian society in its tracks. None could resign himself to the thought that life went on more or less irrespective of the government's decrees. None was prepared to have it said of him, as Sir Lewis Namier said of Metternich, that 'He annotated the margins of the great book of human insufficiency and inertia'.[2] None could have accepted with equanimity Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace's observation, made after six years in Russia in the 1870s, that 'In spite of the systematic and persistent efforts of the centralised bureaucracy to regulate minutely all the departments of national life, the rural Communes, which contain about five-sixths of the population, remain in many respects entirely beyond its influence, and even beyond its sphere of vision'.[3] Because even the most conservative tsars took a highly interventionist view of their responsibilities, the country seemed to be constantly in the throes of 'reaction' or 'reform'. The tsars' temperamental and ideological differences only height-

ened the impact of their interventionism. The number of their edicts, most of which sank like stones, kept the surface of society in constant motion. In the quest for the philosopher's stone which would enable them to grasp and clear up the problems which faced them, the Russian Empire's rulers tried solution after solution, launching themselves into new projects, trying to batten down the hatches, raising and dashing expectations – and turning, usually, into muddled obscurantists. The description 'Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform' could be applied not just to the years between 1801 and 1881, but to almost any eighty-year period of tsarist history.

Yet the greatest of Russia's historians, Vasilii Kliuchevskii, thought that the disjointed character of the Russian government's nineteenth-century performance was sufficiently pronounced to be worthy of special note. In a mordant diary entry written on the day after Nicholas II promulgated the Fundamental State Laws of 1906 – yet another governmental change of tack – he deplored the authorities' lack of constancy in the preceding hundred years and ascribed their volatility to malice aforethought. In doing so he composed an indictment of Russia's nineteenth-century rulers which is all the more striking for having come from the pen of a moderate. 'In the entire course of the nineteenth century,' Kliuchevskii wrote,

from the accession to the throne of Alexander I in 1801, the Russian government engaged in purely provocative activity: it would give society just as much freedom as was necessary to evoke in it a first response, and then collar and punish the simpletons who responded incautiously. Under Alexander I the policy worked like this: by virtue of his constitutional projects Speranskii became an involuntary provocateur, bringing the Decembrists out into the open and then having the misfortune, as a member of the investigative commission, to weep at the interrogation of his cornered political disciples. Under Emperor Nicholas I governmental provocation shifted its ground. If the period of the brazen Arakcheev (which had succeeded that of the bashful, conscientious Speranskii) had been dedicated to turning a plot into an armed rebellion, Nicholas I tried, by treacherously facilitating the activities of Benckendorff, to convert social discontent into plotting. The successful consequences of experimenting with this stratagem, manifested in the case of the Poles, long paralysed the strength of Russia's conspirators, fragmenting them into powerless circles, and the Petrashevskii affair starkly illuminated their powerlessness. Malcontents remained – Herzen, Granovskii, Belinskii – but they posed no threat, and the shameful reign of Emperor Nicholas I was successfully brought to a close by the Sevastopol' defeat and the Peace of Paris. It was the government of Emperor Alexander II which really fostered conspiracy in Russia. All its great reforms, unforgivably delayed, were nobly conceived, speedily elaborated, and dishonestly executed (apart from the judicial and military reforms). The monarch disposed wisely, the coadjutors whom he summoned (Samarin, the Miliutin brothers) self-denyingly drew up plans, but ministers of the camarilla (Lanskoi, Tolstoi, Valuev, Timashev) employed circulars to turn plans which had been approved on high into a mockery of the people's expectations. The tsar-reformer was threatened with playing the part of autocratic provocateur: Alexander II was going the same way as the first Alexander. With one hand he was granting reforms which excited the highest expectations in society, but with the other he was promoting and supporting agents who were dashing them. Not satisfied with tracking down illegal be-

haviour, and sensing a groundswell of discontent, the police sought to read men's hearts and minds by using denunciations and official searches. By enforcing retirements, by arrests and despatch into exile, they punished the schemes and designs which were afoot and transformed themselves imperceptibly from guardians of public order into an organized governmental conspiracy against society. Count Tolstoi and Katkov created an entire system of police academy classicism with the aim of turning students into models of uniformed official thinking, morally and intellectually castrated servants of the tsar and the fatherland. These deeply considered steps gave society, especially the younger generation, excellent lessons in conspiring against the government. The inclination to conspire grew fruitfully and quickly on the soil of public embitterment which the government had cultivated. Assassination attempts grew in frequency and culminated in the affair of 1 March.[4]

Kliuchevskii continued his account beyond the murder of Alexander II, and was no doubt wondering whether the concessions granted by Nicholas II in 1905–6 would prove any more lasting than those of his predecessors. From the standpoint of April 1906 his indictment was understandable, but this book will argue that it was blinkered. When Kliuchevskii pinned the misfortunes of early-twentieth-century Russia on her nineteenth-century rulers, he took the easy way out. Initiating and drawing back from change had been features of Russian governmental behaviour long before 1801, and were to be features of it long after Kliuchevskii's death. Nineteenth-century Russian tsars were no more interventionist, no more 'provocative', than their predecessors or successors. The personalities and policies of Alexander I, Nicholas I and Alexander II had less to do with the country's problems than the size of the problems themselves.

THE CHARACTER OF ALEXANDER I

The personality of Alexander I, however, with whose accession this book opens, has engaged historians to such an extent that it seems to be the key feature of Russia's history in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In some presentations, Alexander does indeed look like a 'provocateur' in Kliuchevskii's sense of the term. On the other hand, his genes, his upbringing, his friends, and the manner of his accession gave him good reason to appear in many guises. Christened 'the enigmatic tsar' by one of his biographers, 'the sphinx of the north' by another, a 'paternalistic reformer' by a third, and 'the Russian Trajan' by his former tutor,[5] he justified all four titles at different points in his reign. As the grandson of Catherine the Great, 'the only articulate ideologist to rule Russia between Ivan IV and Lenin',[6] and the son of Paul I, a militaristic admirer of Frederick the Great whom 'Potsdam, Sans Souci, and Berlin pursued ... like a wild dream',[7] he was introduced at an early age to the conflicting environments of the schoolroom

and the parade ground. Born in 1777, he was taken from his parents in the 1780s and exposed by his grandmother to the ministrations of a Swiss republican, Frédéric-César de La Harpe, who attempted to instil in him the ideals of the European Enlightenment. La Harpe's educational endeavours succeeded only up to a point, for by the time Catherine died, in November 1796, Alexander had found an antidote to the intellectual stringency of St Petersburg in the war games of his father's nearby estate at Gatchina. In 1793 and subsequently Catherine had considered bypassing Paul and making Alexander her heir, but her grandson would have no truck with the idea. He already sensed the enormity of the tasks that would confront him when he eventually succeeded to the throne. In May 1796 he wrote to his friend Viktor Kochubei of the 'incredible disorder' which permeated the administration of the empire, and expressed the view that ruling the country was beyond the powers of a genius, let alone of a moderately gifted fellow like himself. He envisaged abdicating, settling on the banks of the Rhine, and leading the peaceful life of a private individual who derived his happiness from the company of friends and the study of nature.[8] This vision captivated (or dogged) him to the end of his life, and played a part in the legend that, far from dying of typhus, he retired to Siberia and became a monk whose memory was still honoured in Tomsk in the 1930s.[9] Alexander was a dreamer. He was lazy, suggestible and given to sudden enthusiasms. But he also had a stubborn streak. Even in his celebrated letter of May 1796 he refrained from saying precisely when he would withdraw from public life; within a year of Paul's accession he had begun taking a more dynamic view of the way in which he would deal with the problems of the Russian Empire. Circumstances, not his kaleidoscopic character, were to be the main reason why he achieved few of the goals he set himself. He was less remarkable for changing his mind than for constantly returning to ideas of which he ought to have been disabused. He was defeated by the context in which he found himself, not by personal inadequacy.

ALEXANDER AND PAUL (1796–9)

It is usually said that Alexander was broadly loyal to Paul during the latter's short reign, and joined in the conspiracy against him only at the end and after much soul-searching. This is the view, for example, of Alan Palmer, but Natan Eidel'man has made a powerful counter-case.[10] It is true that, as heir to the throne, Alexander only once committed himself to a written indictment of his father. In a letter to La Harpe of September 1797 he reported that Paul had conceived the idea of imposing himself decisively on the state of affairs left by Catherine. Paul had started well, Alexander wrote,

but had flattered to deceive. The disorder which already prevailed had merely been intensified. Soldiers wasted their time on parades, orders were issued and rescinded within a month, the regime as a whole was characterized by 'severity without justice, too much partiality, and the maximum inexperience in the handling of business'. The heir to the throne was obliged to spend all his time on the trivia of military service and had no chance of devoting himself to study, which he claimed was his favourite pastime. 'I have become the most unhappy of men'.[11]

Since Alexander never again spoke so strongly of his dissatisfaction with Paul, his discontent is supposed to have been transient. It is more likely, however, that he simply stopped expressing his sentiments in letters. He may even have stopped writing because he was beginning to take action. By 1797 he had discovered some like-minded near contemporaries with whom he could speak freely, all of them outsiders in the context of Russian high politics. Kochubei, to whom Alexander wrote the much-quoted letter of 1796, was a triply peripheral figure. He spent the greater part of the 1790s as ambassador in Constantinople and complained constantly of being out of touch with affairs in St Petersburg; he belonged to a Ukrainian coterie whose members looked like parvenus to the Russians with whom they competed for office; and according to one contemporary he was antisocial, a man of 'few words and murderous cold'.[12] Alexander had met the Pole Adam Czartoryski before the death of Catherine, and through him Pavel Stroganov and Nikolai Novosil'tsev. All of these had reasons for being discontented with their lot. Czartoryski had been brought to St Petersburg after the collapse of Poland in 1795 and focused the remainder of his long life on the cause of Polish rebirth. Stroganov had been tutored by the French revolutionary Gilbert Romme and was a radical. Captivated by the changes in France, he had to be brought back from Paris almost by force in 1791. Novosil'tsev took him in hand on that occasion, but Novosil'tsev had his own reasons for being dissatisfied. He was Stroganov's bastard cousin, 'brought up by his generous uncle like a poor relation'. Olga Narkiewicz describes him as 'a man of poor education, but devouring ambition; one who felt slighted by Russian society, but yet desired to belong to it'.[13]

These young men, all of them slightly older than Alexander, had been working closely with the Grand Duke before he wrote his letter of complaint to La Harpe. Czartoryski had been almost overwhelmed by the liberalism which Alexander expressed in a three-hour private conversation at the Tauride Palace in 1796. In April of the following year, Alexander was displeased by the events which surrounded Paul's coronation in Moscow. Quite apart from substituting one political clan for another in his affections, Paul distributed large numbers of state-owned peasants as gifts, flaunted his domination of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and downgraded Catherine's Charter to the Nobility by declaring that nobles were to lose their immunity from corporal punishment. Alexander asked Czartoryski to prepare a draft manifesto for use in the event of his own eventual accession. In doing so,

Czartoryski spoke of the merits of freedom and justice and of Alexander's intention, after he had made a start on reform, to divest himself of power in order that someone more worthy might take over from him. Much later, Czartoryski claimed that he was well aware of Alexander's naivety, but it is likely that hindsight made him more perspicacious than he had been in the 1790s and that the draft manifesto which he drew up for Alexander embodied a firmer intention than he was prepared to admit. In the indictment of Paul which Alexander addressed to La Harpe, the heir to the throne spoke more precisely of the 'revolution' which he had in mind for his country. 'It would be the best sort of revolution,' he said, 'as it would be undertaken by a legal authority which would cease to exist as soon as the constitution was finished and the nation had chosen its representatives'. Alexander had in mind change from the top down, no doubt by way of staving off the sort of change from the bottom up which had been taking place in contemporary Europe.

At the time of the coronation festivities in Moscow, Novosil'tsev produced a sort of programmatic introduction to the constitutional innovations which Alexander was considering. It has not survived, but seems to have turned on the need to educate that part of the Russian public which would one day constitute the nation's representatives. In his letter to La Harpe, Alexander spoke of his circle's intention to commission the translation into Russian of 'as many useful books as possible' – the texts which underlay contemporary developments in France. Alexander did not envisage being able to distribute many such translations on the open market, but must have contemplated circulating them in manuscript and increasing the small number of those sympathetic to his intentions. In fact he managed a little more than this, by way of a periodical entitled *The St Petersburg Journal* which appeared in 1798. While Novosil'tsev, Stroganov and Czartoryski all contributed items for publication, Alexander provided the funds. The journal's editors were important figures in the early history of attempts at reforming imperial Russia. One of them, Ivan Pnin, played a key role in 'filling the gap between Radishchev and the Decembrists',[14] that gap which extended from Aleksandr Radishchev's arrest in 1790 for publishing his inflammatory *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow* to the rising of the Decembrists in 1825. *The St Petersburg Journal* did much to perpetuate the idea of reform when Paul was doing his best to suppress it. It did not aim to topple the existing order, but to make use of it for the ends which Alexander had in view. The translations with which it abounded, from Montesquieu, Holbach and perhaps especially Antoine-Léonard Thomas, whose 'Epistle to the People' of 1760 spoke sharply of the need to pay the peasantry due respect for their contribution to the life of the community, accorded well with Alexander's mood in the first half of his father's reign.

Paul clearly sensed Alexander's hopes for the future, and attempted to break up his circle by sending Novosil'tsev to England. Czartoryski and Stroganov remained, however, and in 1798 Paul unwittingly strengthened Alexander's resolve by recalling Kochubei from the embassy in Constanti-

nople. Paul showered Kochubei with honours and may have hoped he would modify Alexander's opinions, for he was a nephew of Aleksandr Bezborodko, the highly trusted Chancellor of the Empire. If this was indeed the tsar's idea it misfired, for Kochubei took Alexander's side and added weight to the Grand Duke's circle. He had more experience of affairs, greater authority, and more powerful connections than Alexander's other associates. He persuaded Bezborodko to write Alexander a 'Memorandum Concerning the Needs of the Russian Empire', which conceded that 'the condition of the peasants is such as to require improvement' and advocated an increased role for the Senate in the administration of the country.[15] Through Kochubei Alexander became acquainted not only with Bezborodko, but also with a second member of the generation which had grown up under Catherine. Dmitrii Troshchinskii, whom Bezborodko brought to St Petersburg in the 1780s and who had been a state secretary since 1793, acted as Kochubei's business agent throughout the ten-year period of the latter's absence in western Europe and Constantinople. He revelled in the success of his coterie during Paul's early years on the throne, but sensed, towards the end of the 1790s, that the political order from which he had profited was being subjected to intolerable strain. To judge by his behaviour on the night of Paul's assassination, he was familiar with Alexander's aspirations long before they had a chance to bear fruit.

Yet Alexander and his closest friends were not responsible for the tsar's murder. Alexander was prepared to consider what he would do when he became tsar, but not to take the initiative in hastening that time. He was much less rebellious than heirs to the throne tended to be in eighteenth-century Britain or Prussia. When Bezborodko died in April 1799 he lost a main prop in the edifice of his political relationships. As one of Bezborodko's clique put it, 'When an oak tree falls, the mushrooms get squashed'.[16] Kochubei married and went abroad; Troshchinskii left St Petersburg temporarily to undertake an official inspection of the provinces surrounding Moscow; Czartoryski had already been despatched, as Russian ambassador, to the Kingdom of Sardinia; Alexander's wife was in disgrace with the tsar for having borne Czartoryski's child; and Russian troops in Italy and Switzerland were under orders to capture La Harpe and convey him to St Petersburg. Even if Alexander had been prepared to plot against his father, he seemed to have little prospect of finding assistants who were free from suspicion.

The heir to the throne, however, was only one of Paul's many opponents. In the autumn of 1799 Nikita Petrovich Panin succeeded Kochubei as Vice-President of the College of Foreign Affairs. Nephew of Nikita Ivanovich Panin, an earlier advocate of reformist ideas, he remained broadly true to the dissentient tradition in which he had been reared. In foreign affairs he was pro-English, which explained why two of his closer associates were Lord Whitworth, British ambassador to St Petersburg, and Semen Vorontsov, the Russian ambassador in London. Whitworth's mistress was a sister of Catherine the Great's last favourite and connected Panin with a

clique which had lost favour on the empress's death. More important than any of these was Peter von der Pahlen, Governor-General of St Petersburg. Panin and Pahlen apprised the Grand Duke Alexander of their intention to take action against Paul and gained his tacit sympathy.

THE COUP OF 1801

As 1800 progressed, Paul gave ever more grounds for dissatisfaction with his behaviour. After Bonaparte's coup of November 1799 in France, he felt able to break with Britain and adopt a pro-French orientation in foreign affairs. In May 1800 he exceeded even his own customary standards of brutality by ordering an army officer to receive a thousand blows of the knout for criticizing a recently introduced order of knighthood which the tsar had named after his mistress. In the same month, the population of St Petersburg openly lamented the death of Field-Marshal Suvorov. Suvorov's recent military successes in north Italy had incurred the tsar's envy, but imperial disfavour could not deter the inhabitants of St Petersburg from showing where their affections lay. Perhaps for the first time in Russia, public obsequies turned into a demonstration of dissatisfaction with the government.

Panin and Pahlen continued their machinations. The former, perhaps mindful of the events of 1788–9 in England, seems to have contemplated deposing Paul on the grounds of madness and installing Alexander as regent. The legal convolutions of such a course of action would have enabled him to effect the kind of limitations on the sovereign's power which his family had long stood for. Pahlen, less subtle but more vigorous, probably realized from the outset that the tsar would have to be murdered. The two men had to act quickly, for Paul, ever watchful and by now almost certainly paranoid, might have dismissed them at any time. Pahlen, indeed, lost his position as Governor-General of St Petersburg, only to be quickly reinstated. On 1 November 1800 Paul made a mistake. To mark the fourth anniversary of his accession, he issued decrees allowing military and civilian officials who had retired or been dismissed since November 1796 to return to St Petersburg and seek re-employment. The three Zubov brothers all benefited from this amnesty, as did another key figure in the events of March 1801, General L. L. Bennigsen, who had thought his career was over and was vegetating on his Lithuanian estates. Later in November, veering from one extreme to the other, Paul dismissed Panin. This apparently major blow ought significantly to have damaged the movement against him, but paradoxically it strengthened it. The disappearance from St Petersburg of the leading civilian opponent of the tsar gave the military the opportunity to pursue their more dramatic approach to the problems he posed.

By March 1801 Paul had given further striking signs of his unpredictability. He had set in train a movement of troops from Orenburg which was intended, eventually, to threaten Britain's possessions in India. He had proclaimed the annexation of Georgia from the Persians, which also seemed to signal large-scale ambitions in the east. His pro-French leanings had provoked British naval action in the Baltic which soon gave rise to the first battle of Copenhagen. In St Petersburg, a more than usually large number of gentry families were announcing their departure from Russia. A rumour began to circulate that Paul was planning to marry off his daughter Catherine to her cousin, Prince Eugen of Württemberg, and to make Prince Eugen his heir. Then it became apparent that Paul knew he was in danger. On 9 March 1801 he told Pahlen that he suspected there were plans afoot to repeat the events of 1762 (when Peter III had been deposed by Catherine the Great). Pahlen boldly admitted that a plot existed, but claimed that he was working to subvert it from within. He realized, however, that he would have to act quickly. He needed to secure the Grand Duke Alexander's final sanction for his plans. The two met on 9 March, but what they agreed is uncertain. Alexander seems to have been responsible for putting back the date of the proposed coup from 10 to 11 March, on the grounds that his own Semenovskii regiment would then be on guard duty at the palace where Paul had recently taken up residence; but whether he envisaged his father's murder, or merely his abdication and detention, is unknown. In view of the opinions Alexander held in the first three years of Paul's reign, he can hardly have been averse to his removal; but in view of his reaction to the events of 11–12 March, he did not wholly agree with the manner in which it was undertaken.

Like Chesterton's Prince of Heiligwaldenstein, but much more directly, Paul was killed by his sash. Led by Platon Zubov and Bennigsen (Pahlen, judiciously, bringing up the rear), a band of drunken Guards officers penetrated the ultra-secure Mikhailovskii Palace, discovered the tsar in his bedchamber hiding behind a fire-screen, and after a brief exchange of words and a blow from a snuff-box strangled him with one of his own insignia. The leading conspirators probably did not intend the tsar to die on the spot, for on the night of the murder Dmitrii Troshchinskii had been summoned by the Zubovs to prepare what seems to have been an abdication decree. Later the same night Troshchinskii was called upon again, this time to draw up Alexander's accession manifesto. The contradiction between these events seems to indicate that the murder took place in the heat of the moment. It certainly horrified its prime beneficiary. According to Adam Czartoryski, writing much later, 'This ineffaceable stain ... settled like a vulture on [Alexander's] conscience, paralysed his best faculties at the commencement of his reign, and plunged him into a mysticism sometimes degenerating into superstition at its close'.[17] If Czartoryski's interpretation holds water – and he was not alone in his view – Alexander displayed remarkable simplemindedness in March 1801. When Catherine the Great deposed Peter III in 1762, she accepted the inevitability of his subsequent

murder and kept faith with those who brought her to the throne. Alexander, apparently overwhelmed by the crime committed on his behalf, broke with its perpetrators and effected their rapid withdrawal from St Petersburg. Yet since he did so with impunity, and did not immediately abandon the principles to which he gave voice in the early part of Paul's reign, it may be that he achieved precisely what he wanted in 1801: an end to Paul's unpredictability and cruelty, a chance to put into practice his own plans for the empire's future, and the dismissal of men who might have had some hold over him. Alexander could certainly be duplicitous, and was just as likely to have been pretending when he displayed contrition about Paul's death as when he attempted to alter the course of Russia's development. The relatively small number of his concrete achievements on the throne did not necessarily mean that he was reluctant to do more. His limited success as a reformer derived from the intractability of his inheritance as well as from the extent of his commitment to change.

FOREIGN ENEMIES AND DOMESTIC MINORITIES

The Russian Empire in 1801 posed daunting problems. An early-twentieth-century historian considered that the country was at a crossroads at the moment the new tsar ascended the throne and that his 'contradictions' and 'hesitations' were 'the living reflection of hesitations and contradictions evoked by the struggle between the fundamental currents of his time'.[18] This approach has a good deal to recommend it. Superficially, Russia's eighteenth-century progress had been startling. The empire had greatly increased in size. Its population rose from about 15.5 million in 1719 to more than 42.5 million in 1811. In terms of both area and number of inhabitants it was the largest state in Europe. Its seventeenth-century adversaries, Sweden, Poland and Turkey, had all been put in their place. In the Great Northern War of 1700–21 Peter the Great had overtaken Sweden and established Russia's control of the eastern end of the Baltic. He had founded St Petersburg in 1703 and made it the capital of the empire in 1712. Poland, having been a Russian client-state for much of the century, disappeared from the map in 1795 after a series of partitions in which Russia colluded with Prussia and Austria. Turkey had given ground to Russia in the wars of 1736–9, 1768–74 and 1787–91, and had lost its vassal, the Crimea, in the Russian annexation of 1783. The Black Sea was beginning to look like a Russian lake. The town which became Odessa had only ten inhabitants in 1793, but by 1863 had become the fourth city of the empire. In 1796 Catherine the Great had initiated a Caucasian campaign against Persia, while Paul, as we have seen, had annexed Georgia and conceived of sending troops via central Asia to India. Russian forces had entered Berlin in 1760.

Russian ships had circumnavigated Europe and defeated the Turks off Asia Minor in 1770. Catherine the Great had mediated between Austria and Prussia during the War of Bavarian Succession at the end of the 1770s. Britain had suffered from the 'Armed Neutrality' which Russia set up in the Baltic in 1780 and which, despite its name, challenged British control of northern waters. In the Ochakov affair of 1791, Britain had proved unable to stem Russia's southward advance. With Bonaparte marooned in Egypt, Suvorov experienced triumph after triumph in northern Italy in 1799. Paul might have seemed to be endangering the empire's security by his complex diplomatic manoeuvres of 1800–1, but he clearly felt that he was negotiating from a position of strength. Russia's eighteenth-century dealings with the outside world seemed to justify his attitude.

Even in foreign affairs, however, the empire was not as well placed as it seemed to be. The elimination of Poland gave Russia common frontiers with Austria and Prussia which necessitated the constant monitoring of their ambitions. Even before Poland's disappearance, Russia had been obliged to form an alliance with Prussia to prevent her forming a liaison with the Turks. This alliance – Frederick the Great's 'greatest diplomatic triumph'[19] – was indicative of the balancing act in which Russia had to engage from the moment she became a full member of the European states system. She bypassed the Prussian alliance in 1781 and went into alliance with Austria, but in the nineteenth century the Habsburgs became increasingly reluctant to accept the prospect of Russian penetration of the Balkans. Their neutrality during the Crimean War reflected growing distrust of the tsars and marked a stage on the road to the Austro-German alliance of 1879, which lay at the root of Russia's fatal drubbing in the First World War. Even Britain, far to the west, sensed by the end of the eighteenth century that she could not allow Russian aggrandizement to proceed unchallenged. She failed to compel Russia to abandon Ochakov in 1791, but the shadowy part played by Lord Whitworth in the machinations which led to Paul's assassination reflected continuing British mistrust of Russia's intentions in the Baltic. In the 1850s Britain was to fight on Russian soil and in 1878 she contributed, at the Congress of Berlin, to the modification of Russian plans for the Balkans.

Despite having become a Great Power, Russia could not afford to discount her traditional enemies. After the war of 1788–90 she fought Sweden only once more (in 1808), but Turkey and Poland remained troublesome. Events of 1798–9 in the reign of Paul seemed to augur well for the future of Russo-Turkish relations, in that a Russian fleet took the Ionian Islands from the French and set up a Turkish protectorate over them. But this proved to be the only time in history that Russia and Turkey acted jointly in a military endeavour. The years 1806, 1828, 1853 and 1877 witnessed the outbreak of further wars between them. Russia had the whip hand in all four, at least initially, but western powers tended to come to Turkey's aid and prevent the tsar's forces from making the most of their superiority. Poland, meanwhile, refused to lie down. Poles agitated for the rebirth of their

state in risings against the tsar of November 1830 and January 1863 and in constant attempts to engage the sympathy of western intellectuals and governments. One of their greatest spokesmen, Adam Mickiewicz, declared at the Collège de France in 1844 that France, who had given birth to the Grand Duchy of Warsaw in the course of the Napoleonic Wars, could not draw in her horns and concentrate wholly on domestic affairs. 'Having long stood at the head of the Christian nations,' Mickiewicz said, 'France cannot abandon them in the midst of moral ruin!'[20] His words may have had some effect, for when a Parisian crowd invaded the Second Republic's Chamber of Deputies in May 1848, one of its rallying cries turned on the need to do something about Poland. Poles did not benefit materially, but remained an irritant in Russia's dealings with the outside world.

They were a domestic problem, furthermore, even when they seemed to be causing no trouble, for their presence within the frontiers of the Russian Empire made it difficult for imperial administrators to frame universally applicable statutes. Because many more Poles than Russians belonged to the gentry estate (Poles constituted more than 50 per cent of the total number of nobles within the Russian Empire in the 1850s)[21], the Russian government had to modify its inclination to favour the nobility. The fact that more Poles than Russians tended to be avid for education came to affect the composition and political outlook of the empire's student body.[22] Educated Catholic Poles constituted a bridge between the cultures of eastern and western Europe, infecting the one with the other and preventing the Russian Empire from presenting a single face to the world.

Growing diversity of internal culture was a central consequence of Russia's eighteenth-century expansion. Poles were only the noisiest cuckoo in the nest. Edward Thaden concluded a book on the peripheries of European Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by saying that 'in 1870 there was, in certain important respects, more diversity than there had been 160 years before'.[23] Before Poland was partitioned, Baltic and Ukrainian gentry spoke up for their local privileges at Catherine the Great's Legislative Commission of 1767–8. The Baltic Germans tended to be the most loyal of the tsars' non-Russian subjects, but only because making common cause with the Russians was a lesser evil than showing sympathy for the Latvian and Estonian peasants who constituted the bulk of the population in the north-western part of the empire. German communities on the Volga and in the southern part of the Ukraine – mostly immigrants who had been attracted to eastern Europe by the generous inducements offered by Catherine the Great – usually proved model farmers, but in doing so highlighted the contrast between native and foreign levels of agricultural expertise. As the Westphalian analyst of Russian agriculture, August von Haxthausen, said of the Mennonite colonies north of the Sea of Azov in the 1840s, 'In all of Russia there is no region where, on the whole, there exists such a uniformly high level of agricultural and social development as here'.[24] Ukrainians had a less clearly defined sense of their identity than Russia's German subjects, but could not be called surrogate Russians.

Despite losing their autonomous political institutions in the second half of the eighteenth century and tending to migrate from their heartland – the Ukraine east of the river Dnieper was the one part of the empire to experience a decline in population in the 1780s and 1790s[25] – they began developing the use of their language for literary purposes and never quite lost the feeling that they were culturally distinct from their masters. By the mid-nineteenth century the aspirations of a few of their number had begun to alarm the imperial government. Much more strikingly non-Russian were the Jews whom Russia acquired by partitioning Poland. Before 1772 Jewish subjects of the tsar were virtually non-existent. After 1795 they numbered something like half a million, and did not readily fit any of the social categories into which the government divided its population. Catherine the Great intended no hostility towards them, and can even be said to have treated them more generously than certain other elements in the population by granting them limited rights of movement; but the 'Pale of Settlement', however large, was to become an obstacle to Jewish development, and the concentration of Jews in one region of the empire made them seem a peculiarly striking excrescence on the landscape when doctrines of national identity took hold in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century.[26]

RUSSIAN BACKWARDNESS

Defining the legal status of Jews was only one of the many difficulties experienced by eighteenth-century tsars in the realm of the law. Laws were their prime weapon in confronting their problems at home. No tsar envisaged limiting himself by admitting the existence of an authority higher than his own, but all of them had an interest in reducing the unpredictability of Russian society and fostering its potential for self-advancement. Promulgating laws seemed to be the best way of achieving these objectives. The notion of 'the well-ordered police state' penetrated Russia from central Europe at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and informed much of the Russian government's behaviour for 150 years.[27] If the empire could be placed on a uniform footing, it might be able to advance on a broad front. Laws could dovetail outlying regions with the central provinces; delineate social groups in such a way that every inhabitant of the empire knew his obligations and prospects; and facilitate the evolution of a governmental engine to power the redesigned machinery of society. Superficially, the Russian authorities made some progress in these directions in the eighteenth century. A number of distinguished provincial governors did something to carry the gospel of centralism to the remoter parts of the empire; gentry and peasantry received new or additional definitions

of their standing (respectively beneficial and detrimental to their interests, but both clearer); and a bureaucracy began to emerge which could consolidate and extend the links between ruler and ruled. Catherine the Great can be praised for her 'attempt to construct a constitution intended to protect the subject as much from the unregulated self-seeking of his peers as from the arbitrary application of governmental authority'.[28] She can be applauded for the information-gathering which underpinned all her work (the three reassessments of the size of the tax-paying population, the General Land Survey ordered in 1766, the many 'topographical descriptions' of life in individual provinces). Her most famous statutes – on provincial administration, the police, the government of towns, the corporate identity of the gentry and the foundation of schools – look like a well-integrated answer to Russian lawlessness, rendered incomplete only by the absence of statutes on the central administration and the clerical and peasant estates. Had she been spared, Catherine could have moved into these areas. Had her successors matched her in sophistication, they could have completed the building she started. Had France not upset the European order, the Russian Empire could have become the jewel in its crown. Perhaps Catherine had lit upon the means of modernizing the tsarist regime.

Perhaps; but in Russia the gap between publishing decrees and making sure that they took effect was immense. Most of the passages in this book which treat the grassroots of Russian society are to be found in Chapters Five, Eight, Nine and Eleven, but the chasm which divided the country's lawmakers from Russian reality has to be kept in mind constantly. As Catherine admitted when she appointed Petr Rumiantsev Governor of the Ukraine in 1764, the province had hitherto been part of the empire only in name, despite the fact that it had been under the Russian crown for more than a century.[29] The phenomenal list of instructions with which the empress furnished her new Ukrainian governor touched on everything from the establishment of good border relations with Poland and Turkey and the intensification of land use to the improvement of roads, the planting of trees, the drying out of bogs and the introduction of vets. Needless to say, Rumiantsev fulfilled only some of his orders. Given its tradition of autonomy the Ukraine was always going to be a tough nut to crack, but even in areas closer to the heartland of the empire provincial governors faced an uphill struggle. In answer to the question how Russia's provincial bureaucracy 'managed to govern so many people and so much territory', Robert Jones, in a study centred on eighteenth-century Novgorod, declared that 'The simple answer is that for the most part it could not and did not govern them'.[30] Legislation of 1763 provided for about 16,500 paid civil servants. Contemporary Prussia had about the same number, but for 80 per cent fewer people and a much smaller area. In the mid-nineteenth century Russia still had only about a quarter as many civil servants per head of the population as contemporary Britain and France.[31] It was one thing to conceive of a 'well-ordered police state', but another to bring it into being. Dmitrii Troshchinskii, the civil servant who drafted Alexander I's accession

manifesto, pointed out in a long memorandum written during his tenure of the Ministry of Justice (1814–17) that 'in the great majority of cases, at all times and throughout the empire, the well-being, tranquillity, property, honour and even life of the greater part of the population of the state depend almost exclusively on local institutions'.[32] Yet at the beginning of the reign of Catherine the Great nearly half of Russia's relatively small number of civil servants were to be found in St Petersburg and Moscow. The ratio between rulers and ruled got much smaller between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries,[33] but never reached the point where the central authorities could be sure that their policies would be put into effect.

To increase the potential number and the effectiveness of their servants, tsars needed to improve the empire's educational facilities. Before Peter the Great these had been negligible, and in reality, if not on paper, they remained poor at the end of the eighteenth century. Peter introduced 'cypher schools', Elizabeth founded Moscow University, and Catherine the Great set up a network of primary schools, but none of these was very substantial. There were about 20,000 pupils in Catherine's primary schools in 1800. Education was also to be had in certain other places, notably in establishments run by the armed forces and the church's seminaries, but even the most generous estimate of the number of pupils receiving instruction in 1800 goes no higher than 70,000.[34] Since the children of the better-off gentry were educated privately they did not appear in the school enrolments, but their number was too small to increase the total substantially. By the contentious method of retrospective forecasting Boris Mironov has claimed that perhaps 6.9 per cent of the inhabitants of European Russia aged ten and over were literate in 1797, that in towns the proportion may have been 21 per cent, and that among town males it may have reached 28.6 per cent.[35] He admits, however, that these estimates have to be reduced dramatically if one takes into account that literacy, once acquired, can be lost, and even his optimum figures fail to give the impression that eighteenth-century Russia was well placed to develop its internal resources, administer its new territories effectively, or compete on equal terms with its great power rivals. As Walter Pintner remarks, 'In 1755 the low level, indeed the general lack, of formal education among officials is startling even to one familiar with the limited development of Russian education'.[36] The situation did not change significantly until the first half of the nineteenth century.

Education suffered no less than other spheres of governmental activity from the empire's fundamental difficulty, shortage of funds. Responsibility for founding secular schools rested initially on the Boards of Social Welfare set up under Catherine the Great's provincial reform of 1775, but they were allocated a mere 10,000 rubles each for the provision of schools, hospitals, almshouses and asylums. The Commission on Popular Schools created in 1782 had a budget of only 30,000 rubles. Military schools and St Petersburg's Smol'nyi Institute for daughters of the gentry were relatively well endowed, but a much more substantial total outlay would have been needed

to render the prospects of the empire's educational network anything other than bleak. The imperial administration could not find the cash. The state's outgoings exceeded its revenue by an average of one-third in the first ten years of the nineteenth century.[37] For much of that decade the empire was at war, but its budgetary deficits were not really transient. Russia had gone to war so often in the eighteenth century that she had to see military expenditure as a regular rather than an extraordinary outgoing. The state's need for money arose not only out of its constant involvement in fighting, but also out of its determination to systematize and intensify the administration of the territories it had acquired. In a way, it became a victim of its own success. It had found the resources to put Russia on a par with her neighbours, but it had to find more to stay in the race. Given the backwardness of the Russian economy and the nature of the taxation system, it was bound to be hard pressed. The gentry, potentially the most fruitful source of revenue, were exempt from personal taxation. Only the non-privileged orders paid the poll tax, and in view of their poverty the rate at which taxes could be increased was limited. The state's vodka monopoly constituted another of its prime sources of income, but developing the fiscal potential of vodka sales had the counter-productive effect, still noted by Russian governments, of impairing the labour force's application to duty. When, to cover its deficits, the government debased the coinage and started issuing paper money, the result was rampant inflation.

The root of Russia's economic problems lay in the relative infertility of her soil, her hostile climate and the strait-jacketed character of social relations in the countryside. Only just over 1 per cent of the population were nobles at the end of the eighteenth century.[38] The vast majority of the remainder were peasants, rather more than half of them belonging to the nobles (the serfs properly so called), about 40 per cent belonging to the state (the 'state peasants') and something under 10 per cent belonging to the church and the imperial family. Even at the best of times, the unprivileged majority of the empire's population had difficulty making ends meet. The soil which the peasants worked is usually said to have been much less fertile than agricultural land elsewhere in Europe. Steven Hoch has recently taken a contrary view, but his arguments await further empirical confirmation.[39] Neither Hoch nor any other authority attempts to deny that peasants were at the mercy of Russia's inclement weather. Broadly speaking, the picture of late-eighteenth-century rural conditions painted by the nineteenth-century historian Vasilii Semevskii has remained in place.[40] Though not entirely monochrome, it was unappealing. In the far north of the country there were relatively few serfs (6 per cent of the village population in Olonets in the 1780s), because in that part of the world the climate militated against intensive agriculture and the state was free from the possibility of enemy attack (which absolved the government from introducing gentry as frontiersmen and serfs as the reward for their pains). South and west of Olonets, serfs grew in number. In the province of Novgorod they constituted 50 per cent of the peasant population, in Smolensk 80 per cent,

in the provinces of the 'golden ring' (around Moscow) more than 70 per cent. Serfs paid their dues to the landlord either in the form of *obrok* or quitrent (in cash or kind), or in the form of *barshchina* (labour services). The former was infinitely preferable to the latter. It increased in the course of the eighteenth century, but still left the serf greater freedom of action. The fictional portrayal of the difference between a serf on *obrok* and a serf on *barshchina* which Turgenev conveyed in 'Khor' and Kalinych', a short story of 1847, was as true for the preceding fifty years as it was for the date of its publication. Quitrent prevailed over labour services only in the non-black soil area of the central part of the empire. In the black soil area, where the land was fertile and serf-owners aimed to cultivate it intensively, three-quarters of the serfs paid their dues in the form of labour services. Often they were working virtually full-time for their landlords. In a decree promulgated at his coronation in 1797, Paul attempted to prevent peasants from being obliged to work on Sundays and saints' days and suggested that landlords oblige them to work the demesne for no more than three days a week; but the second part of this edict was honoured in the breach. Landlords' control over serfs did not stop at being able to make them work the land. Indeed, the serfs who suffered most were probably the landless who worked in their owner's household (as craftsmen, clerks and domestic servants) and those who laboured, usually under some sort of lease, in factories or mines. By the end of Catherine the Great's reign, landlords had virtually unlimited rights to sell their serfs, to subject them to corporal punishment, to send them to Siberia and to encroach on their property. From 1767 serfs were denied the right to petition the authorities concerning malfeasance on the part of their owners. Inevitably, in the light of their circumstances, serfs resorted to violence. Thirty nobles were murdered in Moscow province in the space of six years in the 1760s. Serfs in the iron mines of the Urals flocked to Pugachev's banner in the 1770s. M. D. Kurmacheva has devoted a book to those serfs who, despite their origins, formed a sort of 'serf intelligentsia' in the second half of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries by becoming artists, musicians or writers, but she admits that they represented only a small proportion of the total number.[41] Isabel de Madariaga has contested Semevskii's view that Catherine the Great intensified serfdom in depth and in extent, and even in the Soviet Union it became fashionable to dispute the claim that the serf population was growing at a slower rate than the population of other social groups because of the hardship which serfs had to endure and their consequently low birth rate and high mortality;[42] but these arguments become too rarefied when they lose sight of the fact that, without social reconstruction, the Russian economy was incapable of the quantum leap it had to make if the empire was to retain its newly acquired Great Power status.

The one social group which appeared to profit from the Russian Empire's eighteenth-century experience was the nobility. Having been obliged to serve the state by Peter the Great, nobles gradually escaped the obligation until, in 1785, they received a charter which spelt out their rights and

formalized their identity as an estate. Since, ten years previously, the provincial reform had brought into being many elective offices which fell into their hands, it might be imagined that they were growing in confidence and that the crown had decided to rely on them for the future development of the country. These contentions underlie John P. LeDonne's study of Russian government under Catherine the Great,[43] but they are open to serious doubt. Eighty per cent of nobles possessed fewer than the hundred serfs which might have enabled them to disregard the benefits of employment by the state. Whether or not the crown obliged them to serve, they were likely to do so. Telling them they did not have to enter the government's employ improved their political status, but challenged their economic interests. Wealthy nobles, seduced by the prospect of turning themselves into aristocrats on the western European model, needed cash for the consumer goods which would turn the prospect into a reality. Their wealth, however, did not derive from a money-orientated economy, and they lacked the entrepreneurial skills to think of turning from production for subsistence to production for sale. The government began to make it possible for nobles to obtain loans on the security of their estates, but even these injections seem to have gone on consumption rather than investment. When Pavel Stroganov claimed, at a meeting between Alexander I and his closest friends in November 1801, that Russian nobles were decadent and much less likely to threaten the throne than their serfs, he spoke no more than the truth.[44] A few nobles had attempted to limit the power of the Empress Anna on her accession in 1730; a few more had been affronted by the extent to which Peter III had circumvented their prime political institution, the Senate, in 1762; and one or two, notably Pahlen and Panin, probably wanted to impose controls on Alexander I after the murder of his father. But in the long run the problems posed by nobles arose not out of their political recalcitrance but out of the increasing divergence between their interests and those of the state. The rapid growth of the civil service, a feature, above all, of the first half of the nineteenth century, rendered the government less dependent on the nobility than it had been in the past. Admittedly, civil servants were often of noble provenance, and even if they were not they could advance far enough in their careers to enter the noble estate; but they differed from nobles outside the service. They tended not to have served in the army; they tended not to own serfs; and they had received a much higher degree of formal education than nobles who did not spend their lives in government offices. Whatever the legal similarities, nobles inside and outside the service were becoming different social groups. Those who were less than wholly committed to a life of official duties were becoming 'superfluous men', epitomized in nineteenth-century Russian literature by Pushkin's Evgenii Onegin, Lermontov's Pechorin, Herzen's Bel'tov and Goncharov's Oblomov. A Russian tsar could not expect to transform his lands by relying on traditional elites.

THE REFORMS OF 1801–4

So Alexander I was faced, at his accession, by problems well-nigh insurmountable in their range and complexity. Before ridding himself of Pahlen in June 1801 he gave certain hostages to fortune. In his accession manifesto he declared himself anxious to return to the ways of Catherine II. Since he never praised her again, it is unlikely that this statement of intent came from the heart. Gustav Rozenkampf, a Baltic German who played a significant part in the discussions of reform with which the early part of Alexander's reign was replete, subsequently wrote that 'Those who hoped Emperor Alexander I would return to the great Empress's system of government and law-giving were cruelly mistaken'.[45] Yet a number of measures sanctioned by Alexander during his first few months on the throne tended to strengthen the impression that he was anxious to revive the style of his grandmother. He confirmed the charter which she had issued to the nobility in 1785; he set up a legal commission to continue the work left unfinished by Catherine's commission of 1767–8; and on 5 June 1801 he called upon the Senate to investigate its rights and duties and explain why its authority had diminished. All these steps implied a return to the supposedly halcyon period which had ended with Catherine's death; but none of them embodied what Alexander really hoped to do.

At Paul's death only one of Alexander's closest associates was in St Petersburg – Pavel Stroganov. The other three – Kochubei, Novosil'tsev and Czartoryski – quickly returned, and two days after Czartoryski's arrival Pahlen was banished. A week later, on 24 June, Alexander conferred with his four friends in the first session of what became known as the Unofficial or Secret Committee. At a series of meetings over the next two years, the tsar and his confederates discussed most aspects of Russia's internal and external affairs. The tsar's former tutor, La Harpe, became a sort of peripheral member of the confederacy during his residence in St Petersburg between August 1801 and May 1802. Alexander now had the prospect of acting upon the ideas he had expressed in 1797. At their first session, the members of the Unofficial Committee decided to draw up a picture of the current state of the empire. Novosil'tsev proposed dividing the labour into three stages: a review of the present situation (subdivided to include consideration of the empire's defence capabilities, its relations with foreign powers, and the condition of the economy and the administration); the reform of specific departments; and the preparation of a constitution to crown the transformed governmental edifice. The tsar and his friends began work immediately on the navy, but 'His Majesty manifested his anxiety to make passing on to the third stage of the labour possible'.[46] The members of the committee therefore turned their attention to the question of reforming the Senate, and Alexander voiced doubts about the step he had taken in this direction less than three weeks previously.

Because Alexander and his closest advisers sought an institutional break

with the past, Senate reform bedevilled the first two years of the reign. In view of the complete unpredictability of governmental behaviour in the reign of Paul, giving the Senate political clout seemed to mark a step in the direction of constitutional advance; but enhancing the status of a body which had already existed for ninety years could also be interpreted as retrogressive. In a memorandum of August 1801 Nikolai Novosil'tsev committed himself to the second of these points of view. 'The restoration of the Senate to the position it occupied at its foundation', he argued, 'is an issue which has no real connection with the job of establishing an institution or institutions defending ... the Natural Rights, the Lawful Freedom and the security of each member of society'.[47] Novosil'tsev implied that, even in its pristine form, the Senate was incapable of pursuing the goals which Alexander had in mind. His opinion was technically correct, in that originally the Senate had been designed merely to keep track of domestic affairs when the tsar was away on campaign. When the tsar was at the centre of affairs, senators belonged to the dignified rather than the efficient part of the constitution. It was true that their judicial functions were considerable, but in the course of the eighteenth century they had acquired an exaggerated sense of their importance. In 1801 some of them believed that their institution could become the focus of a new constitutional order. Writing much later, Adam Czartoryski was loud in his assertion that no real advance could ever have been achieved under the Senate's auspices, as senators 'were for the most part incapable and without energy, selected for their insignificance'.[48]

The description did not apply to Aleksandr Vorontsov, who, despite being a generation older than the tsar's immediate entourage and in some ways typical of the eighteenth-century upper nobility, sponsored the drafting of a coronation charter which would have opened the door to a radical transformation of Russian society. While confirming the rights of the Russian nobility, it acknowledged that noblemen who failed to enter the state's employ could not 'enjoy the advantages and privileges acquired by dint of service'. It looked forward to the preparation of a new law code; it laid emphasis on developing the economic resources of the empire; it stressed the importance of property rights and the right to personal security; it acknowledged the principles of habeas corpus and freedom of expression; and without referring to the possibility of new relations between master and man, it insisted that 'no agricultural implements and no things appertaining to his calling' should be taken from a peasant in the event of a claim being made against the land which he worked.[49]

These were all goals of which the tsar's friends approved. They probably participated in the drawing-up of Vorontsov's charter and they certainly discussed it in sessions of the Unofficial Committee. A recent student of the matter claims that the document came to nothing because the tsar himself opposed it.[50] The real reason for its demise, however, probably lay in the fact that, whether by accident or design, it would have enhanced the power of the country's existing elite. Since it posed no threat to the system

of estates, those who were already privileged were likely to be the principal beneficiaries of its provisions; and since it gave the Senate responsibility for adjusting existing laws while a new law code was being prepared, it promised to benefit a body which the Unofficial Committee wanted to weaken. Aleksandr Vorontsov and his collaborators probably saw their proposals as no more than a stage on a road. Anxious not to appear too radical, they advocated the adoption of new juridical principles without challenging the country's social or institutional order. The tsar thought that they were trying to turn the imperial system further to their own advantage. In his view, the existing political system could not be allowed to pursue new objectives. Mindful of the way in which he had come to power, and of the fact that he had felt obliged to dismiss Pahlen only three months after ascending the throne, he was extremely mistrustful of over-mighty subjects and the political order from which, in his view, they had sprung. Those who sought to gain his confidence had to do more than propose ideas which were dear to his heart; they had to propose means of implementing them which did not advance their own interests.

Of Alexander's closest advisers, La Harpe stood to gain least from proposing ideas to the emperor. A foreigner who intended to return home, he could afford to be altruistic. His letters to Alexander included long disquisitions on Swiss affairs, but so far as the Russian domestic scene was concerned his motives were pure. He found the idea of devolving power on the Senate ridiculous. In the Russian context he thought it counter-productive to devolve power at all. Despite his republicanism, he repeatedly urged Alexander to make full use of his autocratic authority. He was more interested in the achievement of specific ends than in the means by which they were arrived at. After Alexander had reorganized the empire's administration, abolished the Table of Ranks, founded a ministry of education, drawn up a law code, restructured the judicial system, colonized the south, improved communications, extended protection to industry and commerce, and above all facilitated the advance of the country's lowest social orders (*'et surtout la restauration du tiers état'*) – then, and only then, in La Harpe's opinion, could the tsar proceed to the promulgation of a constitutional charter. 'To occupy oneself with such a charter today would be to abandon reality for the sake of pursuing a dangerous chimera'.[51] La Harpe wanted Alexander to 'hurry slowly', not to engage in the sort of grand gesture embodied in Aleksandr Vorontsov's proposal for a charter, not to insist on the sort of immediate 'revolution from above' which he seemed to contemplate as heir to the throne, but to work towards the introduction of regularity and reliability in the conduct of affairs and to instil in his subjects a sense that their government could be trusted.

This was sound advice, but it required of Alexander an interest in fine tuning which was not one of his gifts. It smacked of the schoolroom and offered few opportunities for cutting a dash. Alexander was not content to be the beagle that sat by the fire while the hounds were out in the fields. If he could enact a constitution, or spend his time thinking about one, do-

mestic affairs were of interest to him. If he had to bury his head in the welter of advice issuing from La Harpe, let alone attend to the many other projects which came up for consideration at meetings of the Unofficial Committee, his spirits tended to flag. Because Alexander was unwilling to attend to detail, only two of the spheres which La Harpe considered to be of primary importance significantly changed their shape in the early years of the reign. Central government underwent an overhaul in edicts of September 1802. The Senate, whose place in the country's administrative structure had occasioned so much discussion, was granted the right to object to government edicts which it considered improper, and a network of ministries came into being which on paper marked a sharp break with the collegiate system of government established by Peter the Great. In education, statutes of 1803 and 1804 introduced a four-tier system which looked considerably more sophisticated than that created by Catherine the Great's Statute on Popular Schools of 1786. The empire had hitherto been acquiring a somewhat random network of low-level and underfunded educational establishments, but now received an educational ladder, the rungs of which ascended from the parish via the district to provincial gymnasia and universities. A degree of administrative devolution made possible the more effective supervision of local educational developments. The empire was divided into six educational districts (St Petersburg, Moscow, Vil'na, Dorpat, Khar'kov and Kazan'), each headed by a Curator and each containing (or set to contain) a university, which was to be responsible for the three other sorts of school in the district.

These improvements suffered from considerable deficiencies. The Senate's 'right of remonstrance' was soon shown not be worth very much. When Seweryn Potocki complained that an edict of December 1802 which obliged nobles below officer rank to serve twelve years in the army conflicted with the Charter of Nobility of 1785, the tsar responded by withdrawing permission for senators to voice their objections. Perhaps the withdrawal of a fairly minor concession did not matter very much, but the introduction of ministries, a much more far-reaching affair, was handled almost equally badly. The difference between collegiate and ministerial approaches to government was considerable. Colleges were headed by committees, ministries by individuals, with the result that ministries were more likely than colleges to despatch business rapidly. After Catherine the Great's provincial reform of 1775 transferred many areas of government activity to the regions, the majority of the central colleges had either been abolished or fallen into abeyance. Alexander I had at least two good reasons, therefore, for proceeding quickly to the introduction of ministries: they were conducive to greater efficiency, and there was not much standing in their way. A ministry of crown properties had been established by Paul, and the authority of the Procurator-General (head of the Senate) had been waxing as the importance of the eighteenth-century colleges waned. Since individuals were already prevailing over committees in certain fields of government activity, turning a practice into a principle seemed sensible.

It would have speeded the enactment of any other reforms Alexander was contemplating. Yet he botched the job, by setting up ministries without finally abolishing the colleges. He subordinated the latter to the former, but made it hard for ministers to cut through the red tape beloved of their subordinates. It was not until 1811 that the ministries were put on a sounder footing, and even so, as an expert on imperial Russian administration points out, the last vestige of the eighteenth-century collegiate system did not disappear until 1863.[52] Had Alexander encouraged his new ministers to work together, he might have minimized the other flaws in his revision of the central administration; but although he set up a Committee of Ministers, he did not intend or allow it to turn into a cabinet.

Gaps and contradictions were similarly manifest in the reforms of education. The changes in this field looked far-reaching, but they flattered to deceive. Schools run by the army and the church remained outside the orbit of the new Ministry of Education (technically the 'Ministry of Public Enlightenment'). The gentry for some decades continued to educate their children at home or in private noble pensions. The new educational system was supposed to be classless, but without concurrent changes in policy towards the peasantry few serfs were likely to benefit from it. The government failed to decide at the outset how many students the universities might expect to enrol. It also failed to provide teachers quickly enough to staff the new schools and left to the regions the task of finding most of the money necessary to set the new institutions on their feet. The minister who was given charge of the educational system, Petr Zavadovskii, exemplified the government's lack of commitment to reform. He had handled Russian education more or less continuously since being made head of Catherine the Great's Schools Commission in 1782, but at the beginning of the reign of Alexander I he was over sixty and, by the admission of the tsar, 'a real sheep'; a mordant French resident in St Petersburg called him a 'pedant and sophist' who had 'a self-satisfied air and trifling capacities'.[53]

Alexander's larger ambitions, to transform Russian law and improve the prospects of the peasantry, made little progress in the early years of the reign. Admittedly, the legal commission set up in August 1801 to continue the many eighteenth-century attempts at codification included on its staff Aleksandr Radishchev, the radical thinker who had been sent to Siberia ten years earlier for publishing *A Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow.* Radishchev's reappearance in the capital for the first time in a decade (he had been allowed to return to his estates under Paul) seemed to be a mark of the seriousness of the government's attachment to change. Radishchev and Aleksandr Vorontsov were close, and the former probably played an important part in the preparation of the latter's coronation charter; but neither this nor the radical's writings for the legal commission bore fruit. Zavadovskii, Radishchev's superior at the legal commission, showed no more drive in respect of the law than he did at the Ministry of Education, and drove his subordinate to despair by asking him, with reference to his

continuing radicalism, whether he had not had enough of Siberia already. In September 1802, the month when ministries were created and Alexander's reforms seemed to be getting somewhere, Radishchev committed suicide. In July 1803 the tsar was still speaking of a desire to confer civil rights on the nation,[54] but he was foolish to suppose that a general codex could be drawn up before the laws which were currently in force had been thoroughly studied; in this respect, as in so many others, he showed a naive inclination to run before he could walk.

Solving the problems posed by the peasantry was even more difficult than reforming the administration, the education system and the law. Alexander claimed in 1801 that he wanted to abolish serfdom and that, 'if education were on a higher level', he would risk his life to do so;[55] but he came up against a plethora of suggestions which buried him in detail. His friends differed considerably from each other in their views on the peasant question. Pavel Stroganov felt that the government ought to range itself on the side of the lower orders, Czartoryski and Kochubei occupied a sort of middle ground, and Novosil'tsev tended to relegate social reform to a back seat. Alexander achieved a little. He decided to abandon his father's and grandmother's practice of giving away large numbers of state-owned peasants to the nobility, and sanctioned an edict of December 1801 which entitled certain non-noble groups to purchase unpopulated land; but instead of giving away state peasants he tended to transfer them on lease (which amounted to the same thing), and he failed to act on the suggestion that the government should ameliorate the condition of landless household serfs by buying them from their owners and settling them on state-owned land. It was a measure of his confusion that, towards the end of his reign, he seemed to feel that he had abolished the practice of selling serfs independently of the land which they worked, whereas in fact he had merely abolished the right to advertise such sales in the official press.[56]

The one potentially important serf measure to reach the statute books in the early years of Alexander's reign was the Free Agriculturalists Law of February 1803, which allowed serfs to buy freedom and land by agreement with their owners. The initiative for this measure came from Sergei Rumiantsev, however, not from a central member of the administration, and Viktor Kochubei pointed out in a contemporary letter that it was to be interpreted extremely conservatively.[57] As a means of achieving substantial change, the law was seriously flawed. Landlords and serfs were unlikely to agree terms with ease, credit facilities available to serfs were few, and no upper limit was set to the amount landlords could ask for their serfs' freedom. Since only about 47,000 male serfs benefited from the new law in Alexander's reign, most of them in a small number of large-scale agreements, the countryside was hardly transformed.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, the Free Agriculturalists Law says something about Alexander's first years on the throne which is worth underlining. All the discussions which took place between 1801 and late 1804 (when the tsar began devoting almost all his attention to foreign affairs) turned on the need to elaborate guiding principles. Not many principles were actually enunciated – not, at least, with any great clarity – but once the hunt for them had begun it could not easily be arrested. The Free Agriculturalists Law foreshadowed the adoption of the principle that, if serfs were to be emancipated, they had to receive not only personal freedom but also enough land to maintain their independence. The counter-principle – that serfs be freed without land and thereby greatly impoverished – was also in the air and was to be enshrined in the emancipation of the Baltic peasantry (which took place in the second decade of the reign). Before the second and harsher principle received legislative sanction, a precedent had been set for taking a generous view of the way in which social relations should develop. Alexander had set other influential precedents by 1804. He had given a fillip to the notion of an autocracy based on law rather than whim. He had established that creating a smoother governmental machine was a praiseworthy objective. He had rendered classless education less than a fantasy. The complexity of the problems facing him had prevented him from turning his youthful idealism into a multiplicity of tangible improvements, but he had created an atmosphere in which principles could be canvassed and he had allowed discussions to take place whose effects could not easily be calculated. He promised more than he performed, but others, inside and outside the government, were to try turning his promises into reality. They might have been successful if the empire had not proceeded to spend a decade at war.

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