

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require a subscription.

Author(s): CHRISTOPHER READ

Article Title: IN SEARCH OF LIBERAL TSARISM: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AUTOCRATIC DECLINE

Year of publication: 2003

Link to published

version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X0100228X>

Publisher statement: None

IN SEARCH OF LIBERAL TSARISM: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AUTOCRATIC DECLINE

CHRISTOPHER READ

University of Warwick

ABSTRACT. *The idea that the autocracy might have successfully modernized itself has, in recent years, spread widely beyond academic circles. However, a look at traditional and recent historiography shows that very few historians support this line. Even those who argue that Russia itself was developing rapidly have seen little prospect of the autocracy surviving the process. Equally, those who argue that radical socialist revolution might have been avoided tend to suggest, often by implication rather than in an explicit fashion, that a democratic, capitalist, bourgeois, and constitutional revolution was the alternative path. Thus it was not so much a question of tsarism or revolution but rather what kind of revolution was Russia facing?*

In recent decades tsarism has been getting away with murder. In the early years of the last century it was treated with opprobrium comparable to that which, in more recent times, has been reserved for the apartheid regime in South Africa. The massacre of at least 200 striking Siberian goldminers and members of their families in 1912 was the autocracy's Sharpeville. The brutal suppression of the 1905 revolution – in which thousands were killed and which Tolstoy memorably lamented in 1909 in 'I Cannot Be Silent' when he said even then, there were still 'Executions! Executions! Executions!' – hung over the head of the autocracy, giving it an unsavoury aura like that which still clings to General Pinochet for similar reasons. In addition, the classic historiography written by the founders of Russian studies – Pares, Maynard, Golder, Seton-Watson, Charques – tended to portray an increasingly politically inept autocracy, influenced by the profoundly reactionary Konstantin Pobedonostev. They argued plausibly that the autocracy, far from toying with concepts of democracy and liberalization, was so obsessed with administrative control that it not only opposed radical movements but frustrated the conservative reforms of the autocracy's best hope, Peter Stolypin. Their discourse was one of 'twilight' and 'decline' as far as the autocracy was concerned, not of its liberalization. One did not have to be on the left to despise the appalling repressiveness of the late tsarist regime. In a classic formulation George Kennan stated:

Prior to the undertaking of this review, I was inclined to feel that, had the war not intervened, the chances for survival of the autocracy and for its gradual evolution into a constitutional monarchy would not have been bad. On reviewing once more the events of these last decades, I find myself obliged to question that opinion. Neither the tardiness in the granting of political reform, nor the excesses of an extravagant and foolish nationalism, nor the personal limitations of the imperial couple began with the war or were primarily responses to the existence of the war. None of the

consequences of these deficiencies were in process of any significant correction as the war approached.¹

In his comments Hugh Seton-Watson was doing no more than express the current consensus when he said 'With Mr Kennan's argument that the decisive chance was missed in the 1860s and that in 1906 it was too late, I am in absolute agreement.'²

None the less, despite the almost universal repugnance engendered in humane contemporaries inside and outside the Russian empire, tsarism has, in the last three decades or so, been the subject of an unlikely, slow-burning but insistent revisionism geared to show it was not so bad after all. Extraordinarily, the debate in Britain, at least, spilled over from the academic into the public domain as part of the new right assault on all forms of leftist, not to mention traditional conservative and centrist, ideas. Not only quality newspapers but also the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* joined in.

In the midst of this heightening debate a figure whom many saw as a new Stolypin, Mikhail Gorbachev, embarked on the fateful policies of perestroika. Before long, rose-tinted views of the pre-revolutionary past also surfaced in Russia, among nostalgic nationalists for the most part. Even Rasputin was unconvincingly presented as a national hero. Pre-revolutionary factories, cities, and villages were presented in idyllic mode, a tendency still in evidence in the late 1990s in Nikita Mikhalkov's film *The barber of Siberia*.³ While this was fairly harmless romanticizing, the general evolution of perestroika and the ensuing dissolution of the USSR and the Soviet system did give energy and comfort to the anti-revolutionary school and undermined the convictions of those more sympathetic to 1917 and more hostile to what had come before.

Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of the new arguments they began to impose themselves by sheer weight of repetition. A new consensus was being born. As an example of how far the new concept has filtered into popular historical discourse, in a recent historical magazine the question is asked, could the tsars have survived? The reply given is 'Quite possibly. After all it was Witte [actually Stolypin], Russia's greatest prime minister, who said that in 1908 that all Russia needed was twenty years of peace. And while it has long been fashionable to mock the last tsars of Russia, they begin to look more effective when compared with their Soviet successors.'⁴

Even more surprising, in contemporary debates over Russia's current problems, the autocracy appears to be getting away without any serious indictment. If anything, it is seen by some extremists as a model rather than an admonition. The peak of this has been the canonization of Nicholas II by the Russian Orthodox church when he might, equally plausibly, have been posthumously indicted for crimes against humanity. Clearly, tsarism was less disastrous in many respects than what came after but does it not bear some responsibility for the crimes of its successors? It would appear to be a most unlikely candidate for rehabilitation. This is reinforced even more when one looks at developments in the historiography of late tsarism, including the academic work of those who are often cited as sources of the new direction such as Jacob Walkin, Hans Rogger, Norman Stone, and many others. Looked at carefully hardly any of the writers support the popular view. What has been going on?

¹ George Kennan, 'The breakdown of the tsarist autocracy', in R. Pipes, ed., *Revolutionary Russia: a symposium* (New York, 1969), pp. 18–19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³ See Birgit Beumers, ed., *Russia on reels: the Russian idea in post-Soviet cinema* (New York, 1999).

⁴ Nicholas Kinloch, 'Pass notes: tsarist Russia', in *BBC History*, March 2001, p. 91.

I

The modest origin of the new tendency can be traced back to a book published in 1962 by an American government official living in Djakarta, Jacob Walkin. In *The rise of democracy in pre-revolutionary Russia*, Walkin, in this pathbreaking study, laid emphasis on the emerging democratic political institutions of early twentieth-century Russia. Even so, the most cursory glance at Walkin's book shows that, although he emphasized the emergence of what he called constitutional government and of extended civil liberties, he was under no illusion about tsarism itself, referring throughout to Nicholas's sympathy towards the extreme right, as a continuing potential cause for the country to react by reverting to the radical revolutionary path. The reason for this was, in Walkin's wholly accurate observation, 'the unbridgeable gulf between state and society'.⁵ He argued that, although 'on the eve of World War I, ... the neglect of the needs of the population, the chief cause of the 1905 revolution, was not nearly so flagrant, the slowness with which the Duma was passing essential reforms and the sympathy of the Tsar for extreme reaction might in time have given rise to a comparable revolutionary movement'. Even so, his central thesis was that 'there are solid grounds for believing that the situation might have been corrected without a revolutionary upheaval'.⁶ For Walkin, 'the twin evils upon which the Revolution of 1917 and the Bolshevik seizure of power partially depended' were the liberals' 'own incapacity to govern and the decay of the monarchy'.⁷

While the new tendency has often been seen as, and thought of itself as, one which expected the prospects for revolution to recede as time went on, what it also meant was that, while the Bolshevik revolution might not have happened, it did not follow that the autocracy would remain as it was. If the liberalizing and modernizing tendencies were to evolve there would still have been fundamental changes which would have probably swept the autocracy away or, at the very least, transformed it beyond recognition into a constitutional monarchy. The optimists (so called because they were optimistic about tsarism's and/or Russia's chances of reform) were not arguing that change could happen within the framework of autocracy. In fact, without exception, the early optimists saw tsarism as an obstacle to democratization and modernization of society and economy. One might conclude that in denying the necessity of social revolution from below, which is the essence of their argument, they were, none the less, leaving open the possibility of a bourgeois revolution – notably a political revolution taking exclusive power out of the hands of the tsar. Needless to say, this is very different from expecting 'tsarist survival' or 'revolution avoidance'. Rather, although they were not inclined to admit it, the proponents of liberal modernization in Russia were pointing out an alternative revolutionary path in which autocracy had no place and only a figurehead constitutional monarchy might carry on.

⁵ Jacob Walkin, *The rise of democracy in pre-revolutionary Russia: political and social institutions under the last three tsars* (New York, 1962; London, 1963), p. 226.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 232–3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

II

By the 1970s the idea that socialist revolution might have been avoided was spreading and the hopes of liberals were being talked up. The collectively authored volumes *Russia enters the twentieth century*⁸ and *Russia under the last tsar*⁹ showed the degree to which the new ideas were taking root. The latter volume brought together Mendel – who declared himself ‘undecided’ as to whether he was an optimist or a pessimist ‘although I strongly incline to the former’¹⁰ – and one of the arch-pessimists of the time, Theodore von Laue.¹¹ A number of monographs began to focus on liberalism and conservatism in a more positive light. In the forefront were Richard Pipes’s superb biography of Peter Struve (accompanied by a collection of his works), Robert Byrnes on Pobedonostsev, and Geoffrey Hosking’s careful study of the Third and Fourth Dumas.¹²

In the turmoil of the sixties and early seventies, however, such voices were by no means unchallenged. The fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, celebrated in 1967, probably marked one of the high peaks of its prestige in the west in that there was still some sympathy for its fundamentally ‘progressive’ nature and for its hero-figures, Lenin and Trotsky but not the disgraced Stalin. The tendency to stress liberals and conservatives was largely dismissed by many as the work of ‘cold warriors’ whose work was of little interest to the growing band of neo-Marxist social historians whose main aim in life was to refute the ‘totalitarian’ myths of the older generation. However, the tide was soon to turn. By the mid-1970s a resurgent new right was breeding a much more aggressive ‘defence’ of the formerly largely indefensible. The last years of tsarism were seen not only as a period of advance but, in extreme cases, understood as a potentially more rapid form of Russian development than that undergone by the Soviet Union. The impact of the new ideas spread beyond purely academic circles. Writing in the *Guardian* Peter Young of the right-wing think tank, the Adam Smith Institute, argued that ‘it is regrettable that the Bolshevik coup d’état halted and reversed the remarkable progress of Tsarist Russia’.¹³

One of the earliest, most forthright, and best-researched volumes in this barrage was Norman Stone’s *Eastern Front*.¹⁴ One of the obstacles to any deep re-interpretation of Russia’s development lay in its pathetic performance in the First World War. By and large Nicholas II and his regime were almost universally despised for cultivating the backwardness which had, supposedly, brought the country to its knees. However, in a brilliant intellectual reversal, Stone, while still castigating parts of the autocracy, blamed the economic failures on excess growth; the military failures on the

⁸ G. Katkov et al., eds., *Russia enters the twentieth century, 1894–1917* (London, 1971).

⁹ T. G. Stavrou, ed., *Russia under the last tsar* (Minneapolis, 1969).

¹⁰ Arthur P. Mendel, ‘On interpreting the fate of imperial Russia’, in Stavrou, ed., *Russia under the last tsar*, pp. 13–41. The quotations are from p. 40.

¹¹ Theodore von Laue, ‘Problems of industrialization’, in Stavrou, ed., *Russia under the last tsar*, pp. 117–53. See also idem, ‘The chances for liberal constitutionalism’, *Slavic Review*, 24 (1965), pp. 34–46.

¹² Richard Pipes, *Struve: liberal on the left, 1870–1905* (Cambridge, MA, 1970); idem, *Struve: liberal on the right, 1905–1944* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); Robert F. Byrnes, *Pobedonostsev: his life and thought* (Bloomington, 1968); Geoffrey Hosking, *The Russian constitutional experiment* (Cambridge, 1973). A number of these works looked back to the pioneering work by Viktor Leontovitsch, *Geschichte des Liberalismus in Russland* (Frankfurt, 1957).

¹³ Peter Young, letters column, *Guardian*, London, 31 Jan. 1989. The present author’s challenge to this interpretation was published in the same place on 6 Feb.

¹⁴ Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (London, 1975).

incompetence of high officials and officers born to their ranks (patricians) who stifled professionally competent meritocrats (praetorians); and the emergence of revolution from the crisis of inflation (that most fashionable of late seventies and eighties topics) unleashed by the war. Stone and others were not slow to stress the implications of these ideas. In particular, the revolution was seen as unnecessary and disruptive. Without the war, Russia was advancing, its economy developing. Given longer (Stolypin's twenty years was a favourite selection) the country would have evolved into a prosperous, capitalist, and at least semi-democratic country – it being an article of faith at the time that free markets and democracy were inseparably linked. However, Stone still severely castigated the autocracy for its incompetence and for its tendency to prolong the life of a superannuated class of administrators born to the job who blocked the path of entrepreneurs and meritocrats with whom the future of a liberal-capitalist Russia lay.

A number of landmark volumes appeared which offered at least some support for a more optimistic line. Linda Edmondson and Olga Crisp, for example, edited a conference volume on *Civil rights in imperial Russia*.¹⁵ The editors were careful to say that 'We do not expect to overturn the prevailing view that respect for citizens' rights was poorly developed at all levels of Russian society; indeed most of the essays in the book will tend to confirm the conventional wisdom.'¹⁶ The majority of contributors were largely pessimistic, sharing the view of one of them, W. E. Butler, that 'Full implementation of civil rights laid down in the 1906 Basic Law achieved little progress in the successive State Dumas convoked between 1906 and 1917. Sundry bills were introduced in a liberal reformist spirit, but those which were passed were either blocked in the State Council or vetoed by the Tsar.'¹⁷ But there were also more optimistic voices. Caspar Ferenczi argued that 'The constitutional reforms of 1905 and 1906 changed not only Russia's political institutions, but also her style of government and her political culture ... Despite continuing repression, which was further intensified in 1907, public opinion succeeded in acquiring and maintaining a new breadth, and in increasing its influence over governmental decisions.'¹⁸ The editors' claim for their volume was that, in tsarist state and society, 'in spite of the unfavourable political environment, a concern for civil rights was rather more apparent than historians have been inclined to perceive'.¹⁹ The very selection of the topic of civil rights was indicative of the new direction. There was a much stronger tendency than hitherto to take tsarist legislation seriously and to study its effects more closely. Klaus Fröhlich examined the liberal Constitutional Democratic party, in a more positive light than had often been the case.²⁰ Marc Szeftel paid considerable attention to the emergence of what he considered to be genuine constitutional law and a constitutional monarchy based on the October Manifesto, even though, as he admitted, 'Complete implementation of the manifesto still had a long and difficult path before it on the eve of the collapse of the monarchy.'²¹

One of the positive consequences of the growing debate was that it had laid the foundations for a more complex interpretation than the caricatural view of an

¹⁵ Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson, eds., *Civil rights in imperial Russia* (Oxford, 1989).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. vi. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 191. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

²⁰ Klaus Fröhlich, *The emergence of Russian constitutionalism, 1900–1904: the relationship between social mobilization and political group formation in pre-revolutionary Russia* (The Hague, Boston, and London, 1981).

²¹ M. Szeftel, 'Le manifeste du 17 octobre', in F.-X. Coquin and C. Gervais-Francelle, eds., *1905: la première révolution Russe* (Paris, 1986), p. 28.

unrelievedly wicked tsarism and an heroic and near-faultless opposition which one not infrequently encountered in the sixties and early seventies. Instead a more richly textured history has emerged as optimists and their opponents both developed their arguments. For the remainder of this review attention will focus on what has become of the debate about the fate of tsarism in the last fifteen years or so.

III

It would be far from the truth to say that the bulk of the historical profession had followed the optimist line. Although affected by aspects of the new interpretation – especially its not wholly original stress on the degree to which Russian society and economy were advancing before 1914 and its great antipathy to revolution in general and Lenin and Bolshevism in particular – the response to the optimists has only been one component of a new complexity. Other major influences (which are obviously interconnected rather than separate) include deeper monographic studies of social, political, and economic issues; greater reference to gender and identity; a less ‘political’ and more ‘cultural’ form of social history verging at times on anthropology; paying more attention to peasants and less to ideas and the intelligentsia. Incidentally, so far, late tsarist and early Soviet history have been spared the worst ravages of post-modernism, perhaps because, like other essentially tragic topics, playing entertaining intellectual parlour games with phenomena that cost tens of millions of lives seems rather indecent.

One of the main engine rooms of renewal of our understanding of late tsarism has come from economic history. It had always been obvious that Russia underwent several largely industrial growth spurts in the 1860s, 1890s, and from 1908 to 1913 but careful analysis, notably by Paul Gregory, concluded that even the supposedly sluggish peasant economy was growing marginally faster than population was rising.²² The argument was taken further and somewhat polemicized by J. Y. Simms who pointed out that since peasant tax revenues were rising then the peasant sector must be prospering in order for them to pay up.²³ Opponents argued that disaggregation of the statistics and deeper knowledge of peasant responses to taxed items – notably their rational tendency to substitute non-taxed for taxed items in their economy, such as replacing taxed sugar by untaxed honey – showed a different story.²⁴ Everyone agreed that some sectors were getting wealthier, leading on to a debate about the existence or otherwise of a ‘prosperous’ peasant class usually referred to in the Leninist terminology as ‘kulaks’ though the facts were equally consistent with the rise of a rural bourgeoisie which was not the same thing. The complexities of the debate need not detain us here. The best synthesis of the new economic history came in 1986 with Peter Gatrell’s carefully constructed volume *The tsarist economy, 1850–1917*²⁵ which calculated a small overall

²² Paul Gregory, *Russian national income, 1885–1913* (Cambridge, 1982), and idem, *Before command: an economic history of Russia from emancipation to the first five-year plan* (Princeton, 1994).

²³ James Y Simms Jr, ‘The crisis in Russian agriculture at the end of the nineteenth century: a different view’, *Slavic Review*, 36 (1977), pp. 377–98.

²⁴ See for example John T. Sanders, ‘“Once more unto the breach dear friends”’: a close look at the indirect tax receipts and the condition of the Russian peasantry, 1881–1889’, *Slavic Review*, 43 (1984), pp. 657–66, and Simms, ‘A reply’, in *ibid.*, pp. 667–71. See also essays by E. M. Wilbur and S. Wheatcroft in E. Kingston-Mann and T. Mixer, eds., *Peasant economy, culture and politics of European Russia, 1800–1921* (Princeton, 1991).

²⁵ Peter Gatrell, *The tsarist economy, 1850–1917* (London, 1986).

growth rate for the Russian economy that equated with slowly rising living standards in all sectors.

The subtext of much of this debate was, of course, the ‘optimist’ assumption that if living standards, particularly of peasants, were rising then the acuteness of the revolutionary crisis must be slowly diminishing. We will return to this argument later but Gatrell’s next book, a more closely specialized study of *Government, industry and rearmament in Russia, 1900–1914: the last argument of tsarism* painted a more complex picture. As far as the upturn of 1908–13 was concerned Gatrell argues that ‘the tsarist government never developed a coherent industrial policy. Industrial recovery was a by-product of rearmament. So far as the old regime was concerned, the revival of industry occurred in a fit of absence of mind.’²⁶ Gatrell stresses that different government departments – the State Bank, Ministries of Trade and Industry, Transport, the Admiralty – were pursuing different and uncoordinated strategies. Incredibly for a twentieth-century government of a major power, ‘there were plenty of government ministers, members of the State Council and other influential figures whose attitude to private enterprise remained lukewarm, if not hostile’.²⁷ At the risk of oversimplifying Gatrell’s subtle and persuasive argument, his conclusions help us to get to the heart of the problem. The tsarist government embarked on a programme of rearmament to equip itself for war but ‘proved less adept at addressing the consequences of these policy shifts. Rearmament saddled the old regime with economic and political problems which it was ill-equipped to handle ... These tasks exposed the fragile foundations upon which the entire edifice rested.’

Gatrell’s argument moves out of the economic sphere and back into the political and echoes, to some extent, the theoretical interpretation of Theda Skocpol which drew attention not just to class relations as a source of revolution but to the relationship between powerful classes and the state.²⁸ This dimension, so central to Gatrell, has been ignored elsewhere. However, it is referred to in Robert McKean’s superb detailed study which shows a similar picture of multiple sources of government policy, lack of overall direction and the growing frustration of a rising industrial and entrepreneurial class still looked down on in powerful quarters with aristocratic disdain.²⁹ Though his main concern is with the evolution of the working class McKean’s work backs up much of Gatrell’s. For instance, McKean says that ‘in the sphere of labour relations policy-making remained confused, contradictory, highly ambiguous, and ultimately sterile. The Imperial authorities and industrialists vacillated between repressive, paternalistic, and liberal measures.’³⁰ Most earlier studies of the government of Nicholas II have painted a similar picture of conflict, confusion, and incompetence continuing right up to the end, indeed snowballing out of control through the ‘ministerial leap frog’ of the last seventeen months.³¹

²⁶ Peter Gatrell, *Government, industry and rearmament in Russia, 1900–1914: the last argument of tsarism* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 163.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Theda Skocpol, *States and social revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge, 1979).

²⁹ Robert B. McKean, *St. Petersburg between the revolutions: workers and revolutionaries, June 1907 – February 1917* (New Haven and London, 1990).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

³¹ See Howard D. Mehlinger and John M. Thompson, *Count Witte and the tsarist government in the 1905 revolution* (Bloomington and London, 1972); A. M. Verner, *The crisis of Russian autocracy: Nicholas II and the 1905 revolution* (Princeton, 1990), and G. Katkov, *Russia 1917: the February Revolution* (London, 1967).

Not much comfort here for the optimists one would have thought, nor is there much convincing counter-scholarship saying anything different. No one's revisionism has gone so far as to suggest that autocratic government was efficient or even competent. At best the argument tends to be that there were people who might have helped make it so – Witte, Stolypin, and others – but they were not trusted or supported wholeheartedly by Nicholas and his closest supporters. The Walkin tradition was continued in the form of a volume by Nicolai Petro which, contrary to supposed received wisdom, tried to establish the existence of a long tradition of democratic self-government in Russia which, he argued, produced a 'constrained autocracy' rather than the despotism it was often assumed to be.³² Less controversially, Dominic Lieven produced an excellently researched study of Nicholas II and his government which could be described as largely sympathetic to Nicholas as a person without underestimating the severity of the problems he faced. Nicholas was portrayed as a mild-mannered English gentleman caught up in affairs beyond his grasp and captive to an heroic sense of duty to which he was eventually prepared to sacrifice himself. This Nicholas was neither tyrant nor anti-semitic.³³

Even more strikingly, a group of historians even began to draw attention to the long-term 'success' of tsarism, its longevity (300 years of the Romanov dynasty was longer than any other in Europe) and its stability, in surviving 1789 unscathed and being the chief bastion of reaction in continental Europe in 1848. True, David Moon attributed stability and success to the remarkable expansion of the Russian peasantry, which preserved the core of its traditional culture and agrarian system despite a more than tenfold increase in population and an almost equally massive increase in area, rather than to the elite, but others were prepared to change the paradigm even further.³⁴ For historians like David Saunders, tsarist Russia was a 'static society' surviving by not changing. The rate of modernization was increasing at the end of the nineteenth century but barely affected more than a minority of the country. In work preparatory to the production of a social history of the Russian empire from 1801 to 1917 he argued that 'the thesis I have been developing is that, contrary to appearances, the society of the later Russian Empire was not fundamentally revolutionary'.³⁵ The traditional historians of late tsarism had been asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking why tsarism collapsed, the issues should have been, why was it so successful, why did it survive so long, and how did it absorb so much opposition?

Consideration of McKean's immensely detailed study of labour relations in St Petersburg brings us from political history to social history. McKean's own focus lies

³² Nicolai Petro, *The rebirth of Russian democracy: an interpretation of political culture* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1995).

³³ D. Lieven, *Nicholas II: emperor of all the Russias* (London, 1993). Other biographies include Edvard Radzinskii, *The last tsar* (London and New York, 1992), and M. Ferro, *Nicholas II* (London, 1993). Both have important merits though the former is preoccupied with the death of the imperial family and the latter with the putative discovery of Anastasia. See also R. A. Warth, *Nicholas II: the life and reign of Russia's last monarch* (Westport, CT, 1997).

³⁴ David Moon, *The Russian peasantry, 1600–1930: the world the peasants made* (London, 1999).

³⁵ David Saunders, 'The static society: a sceptical look at the later Russian empire', unpublished discussion paper presented at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, 15 Oct. 1997. I would like to record my thanks to the author for giving permission to quote this extract. Some of the ideas are further developed in David Saunders, 'The static society: patterns of work in the later Russian empire', in G. Hosking and R. Service, eds., *Reinterpreting Russia* (London and New York, 1999), pp. 126–41.

here, or at least on the political/social border. His main interest is in the working class and he comes to the somewhat revisionist conclusion that the majority of St Petersburg workers were far removed from revolutionary organizations and revolutionary consciousness in this period and were much more labourist in their aims and objectives. They struck for better wages and conditions not because they were reading political pamphlets or expecting to bring down the autocracy. He was preceded in this conclusion by Geoffrey Swain who, in his *Russian social democracy and the legal labour movement*,³⁶ argued similarly that Russian workers knew little about arcane doctrinal disputes between the largely émigré leadership and cared less. Victoria Bonnell had proposed a substantially similar argument in *Roots of rebellion: workers' politics and organization in St Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1914* though Bonnell and Swain do not see this as incompatible with the development of revolutionary consciousness.³⁷ But McKean infers that worker revolution would have been unlikely and that, without the war, tsarism might have survived.

Others have, however, pointed to labourism as a source of the revolutionary activity of workers in the revolutionary period itself,³⁸ from which one might conclude that even without the war some other crisis might have triggered off another, perhaps more successful 1903–5 style outburst. However, in what is, in some ways, the last of the left-wing revisionist social histories of the Russian working class, Heather Hogan, in *Forging revolution: metalworkers, managers and the state in St Petersburg, 1890–1914*, takes issue with the kind of arguments McKean had championed.³⁹ In her view, the metalworkers she studied showed growing restlessness with ineffective moderate, menshevik, trade-union-style strategies and, instead, driven by increasingly exploitative 'rationalizing' practices of their employers who maintained an intransigent attitude to worker demands, were pushed further and further into political action and towards the revolutionary parties whose analysis made more sense to them than the timid nostrums of the mensheviks. In the main, this late contribution echoed the views of one of the founders of neo-Marxist revisionism, Leopold Haimson, whose seminal articles on social stability in Russia had launched the social history debate shortly after Walkin had opened up the attack in the opposite direction on the political front.⁴⁰ Haimson's point had been that, war or no war, Russia was on the verge of revolution. While later contributors, focusing almost exclusively on the worker–Bolshevik relationship to the near exclusion of, for example, the crucial worker–Socialist Revolutionary relationship, did not always go so far they were, as we mentioned earlier, keen to refute the view that Bolshevism had no roots in the Russian working class and tended to assume that revolution was likely sooner or later. The concept of possible tsarist survival was barely even an issue for them.⁴¹

³⁶ Geoffrey Swain, *Russian social democracy and the legal labour movement* (London, 1983).

³⁷ Victoria Bonnell, *Roots of rebellion: workers' politics and organization in St Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, 1983).

³⁸ See for example Christopher Read, *From tsar to soviets: the Russian people and their revolution, 1917–1921* (London, 1996).

³⁹ Heather Hogan, *Forging revolution: metalworkers, managers and the state in St Petersburg, 1890–1914* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993), p. 156.

⁴⁰ Leopold Haimson, 'The problem of social stability in urban Russia, 1905–1917', *Slavic Review*, 23 (1964), pp. 619–42, and 24 (1965), pp. 1–22.

⁴¹ Major revisionist texts include Diane Koenker, *Moscow workers and the 1917 revolution* (Princeton, 1981); Diane Koenker and William Rosenberg, *Strikes and revolution in Russia in 1917* (Princeton, 1989); David Mandel, *Petrograd workers and the fall of the old regime: from the February revolution to the July days, 1917* (London, 1983); idem, *The Petrograd workers and the Soviet seizure of*

Hogan's work had moved on from the original debate in at least one further respect. Her analysis shows signs of following many other social historians down the seductive trail of 'identity' and eventually of 'culture'. Some of the most interesting and original work of the 1990s has been written in this vein. In the forefront are volumes on late-tsarist era sexuality by Laura Engelstein,⁴² and Joan Neuberger's work on hooliganism in the same period.⁴³ Both volumes make claims about the mainstream political relevance of the topics. Neuberger argues that hooliganism 'convinced a significant portion of society – including a host of prominent intellectuals and political leaders, as well as social reformers, commercial press journalists, and reactionary defenders of the regime – that Russia's capacity to assimilate its poor into a cultured society and become a civilized and politically unified nation was diminishing with each passing day'.⁴⁴

Engelstein also makes political claims for her work. The opening sentence is 'Sex was a political subject in late imperial Russia',⁴⁵ and her conclusion states 'In the years leading up to 1917, sexual disarray at the pinnacle of power came to stand for what was wrong with the tsarist regime. Instead of adopting responsible principles of statecraft, the emperor clung to archaic images of rule and let himself be swayed by idiosyncratic figures, among whom the most notorious was Grigorii Rasputin.'⁴⁶ Engelstein's reference to one crucial weakness in the optimist case – underestimation of the reactionary nature of Nicholas II – is accompanied by stress on another – the fact that bourgeois modernity was opposed to tsarism not its ally. As she points out at several stages, unlike

Western spokesmen for bourgeois respectability ... Russian professionals were dependent on and resentful of the state, drawn into alliance with disgruntled groups below them, yet culturally related to those above them. Most were enemies of the traditional patriarchal order and all it stood for – old-style family life, police rule, human servitude. Many recognized the plight of women as analogous to their own disenfranchized state.⁴⁷

In other words Russian professionals counterposed a vision of political and sexual modernity to the administrative rigidity of the old regime.⁴⁸

power: from the July days 1917 to July 1918 (London, 1984); Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Baku commune: class and nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, 1972); Steve Smith, *Red Petrograd: revolution in the factories, 1917–1918* (Cambridge, 1983); Laura Engelstein, *Moscow, 1905: working-class organization and political conflict* (Stanford, 1982); T. Hasegawa, *The February revolution: Petrograd 1917* (Seattle, 1981); Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks come to power: the revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York, 1976); Reginald Zelnik, *Labour and society in tsarist Russia: the factory workers of St Petersburg, 1855–1870* (Stanford, 1971).

⁴² L. Engelstein, *The keys to happiness: sex and the search for modernity in fin-de-siècle Russia* (Ithaca and London, 1992).

⁴³ Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: crime, culture and power in St. Petersburg, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, 1993).

⁴⁴ Idem, 'Culture besieged: hooliganism and futurism', in Stephen P. Frank and Mark Steinberg, eds., *Cultures in flux: lower-class values, practices and resistance in late-imperial Russia* (Princeton, 1994), p. 187. ⁴⁵ Engelstein, *The keys to happiness*, p. 1. ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 421.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 422. Other major works on women and gender include Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik women* (Cambridge, 1997); Moira Donald, 'Bolshevik activity amongst the working women of Petrograd in 1917', *International Review of Social History*, 27 (1982), pp. 129–60; Linda Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900–1917* (Stanford, 1984); Barbara Engel, *Between the field and the*

In a splendid blend of old and new social history Mark Steinberg has re-written the history of part of the working class, the printers of late tsarist Russia.⁴⁹ Despite approaching the question from a new angle, Steinberg's conclusions tend to reinforce the predominant view. Far from melting away, confrontation was getting more acute.

By the end of 1905, even in St Petersburg where the practice and rhetoric of moral community were most deeply rooted and persistent, the structure and psychology of social relations in the printing industry had undergone a dramatic transformation. The pursuit of class interest and power, previously only implied in the differing ways workers and employers defined morality and community, became more direct and aggressive. Henceforth, class identity and interests would explicitly shape the structure of social relations in the industry, as workers and employers parted into their separate organizations and confronted each other with growing suspicion and hostility.⁵⁰

One of the features of recent social history has been a turn away from intellectuals. However, Neuberger, Engelstein, and Steinberg all have things to say about the intelligentsia and the professional classes. A small number of studies keep them in prime focus.

Although mainly devoted to the avant-garde and to the post-revolutionary period Katerina Clark's study *Petersburg: crucible of revolution* reinforces a number of anti-optimist points.⁵¹ In particular Clark emphasizes the deep, prophetic, millenarian expectations of revolutionary change which were circulating widely in pre-war St Petersburg and the modernizing culture of the educated classes in general, both of which brought conflict with the decaying archaisms of autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationality. Similarly, the contributors to *Between tsar and people: educated society and the quest for public identity in late imperial Russia*⁵² make similar points, especially over the intelligentsia's struggle to fight for a public sphere in a state-dominated society.

In a different vein, there is Anna Geifman's *Thou shalt kill: revolutionary terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917*. The author follows a lengthy tradition of writings on the revolutionary movement. However, Geifman's approach is rather distinctive. Her focus is on the marginalized subject of terrorism, particularly that which goes beyond the scope of mainstream parties. Even though terrorism died down after the repression of 1906 Geifman's estimates of its extent in the revolutionary years are startling. 17,000 people are said to have been killed or wounded in terrorist attacks and 7,000,000 roubles 'expropriated' by radical groups in bank robberies and the like.⁵³ She also shows that the tradition still survived down to the revolution of 1917 though it remained on a much smaller scale.

Last but not least, the social history of the largest group in Russian society, the peasantry, has also been undergoing a gradual revolution. The extent to which peasant

city: women, work and family in Russia, 1861–1914 (Cambridge, 1983); Beatrice Farnsworth and Lynn Viola, eds., *Russian peasant women* (New York, 1992); Richard Stites, *The women's liberation movement in Russia, 1860–1930* (Princeton, 1978); Rose Glickman, *Russian factory women: workplace and society, 1880–1914* (Berkeley, 1984).

⁴⁹ Mark D. Steinberg, *Moral communities: the culture of class relations in the Russian printing industry, 1867–1907* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1992).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁵¹ Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: crucible of revolution* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1995).

⁵² E. W. Clowes, S. D. Kassow, and J. L. West, eds., *Between tsar and people: educated society and the quest for public identity in late imperial Russia* (Princeton, 1991).

⁵³ Anna Geifman, *Thou shalt kill: revolutionary terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 21–2.

studies in general has been changed through the influence of Clifford Geertz, *Subaltern studies*, and many other influences is well known. Although magisterial accounts by John Maynard, Lancelot Owen, and G. T. Robinson are still immensely valuable,⁵⁴ many studies including Daniel Field's *Rebels in the name of the tsar*,⁵⁵ Shanin's classic works,⁵⁶ and Moon's already mentioned study⁵⁷ give testimony to the degree to which new ideas have taken off in this sphere. As far as our current theme is concerned a number of writers have extended and developed this new approach. Monographs by Ben Eklof⁵⁸ and Scott Seregny⁵⁹ have illuminated the formerly neglected topic of peasant education showing not only the difficult conditions of isolation under which many rural school teachers operated at the turn of the century but also the complexities of the 'modernizing' influence of education among the peasantry. In the compilation edited by Eklof and S. P. Frank, entitled, *The world of the Russian peasant: post-emancipation culture and society* the impact of the new approach is clear.⁶⁰ The emerging picture, as far as our current theme is concerned, is one in which peasant men and women are seen as actors in their own right pursuing, often in traditional ways, rational, frequently self-defensive, goals through local solidarity and the expression of local issues and tensions. They are also shown as more politically astute than was often thought, their 'deference' and 'backwardness' masking a sense of reality which might be crudely expressed 'act weak and dumb when the authorities have the upper hand, but strike hard when the opportunity arises (or when driven to it by exasperation and despair)'. The importance of peasant migration has also been emphasized largely as an explanation of how modernization reached the villages. The converse issue – that transfer of peasant radicalism to the cities through rural industrial recruitment might help explain the militancy of Russian industrial labour which remained close to the peasantry throughout the period – has been less frequently argued.⁶¹ In any case, growing acknowledgement of the importance of migration has led to a blurring of the once confidently flaunted broad distinction between urban workers and peasants.⁶² Recent studies have even traced the most 'backward' of peasant practices, attachment to

⁵⁴ John Maynard, *Russia in flux* (London, 1941), and idem, *The Russian peasant and other studies* (London, 1942); Lancelot Owen, *The Russian peasant movement, 1906–1917* (London, 1937); Geroid Tanquary Robinson, *Rural Russia under the old regime* (New York, 1932).

⁵⁵ Daniel Field, *Rebels in the name of the tsar* (Boston, 1976).

⁵⁶ Teodor Shanin, *The awkward class: political sociology of peasantry in a developing society: Russia, 1910–1925* (Oxford, 1972), and idem, *The roots of otherness: Russia's turn of century* (2 vols., London and New Haven, 1985–6).

⁵⁷ Moon, *The Russian peasantry, 1600–1930*. See also David Moon, *Russian peasants and tsarist legislation on the eve of reform, 1825–1855* (London, 1992).

⁵⁸ Ben Eklof, *Russian peasant schools: officialdom, village culture and popular pedagogy, 1861–1914* (Berkeley, 1986).

⁵⁹ Scott Seregny, *Russian teachers and peasant revolution: the politics of education in 1905* (Bloomington, 1989).

⁶⁰ B. Eklof and S. P. Frank, eds., *The world of the Russian peasant: post-emancipation culture and society* (Boston, MA, 1990). It should be said that its nearest equivalent predecessor, *The peasant in nineteenth-century Russia* (Stanford, 1968), edited by Wayne Vucinich, still holds up very well.

⁶¹ Christopher Read, 'Labour and socialism in tsarist Russia', in Dick Geary, ed., *Labour and socialist movements in Europe before 1914* (Oxford, New York, and Munich, 1983).

⁶² J. Bradley, *Muzhik and Muscovite: urbanization in late imperial Russia* (Berkeley, 1985); Robert Johnson, *Peasant and proletarian: the working class of Moscow in the late nineteenth century* (Leicester, 1979).

religion, into the city and factory.⁶³ As in so many areas Moshe Lewin, though writing exclusively about peasants in the Eklof and Frank volume,⁶⁴ pioneered study of the importance of popular religion in the mentality of the Russian *narod* (people) and it remained integral to his interpretation of the revolution years in *The making of the Soviet system*.⁶⁵ Another new strain discernible in the Eklof and Frank volume is a growing interest in judicial institutions and processes, including peasant courts,⁶⁶ which has produced a growing stream of research largely on the pre-1905 period and therefore largely outside our current theme, though it tends to depict an independent peasantry capable of governing its own affairs albeit often in a crude and sometimes arbitrary and certainly illiberal manner.⁶⁷

The new approach to the peasantry is also visible in accounts of the revolutionary period, notably those of John Channon, Orlando Figes, Donald Raleigh, and Christina Worobec in the English-speaking world and of Viktor Danilov, A. D. Maliavskii, and V. V. Kabanov among Russian scholars.⁶⁸ Together they present a convincing picture of a peasantry still spoiling for its traditional fight with the landowners when the opportunity arose, as it did in 1917. Their accounts show overwhelmingly that, even though modernization was making inroads and in some cases peasants were benefiting from economic growth, their resentment against the authorities and the landowners had not diminished. Optimist arguments tended to wish away the peasant problem. For instance, although he records an almost incredible level of military intervention against peasants, quoting 13,507 incidents in January 1909 and 114,108 for the year as a whole, Norman Stone in *Europe transformed* seems to imply that there was little reason for it.⁶⁹ Pre-1905 redemption payments were ‘Two and a half pence per head per annum’⁷⁰ and after 1905 prices were rising, there were good harvests, the peasants farmed 95 per cent of the land, there were many oases of prosperity, and the Stolypin reforms were working at least for a while. The situation worsened around 1912 but there is little explanation as to why this was so.⁷¹ Indeed, Stone’s definition of the peasant problem is not so much directed to peasant land hunger and impoverishment but to asking ‘why did Russian

⁶³ Simon Dixon, ‘How holy was Holy Russia? Rediscovering Russian religion’, in G. Hosking and R. Service, eds., *Reinterpreting Russia* (London and New York, 1999), pp. 21–39.

⁶⁴ M. Lewin, ‘Popular religion in twentieth-century Russia’, in Eklof and Frank, eds., *The world of the Russian peasant*, pp. 155–68.

⁶⁵ M. Lewin, *The making of the Soviet system* (London, 1985).

⁶⁶ Stephen Frank, ‘Popular justice, community and culture among the Russian peasantry 1870–1900’, in Eklof and Frank, eds., *The world of the Russian peasant*, pp. 133–54.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Jane Burbank, ‘A question of dignity: peasant legal culture in late-imperial Russia’, *Continuity and Change*, 10 (1995), pp. 391–404; Peter H. Solomon, ed., *Reforming justice in Russia, 1864–1906: power, culture and the limits of legal order* (New York, 1997); Cathy Frierson, ‘“I must always answer to the law ...” rules and responses in the reformed *volost’* court’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 75 (1997), pp. 308–34, and G. Popkins, ‘The Russian peasant *volost’* court and customary law, 1861–1917’ (DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1995).

⁶⁸ John Channon, ‘The peasantry in the revolutions of 1917’, in E. R. Frankel et al., eds., *Revolution in Russia: reassessments of 1917* (Cambridge, 1992); Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, civil war: the Volga countryside in revolution, 1917–1921* (Oxford, 1989); Donald J. Raleigh, *Revolution on the Volga: 1917 in Saratov* (Ithaca, 1985); Christina Worobec, *Peasant Russia: family and community in the post-emancipation era* (Princeton, 1991); V. P. Danilov, *Rural Russia under the new regime* (Bloomington, 1988); A. D. Maliavskii, *Krest’ianskoe dvizhenie v Rossii v 1917g. mart-oktiabr’* (Moscow, 1981); V. V. Kabanov, *Krest’ianskoe khoziastvo v usloviakh “voennogo kommunizma”* (Moscow, 1988).

⁶⁹ Norman Stone, *Europe transformed, 1878–1919* (London, 1983), p. 244.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 230–44.

agriculture remain backward [i.e. not capitalist], and why did the peasantry not respond to the revolution in the counter-revolutionary way in which European peasants generally responded to urban upheavals?'⁷² No one, including Stone as has just been mentioned, has produced a study backing up the assumption that the peasant problem was becoming less acute politically. By and large, although it has shown some very complex effects, the literature on the impact of the Stolypin reforms, on which optimists pinned their hopes in this sphere, has tended to come up with a verdict of 'not proven' at best.⁷³ The most recent study, Judith Pallot's *Land reform in Russia*, comes down on the pessimistic side.⁷⁴ If one adds the fact that the 'separators' who took advantage of the reforms were among the first targets of the communal peasants in 1917, the overwhelming verdict must be that the reforms, at best, had a long, long way to go before they would seriously undercut the peasant problem. Peasant studies have provided little comfort for the optimists and, perhaps for this reason, with few notable exceptions, they have shown little interest in pursuing research in this area.

IV

A number of sweeping, large-scale interpretations of late tsarism and its successors impinge on our theme.⁷⁵ In a stimulating maverick work, the complex central argument of which risks being reduced to banality by any short summary, Adrian Jones argues that all attempts to interfere with the peasantry emanating from the educated class – whether tsarist, revolutionary, or Soviet – were based on cultural misunderstandings which expected the peasantry to fit in with western class-based, stratifying, developmental concepts. In Jones's view, late-imperial Russia was the setting for a clash of two cultures, intelligentsia and peasant. The former considered the peasants through a stratifying developmental prism while in practice the peasantry were largely unchanging and absorbed intelligentsia attempts at manipulation whether they emanated from liberals, Marxists, populists, or the state. It is not our purpose to enter into the pros and cons of Jones's account, but it is extremely significant from our point of view that the autocracy as such barely appears in his argument. Where it does so it is simply dismissed as anachronistic or archaic. Autocratic survival is not even a question worth raising. Tim McDaniel is almost equally dismissive in that, although he rightly points out the way autocratic peculiarities shaped the thinking of its actual and would-be successors, he does not seriously envisage tsarist survival. The main theme of his work is the contradiction between autocracy and modernization.⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid., p. 235.

⁷³ David A. Macey, *Government and peasant in Russia, 1861–1906: the pre-history of the Stolypin reforms* (De Kalb, 1987); Judith Pallot and Dennis J. B. Shaw, *Landscape and settlement in Romanov Russia* (New York, 1989), plus articles by Judith Pallot in James Bate and R. A. French, eds., *Studies in Russian historical geography*, I, pp. 83–108, and II, pp. 423–49 (London, 1983). Note also a growing political literature on Stolypin, notably Peter Waldron, *Between two revolutions: Stolypin and the politics of renewal in Russia* (London, 1997), and Abraham Ascher, *P. A. Stolypin: the search for stability in late imperial Russia* (Stanford, 2001).

⁷⁴ Judith Pallot, *Land reform in Russia: peasant responses to Stolypin's project of rural transformation* (Oxford, 1999).

⁷⁵ Adrian Jones, *Late-imperial Russia: an interpretation: three visions, two cultures, one peasantry* (Zurich, 1997).

⁷⁶ Tim McDaniel, *Autocracy, capitalism and revolution in Russia* (Berkeley, 1988); idem, *The agony of the Russian idea* (Princeton, 1996), and idem, *Autocracy, modernization and revolution in Russia and Iran* (Princeton, 1991).

One final way to take soundings of the current state of historiography is to end up where we began, to compare some general works and collected articles published in recent years. Richard Pipes's *Russian Revolution, 1899–1918*⁷⁷ was published in 1990. While Pipes's work is highly influential on the outside world as much as on other scholars and his volume was widely reviewed in the mainstream media, his antipathy to autocracy did not dent the growing optimistic consensus. Nor did the excellent but sometimes overlooked narrative trilogy by W. Bruce Lincoln.⁷⁸ Similarly, the widely acclaimed and extensively reviewed *A people's tragedy: the Russian Revolution* by Orlando Figes⁷⁹ is particularly forthright on the inadequacies of the autocracy and the continuing backwardness of the peasantry and by no stretch of the imagination could it fit into the optimistic camp. One volume devoted specifically to the survival of tsarism is Peter Waldron's excellent *The end of imperial Russia, 1855–1917*.⁸⁰ Waldron, taking a wider perspective than Jones, taking in urban life, emphasizes the degree to which Russia had modernized under late tsarism – 'Social change left no family or individual in the empire untouched.'⁸¹ The autocracy had apparently survived the crisis of 1905 so well that by 1914 'The autocracy believed that it had regained its pre-1905 position. Reform was off the agenda and the people of the Russian empire felt that their political aspirations were frustrated.'⁸² 'The autocratic state appeared to have a considerable reserve of strength after 1905 although, as quickly became clear, this was only superficial.'⁸³ Here there is no discourse of 'twilight' or 'decline' of Russia as a whole but neither is the autocracy seen as an institution with a future. The emphasis is on dynamic change and the autocracy's difficulty in keeping up. As far as social change was concerned 'by 1914 the dynamics of Russian society were moving at a pace which the state could no longer regulate. The old social order had irretrievably broken down but a new equilibrium had not yet been reached.'⁸⁴ Finally, one of the most recent contributions to the debate⁸⁵ examines the main political currents of the late imperial period from the social democrats to the State Council in a series of disparate contributions. Though there is no overarching thesis, the picture presented by the contributors is one of drift and confusion in government and growing restlessness in all sectors of society. Reading the contributions one could easily form the conclusion that, war or no war, the autocracy was heading for the rocks.

Similarly, the best recent general history of Russia in the twentieth century, written by Robert Service, shows little inclination to optimistic arguments. Its opening sentence is uncompromising. 'No imperial power before the First World War was more reviled than the Russian empire.'⁸⁶ A society split between traditional and modern was presided over by 'a creaky structure of power. Matters were not helped by the fact that the emperor was not respected.'⁸⁷ Young, increasingly educated people in particular saw 'The tsarist order ... as a humiliating peculiarity that Russia should quickly

⁷⁷ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution, 1899–1918* (London, 1990).

⁷⁸ W. Bruce Lincoln, *In war's dark shadow: the Russians before the Great War* (New York, 1983); idem, *Passage through armageddon: the Russians in war and revolution, 1914–1917* (New York, 1986); and idem, *Red victory: a history of the Russian civil war* (New York, 1989).

⁷⁹ Orlando Figes, *A people's tragedy: the Russian Revolution* (London and New York, 1996).

⁸⁰ Peter Waldron, *The end of imperial Russia, 1855–1917* (London, 1997). ⁸¹ Ibid., p. 69.

⁸² Ibid., p. 37.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 36.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 102.

⁸⁵ A. Geifman, ed., *Russia under the last tsar: opposition and subversion, 1894–1917* (Oxford, 1999).

⁸⁶ Robert Service, *A history of twentieth-century Russia* (London, 1997), p. 1.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

remove.⁸⁸ Even before the war 'As things stood, some kind of revolutionary clash was practically inevitable.'⁸⁹

Social strife was continual. National resentments among the non-Russians were on the rise. Political opposition remained strident and determined. The monarchy was ever more widely perceived as an oppressive, obsolescent institution which failed to correspond to the country's needs. Nicholas II had been almost overthrown in 1905. He had recovered his position, but the basic tensions in state and society had not been alleviated.⁹⁰

In the light of this mass of contrary evidence how has the extreme optimist argument succeeded in surviving? Its fundamental flaw is that, having identified modernization and progress in Russia, it goes on to assume that this would have helped tsarism to survive and, in the more far-fetched versions, to equal or surpass the achievements of the early Soviet period. In reality, however, the same facts of progress could be understood as part of the rise of an as yet small middle class which, while caught up in the trammels of the state and in part dependent on it, resented that state and was only loyal to it to the degree to which the state was the unique guardian of social order. In that sense the real issue between optimists and pessimists is less the question of whether tsarism would survive. As this review has attempted to show, when looked at closely, even optimists did not hold out much hope for tsarism as it existed. Although unacknowledged by most optimists, the real question was what kind of revolution did Russia face, a bourgeois one focused on institutional reform and led by what was still a weak middle class or a radical populist one which would lead to widespread property redistribution and lead inevitably to extensive social transformation? Perhaps the secret of the enduring fascination, for many Russians and non-Russians, of the writings of those who appeared to be suggesting that tsarism might have survived is to be found in a comment made by Adrian Jones: 'As any celebrity or astrologer knows, the laurels in games of soothsaying and renown do not necessarily go to those who have things right; they go to those who confirm whatever their audiences most want to hear.'⁹¹

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

⁹¹ Jones, *Late-imperial Russia*, p. 104.