

# *The Russian Nobility on the Eve of the 1905 Revolution*\*

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In the midst of the revolutionary upheaval in seventeenth-century England James Harrington, a historian and pioneer social scientist, wrote: "A monarchy divested of its nobility has no refuge under heaven but an army. Wherefore the dissolution of this government caused the [Civil] war, not the war the dissolution of this government."<sup>1</sup> It was not unnatural for Harrington to attribute capital importance to the disaffection of much of the English elite as a cause of the Civil War. Born in 1611, he had witnessed the disputes between factions of the ruling elite—especially between the central government and local notables—and had watched political conflicts and religious disagreements undermine the old political order in England.<sup>2</sup>

Harrington's dictum may be applied to other monarchical European states before the end of their old regimes. Norman Hampson has observed that "the main political conflict in eighteenth-century France was . . . the struggle of the aristocracy against the declining power of royal absolutism."<sup>3</sup> Virtually all of the modern historians of the French revolution agree that what Albert Soboul called the "revolt of the aristocracy" between 1787 and 1789 contributed to the destabilization of the monarchical system.<sup>4</sup> It was aristocratic opposition to royal taxation that

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714* (New York, 1961), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> For thirty years historians have debated the social origins of the English revolution. The historiography of this debate is summarized neatly in Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642* (New York, 1972), pp. 26-43.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Hampson, *A Social History of the French Revolution* (London, 1963), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> See Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon*, translated by Alan Forest and Colin Jones (New York, 1974), pp. 97-113; and his *La Civilisation et La Révolution Française, I/La Crise de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1970), pp. 199-266. For bibliography see J. Meyer, *La Noblesse Bretonne au XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1966). See also Georges Lefebvre, *La Révolution Française*, 2nd. ed. (Paris, 1957), pp. 7-126, especially notes on pp. 107-110; and Hampson, pp. 1-59.

eventually compelled Louis XVI's chief minister, Archbishop Brienne, to convoke the Estates General in 1789.

In Russia before the 1905 revolution the monarchy was divested of the solid support of its nobility.<sup>5</sup> Not only the liberal gentry but many conservatives as well criticized the financial and social policy pursued by Alexander III and Nicholas II. The attacks of gentry-dominated political groups helped to diminish public support for the autocracy, and in the crisis of 1905-1907 the government found it difficult indeed to suppress popular disorders.

At first sight the growth of gentry opposition to the Russian government after 1880 seems illogical, even paradoxical. After all, it was Alexander III who inaugurated the era of the so-called "counter-reforms" and Nicholas II's most famous pretension was to rule in the spirit of his father. Both Alexander and Nicholas were sympathetic to the problems of the rural nobility and they authorized a series of government study committees and special conferences to consider the needs of Russian landowners.<sup>6</sup> Yet in the quarter century before 1905 gentry discontent with the regime grew rather than diminished. The tsars' efforts on behalf of the provincial elite were little appreciated, partly because these efforts were ill-timed and partly because they were almost wholly ineffective. It was only natural for gentry spokesmen to criticize the government's incompetence in dealing with crucial political and economic problems, and for the gentry's exasperation with the government to increase with time.

Historians have recently become interested in the background to gentry opposition before 1905. The Soviet historian Iu. B. Solov'ev has treated the gentry question from 1883 to 1902 from the government's perspective, and has offered many illuminating observations about the role of Minister of Finance S. Iu. Witte. Western scholars concerned with the development of political parties in 1905 and thereafter have dealt with the gentry opposition as one necessary precondition for un-

<sup>5</sup> In Russia the collective term used for the First Estate was *dvorianstvo*. This term can be translated as "nobility" or "gentry." There was no rigid distinction between titled aristocracy and mere gentry comparable to that in England, since titles in Russia were hereditary and purely honorific. They did not necessarily impart greater social prestige to their bearers. In this paper "gentry" and "nobility" will be used interchangeably.

<sup>6</sup> The most important of these commissions were: the Abaza Commission, founded in 1891 to discuss the problem of entail laws; the Special Commission on the Needs of the Nobility, created in 1897 to discuss all aspects of the gentry problem; and the Special Commission on the Needs of Agriculture, created in 1902 to analyze the agrarian problem as a whole. The best treatment of these committees is Iu. B. Solov'ev, *Samoderzhavie i dvorianstvo v kontse XIX veka* (Leningrad, 1973), pp. 165-376.

derstanding the political patterns of the Duma years.<sup>7</sup> By drawing on the work of Solov'ev and these other scholars, one can now explain the roots of gentry opposition with greater confidence than ever before.

In my view the primary cause of gentry disenchantment with the monarchy was that the tsar and his camarilla failed to resolve Russia's chronic agrarian crisis. Although the agrarian crisis was an extremely complicated phenomenon which affected every aspect of the rural economy, one of its most obvious symptoms was the financial squeeze felt by grain producers from the mid-1880s until 1896.<sup>8</sup> The sale price for winter wheat fell by more than fifty percent from 1883 to 1894. Even as late as 1900 the price had not climbed back to 1883 levels.<sup>9</sup> Oats dropped from 62 kopecks per pood in 1881 to a low of 35 kopecks in 1893.<sup>10</sup> Barley prices also fell sharply after 1883.<sup>11</sup> Neither oats nor barley had reached their earlier price levels by the turn of the century. Rye prices plummeted from 98 kopecks per pood in 1881 to 41 kopecks in 1894. By 1900 a pood of rye sold for an average of 59 kopecks—less than two-thirds of the price prevailing twenty years before.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Solov'ev in *ibid.* For a revealing exploration of the development of gentry liberalism see N. M. Pirumova, *Zemskoe liberal'noe dvizhenie: Sotsial'nye korni i evoliutsiia do nachala XX veka* (Moscow, 1977). The recent Western literature is reviewed in Terence Emmons, "The Russian Landed Gentry and Politics," *Russian Review* 33, no. 3 (July, 1974): 269–283. See also: Roberta Thompson Manning, "The Russian Provincial Gentry in Revolution and Counterrevolution, 1905–1907" (unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> The best summary treatment of the agrarian crisis in Russian is N. A. Egiazarova, *Agrarnyi krizis kontsa XIX veka v Rossii* (Moscow, 1969). In English see A. Gerschenkron, "Agrarian Policies and Industrialization: Russia 1861–1917," in *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, 6, part 2, pp. 706–800; G. T. Robinson, *Rural Russia under the Old Regime: A History of the Landlord–Peasant World and a Prologue to the Peasant Revolution of 1917* (Berkeley, 1969), pp. 94–137.

To my knowledge, only one scholar has suggested in print that there was no agrarian crisis in late nineteenth-century Russia. See James Y. Simms, Jr., "The Crisis in Russian Agriculture at the End of the Nineteenth Century: A Different View," *Slavic Review* 36, no. 3 (September 1977): 377–398. However, Simms does not deal with the price depression and the crisis of gentry agriculture; he is concerned solely with the peasant problem. Incidentally, Simms relies heavily on the tautological proposition that a rise in indirect taxes from the sale of "consumer goods" (kerosene, matches, sugar, alcohol, and cotton fabrics) indicated increased consumption of consumer goods, and thus, a better standard of living for the peasantry. For a criticism of Simms see G. M. Hamburg, "The Crisis in Russian Agriculture: A Comment," *Slavic Review* 37, no. 3 (September 1978): 481–486; Simms' response, "On Missing the Point: A Rejoinder," appeared in the same issue, pp. 487–490.

<sup>9</sup> Ministerstvo zemledel'ia i gosudarstvennykh imushchestv, *Otdel sel'skoi ekonomii i sel'sko-khoziaistvennoi statistiki, Svod statisticheskikh svedenii po sel'skomu khoziaistvu Rossii v kontse XIX veka* (St. Petersburg, 1903), vyp. 2, pp. 26–29.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34–37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38–41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–25.

The sharp drop in the prices for major crops was not accompanied by a corresponding decline in the costs of production. One major component of production costs was the sale cost of draft animals. In the period 1883 to 1900 the average spring cost of draft horses decreased slightly, from 57 rubles to 52 rubles. However, the sale price of draft horses during the autumn rose slightly, from 42 to 47 rubles per horse.<sup>13</sup> The price curve for draft horses shows a general decline in costs from 1883 to 1891, then a sharp jump in prices from 1891 to 1894, followed by a slowly rising price curve at the turn of the century. This evidence suggests that costs of draft animals were rising sharply during the period when grain prices were falling most sharply—that is, during the mid-1890s. At this time the infamous “scissors” of rising costs and declining prices cut at the heart of the rural economy.

A second major component of production costs was agricultural labor costs. In the late 1880s there were probably 3.5 million agricultural wage laborers in Russia.<sup>14</sup> By the turn of the century this number rose to about 4 million, and by 1914 there may have been five million such workers.<sup>15</sup> According to the 1897 census there were 1.8 million people who listed agricultural wages as their main source of income;<sup>16</sup> the rest of the agricultural labor force consisted of peasants who were trying to supplement their income from the land by selling their labor.

Average wages during the annual sowing season were quite stable from 1882 until 1900, varying from a low of 39 kopecks per laborer per day in 1892 to a high of 49 kopecks a day in 1900.<sup>17</sup> Wages during the fall harvest fluctuated significantly from a low of 53 kopecks a day in 1891 to a high of 74 kopecks a day in 1893.<sup>18</sup> The year of the highest wages—1893—has been called the “year of the worker crisis.” Gentry landowners in the blacksoil belt had trouble finding enough farm hands to gather the enormous harvest of that year, particularly since the grain did not mature until nearly a month later than usual.<sup>19</sup>

The combination of falling grain prices with relatively stable or rising production costs meant a net decline in agricultural income.<sup>20</sup> Many

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56–61.

<sup>14</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Sochineniia*, 3: 236.

<sup>15</sup> I. D. Koval'chenko, L. V. Milov, *Vserossiiskii agrarnyi rynek XVIII—nachalo XX veka. Opyt kolichestvennogo analiza* (Moscow, 1974), p. 320.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320; V. P. Kadomtsev, *Professional'nyi i sotsial'nyi sostav naseleniia po perepisi 1897 g.* (St. Petersburg, 1903), pp. 100–101.

<sup>17</sup> *Svod statisticheskikh svedenií*, pp. 112–113.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112–113.

<sup>19</sup> Wages in the blacksoil zone were 93 kopecks per day in 1893.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the depression was more severe in some regions than in others. The differential impact of the depression has been analyzed briefly by Egiazarova. See also *Doklad predsedatelia vysochaishe uchrezdennoi v 1888 godu kommissii po povodu padeniia tsen na sel'sko-khoziaistvennye proizvedeniia v*

gentry landowners were forced to sell unproductive plots or even entire estates. It is well known that between 1877 and 1905 the total personal land holdings of the gentry diminished from 73 million to 52 million desiatins.<sup>21</sup> Gentry landowners also mortgaged their estates to avoid selling them during the depression. In 1889 there were already 41,000 mortgaged estates in European Russia. By 1896 this figure had reached 71,000 estates, and by 1900 there would be almost 97,000 mortgaged estates.<sup>22</sup> The amount of land mortgaged in Russia increased from 30.2 million desiatins to almost 45 million desiatins in the brief span of eleven years.

The economic pressure on the landed gentry prompted many complaints to the government. For example, on 15 June 1896 a special commission on the needs of the nobility reported to the Samara noble assembly:

The ominous agrarian crisis, which has continued during the past years, has now reached the point that all landowners who farm their estates are threatened with complete ruin. In the recent past one could cover expenses only by the utmost exertion and care. Now the greatest possible knowledge and effort will not save the landowner from disaster in the absence of extraordinary [government] steps to avert the crisis.<sup>23</sup>

The Poltava assembly complained in 1894:

The nobility face a dilemma: they must either give up their ancient activity as landowners, liquidate their landed property, and, breaking age-old ties with the people and the province, turn to the first potential buyer, or they must maintain their moral connection with the people—a connection stemming from common activity and common interests—and perish at their post.<sup>24</sup>

The complaints about the sad state of the gentry in the present and fears for the future were accompanied by confusion about the proper

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*piatiletie 1883–1887* (St. Petersburg, 1892), which argues that the crisis was worst in the eastern and central segments of the blacksoil belt, and in large parts of rye-producing non-blacksoil provinces. Landowners themselves analyze the crisis in *Sel'skokhoziaistvennye i statisticheskie svedeniia po materialam, poluchennym ot khoziaev*, vyp. 3 (St. Petersburg, 1890).

<sup>21</sup> Tsentral'nyi statisticheskii komitet, *Statistika zemlevladieniia 1905 g. Svod dannykh po 50 guberniiam Evropeiskoi Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1907).

<sup>22</sup> Egiazarova, Appendix, Table, p. 188.

<sup>23</sup> TsGIA (Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv), fond 593, opis' 1, delo 47, p. 507. "Doklad komissii izbrannoi ocherednym samarskim sobraniiem dvorianstva 15 iunია 1896 goda po voprosu o vobuzhdenii khodataistva o bli-zhaishikh nuzhdakh dvorianstva."

<sup>24</sup> TsGIA, fond 593, opis' 1, delo 47, p. 330. "Ob"iasnitel'naia zapiska poltav-skogo khodataistva," 11 March 1894.

course of action for threatened landowners. One prominent gentry spokesman asked the All-Russian Congress of Farmers: "Where are we going? What will become of us? What should we do? Must we lay down our weapons in the expectation of a swift death?"<sup>25</sup>

It would be wrong to infer from landowners' general complaints about the agrarian crisis that the Russian nobility blamed the government for the world-wide decline of grain prices between 1883 and 1897. Obviously, the government had precious little influence over grain price levels on the London exchange, and Russian nobles were aware of the government's limited power in international commerce. However, the government did exercise control over important aspects of the Russian rural economy that affected the welfare of gentry landowners during the Great Depression: agricultural credit; railroad transportation costs; and land inheritance rules. Prominent gentry spokesmen criticized state policy in these matters, and the accumulation of gentry grievances against the state eventually contributed to the climate of dissatisfaction with the regime that was evidenced clearly at the turn of the century.

The initial fall of cereal prices in the early 1880s triggered a gentry campaign for a state-supported land bank, which would provide both short-term loans and long-term mortgages at low interest rates. Gentry petitions in favor of the new bank came primarily from Southern and Central Russia, and from areas in Eastern Russia beyond the Volga.<sup>26</sup> The geographical incidence of gentry petitions seemed to be highest in blacksoil provinces where there was a high level of indebtedness to privately-owned land banks, which were notorious for the high interest rates charged to borrowers. By no means did all provincial gentry assemblies advocate a land bank. Gentry petitions led to the establishment of the Gentry Land Bank in mid-1885. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Finance insisted that the new bank command commercial rates of interest on its loans, and noble spokesmen, divided by regional interests and differing perspectives on the bank question, were unable to force the Ministry of Finance to accept lower returns on bank capital.<sup>27</sup>

During the second phase of the Great Depression in the mid-1890s, many gentry assemblies demanded reduced interest rates on short-term loans and institutional reorganization of the Gentry Land Bank, which

<sup>25</sup> *Trudy Vserossiiskogo s'ezda sel'skikh khoziaev*, vypusk 5, Doklad B. V. Lilienfel'da (Moscow, 1896), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Especially active were gentry assemblies in the following provinces: Orel, Voronezh, Tambov, Penza, Bessarabia, Poltava, Saratov, Orenburg, Ufa, Kazan', Kaluga, St. Petersburg. The last two provinces were in different geographical areas than the others: Kaluga was in the Central-Industrial region, and St. Petersburg was in the North.

<sup>27</sup> For a convenient summary of the debate over the bank, see Solov'ev, pp. 165-185.

they saw as over-centralized and unresponsive to local needs.<sup>28</sup> Between January 1892 and December 1895 gentry groups from eleven provinces criticized existing bank organization and loan disbursement procedures.<sup>29</sup> The government made no serious effort to alter the Gentry Bank's structure in response to these complaints, probably because the gentry in most other provinces accepted the existing bank organization without complaint. Criticism of high interest rates was more widespread. In 1896 a convocation of gentry marshals asserted that the commercial lending rate "twice exceeded the normal rate of return [on capital investment] from the land," and in the marshals' opinion "completely contradicted the tenets and purpose of agricultural credit enunciated by Alexander III."<sup>30</sup> The Orel provincial gentry marshal, M. A. Stakhovich, told Nicholas II in person that interest rates were too high, and that without the tsar's help the nobility would "lose the capacity to serve Russia . . . and would be replaced by less reliable elements."<sup>31</sup> In May 1897, after a year of debating the size of the interest-rate reduction to be granted to landowners, the government announced a one-half percent cut on short-term loan rates charged by the Gentry Bank.<sup>32</sup> The gentry landowners who had pushed hard for a more substantial cut in bank lending rates were dissatisfied by the government's minor concession, yet they lacked the unity and political clout necessary to force further concessions from the government. The lack of universal gentry support for large interest reductions and the determined opposition of Finance Minister Witte to such reductions accounted for the government's lukewarm reaction to gentry petitions on this issue.

The pattern of complaints by some gentry landowners against government agricultural policy, followed by minor government concessions that failed to satisfy the original petitioners, can be observed in other cases as well. After the Ministry of Finance adopted a differential railroad tariff rate on cereal shipments in 1893, there were numerous gentry petitions, primarily from provinces in the Central Agricultural region, in favor of the abolition of this differential tariff. These petitions had

<sup>28</sup> For gentry petitions on these matters, see TsGIA, fond 593, opis' 1, delo 47, "Po khodataistvam dvorianskikh sobranii ob izmeneniikh nekotorykh statei ustava banka."

<sup>29</sup> There were petitions from the Central-Industrial (Moscow, Nizhni Novgorod), Central-Agricultural (Riazan', Orel, Chernigov, Voronezh), Southern and South-western (Poltava, Khar'kov, Ekaterinoslav, and Bessarabia) regions. Only one province east of the Volga (Samara) petitioned on this issue. See *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> TsGIA, fond 593, opis' 1, delo 351, "O merakh k oblegcheniiu polozheniia zaemshchikov dvorianskogo banka i ob izmenenii poriadka ikh otvetstvennosti po zaimam 1896-1911 gg." l. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Solov'ev, pp. 219-220; original in Manuscript Division, Lenin Library, fond 126, k. 12, dnevnik A. A. Kireeva, zapis' 31 ianvaria 1896 g., l. 48.

<sup>32</sup> The ukaz was signed by Nicholas II on 29 May. Solov'ev, p. 245.

little effect until 1897, when the government decided to cut freight charges on short and intermediate distance grain shipments.<sup>33</sup> Yet this decision did not redress the fundamental grievance of the Central provinces—that differential tariffs, no matter how they might be computed, were inherently discriminatory and harmful to agriculture in Central Russia. Gentry spokesmen from Central Russia continued to press for changes in the government's railroad policy until 1905, but were unable to achieve their goals because of their weakness as an interest group.<sup>34</sup> During the 1890s various members of the middle stratum of the landed nobility tried to convince the government to rewrite land inheritance rules on their behalf. Until 1899 these petitions were frustrated by the political ineptitude of the authors, by large landowners who opposed new inheritance laws, and by slow-moving government study commissions. Even the entail law of 1899 afforded little comfort to the middle gentry, whose estates it was designed to save from parcelization and sale.<sup>35</sup>

It is fair to say that the grain price depression of the 1880s and 1890s seriously affected the gentry economy throughout Russia, and that the gentry responded to the depression by pressuring the government to modify economic policy in favor of the privileged rural elite. This political pressure from the nobility was, in large measure, ineffective because the landed gentry failed to constitute an organized political pressure group and did not elaborate a coherent program in opposition to the Ministry of Finance's plan of industrialization at the expense of the rural sector. Yet this political failure did not mean the end of the gentry opposition. Old grievances were never redressed and new, more severe problems appeared as the agrarian crisis wore on. Thus, despite the confusion in their ranks and their disagreements over specific issues, the gentry were certain of one thing: the government had not discovered a solution to the agrarian crisis as a whole, or to any of its various symptoms. Frustration with government policy and despair over mounting economic troubles were the primary sources of the nobility's disaffection with the old regime.

<sup>33</sup> TsGIA, fond 1233, opis' 1, delo 68, l. 36. "Spravka po voprosu o zhelezno-dorozhnykh tarifakh na perevozku khlebykh gruzov."

<sup>34</sup> In 1902 and 1903 forty-three district committees on the needs of agriculture petitioned the government to change the differential tariff formulae. Twenty-seven called for a complete abolition of the differential tariffs. These committees seem to have acted out of a desire to raise agricultural incomes in their respective provinces. However, forty-three committees (out of more than four hundred) could not force the government to alter its policies.

<sup>35</sup> On the government commission which studied the entail law, see Solov'ev, pp. 203-212. On the entail question, see Thomas Stewart Hause, "State and Gentry in Russia, 1861-1917" (unpublished dissertation, Stanford University, 1974).

Another important reason for gentry disaffection was that the government failed to solve the peasant question. It has often been said that gentry landowners lived in a sea of peasants, and this was certainly true. It was in the interest of noble landowners to make sure that the sea remained calm, that the peasants did not sweep away gentry lives and property in one vast tidal wave of discontent. Before 1891 the gentry were reasonably secure against a repetition of the Pugachev rebellion, the great eighteenth-century peasant uprising that had shaken the Catherinean state. In fact, there had been only two periods of real tension between peasants and landowners in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first had followed directly on the heels of the Emancipation, and had lasted from 1861 to December 1863.<sup>36</sup> The second period of tension lasted from 1878 to 1884.<sup>37</sup> The gentry had survived both these worrisome periods, albeit with substantial economic losses on some estates. Although reformers had actively debated ways to reorganize the peasant economy during the 1870s and 1880s, their voices were unheeded by most nobles.

The complacency of gentry landowners concerning the peasant question was shattered by the famine of 1891–1892. The famine, according to Shmuel Galai, “suddenly exposed both the stagnation of Russian agriculture, which on the eve of the twentieth century was still completely dependent on the vagaries of nature and the cruelty and incompetence of the tsarist government.”<sup>38</sup> Contemporary observers believed that the famine led to a revitalization of political thought and to a radicalization of society. A. A. Kizevetter wrote in his memoirs:

The horrors of the 1891 famine year represented to society the results of the preceding period of “counter-reforms,” when the government had pursued a policy that did not answer the needs and demands of the people, and when society had grown cold to questions of state life and

<sup>36</sup> The army was employed on 619 occasions to suppress peasant disturbances between June 1861 and December 1863. See P. A. Zaionchkovskii, *Otmena krepостного права v Rossii*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1960), p. 211. See also V. L. Gorn, “Krest’ianskoe dvizhenie do 1905 g.,” in L. Martov, et al., eds., *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie v Rossii v nachale XX-go veka*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1909), p. 230.

<sup>37</sup> For a breakdown of peasant rebellions between 1875 and 1884 see P. A. Zaionchkovskii, *Krizis samoderzhaviiia na rubezhe 1870–1880-kh godov* (Moscow, 1964), p. 10, and pp. 480–481. The tension during this period did not derive so much from the extent of the movement itself as from the apprehension that the peasants would begin to follow instructions of the Populist groups *Land and Liberty* and *The People’s Will*.

<sup>38</sup> S. Galai, *The Liberation Movement in Russia, 1900–1905* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 23. In his recent book on the famine, Richard Gardner Robbins disputes the view that the government’s reaction to the crisis was inept and callous. See *Famine in Russia 1891–1892: The Imperial Government Responds to a Crisis* (New York, 1975).

had acted as an indifferent observer of everything occurring in the political arena. Work in the famine led society out of this temporary paralysis.<sup>39</sup>

By 1896 the peasant question had become a matter for debate even among normally conservative gentry leaders. In February and March 1896 twenty-seven provincial gentry marshals met in St. Petersburg to prepare a statement on the needs of the landed elite. The marshals' memorandum, which as a whole reflected the conservative position on the reforms of 1861 and on subsequent government policy, nevertheless criticized government treatment of the peasantry. The marshals mentioned that depression-level prices for grain harmed peasant producers, who had a hard time meeting their fiscal obligations. The marshals pointed to the high peasant arrears on redemption payments as evidence. The whole of rural Russia was declining and becoming impoverished. According to the marshals, "Landowners, peasants, and grain traders alike are lost in a maze of debts and arrears, with no way out since no one pays attention to their needs and problems."<sup>40</sup>

The gentry marshals did not work out a program of reforms for the peasant economy; however, a number of zemstvo assemblies who considered the plight of the peasantry between 1894 and 1898 did elaborate reform programs.<sup>41</sup> The most frequently mentioned proposal to ameliorate the peasant problem was some form of peasant resettlement on sparsely populated or virgin territory. Ten zemstvo assemblies defended

<sup>39</sup> A. A. Kizeveter, *Na rubezhe dvoukh stoletii. Vospominaniia 1881-1894* (Prague, 1929), p. 189.

<sup>40</sup> TsGIA, fond 593, opis' 1, delo 351, l. 4. "Zapiska gubernskikh predvoditelei dvorianstva, vyzvannykh, s Vysochaishego ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva soizvoleniia, g. Ministrom vnutrennikh del v soveshchaniu o nuzhdakh dvorianskogo zemlevladieniia."

<sup>41</sup> The zemstvo petitions were responses to a questionnaire distributed by the Ministry of Agriculture in late 1894. See *Ministerstvo zemledeliia i gosudarstvennykh imushchestv, Nuzhdy sel'skogo khoziaistva i mery ikh udovletvoreniia po otzyvam zemskikh sobranii* (St. Petersburg, 1899), pp. 158-169.

The response of zemstvos to the ministry's questionnaire and the prominence of the zemstvos in provincial politics before 1905 raise the problem of how the gentry in non-zemstvo provinces perceived the agrarian crisis in general, and the peasant question in particular. This question is difficult to answer because gentry in the nine Western non-zemstvo provinces operated under heavy political constraints. They lacked both zemstvos and elected provincial gentry marshals. (The government had decided to appoint gentry marshals in the Western provinces after the Polish rebellion of 1863-1864, in which many Western nobles had taken part.) Only in 1902, with the creation of the Witte committees on the needs of agriculture, could the Western gentry speak out on important issues. Most opinions expressed in the Witte committee meetings could be classified as conservative, or ultra-conservative. Because of the nationality problem in the Western provinces, the government derived little comfort from the opinions of Western gentry spokesmen, however conservative these opinions might be at first blush.

peasant resettlement under various guises.<sup>42</sup> Another proposal was to reduce the fiscal pressure on the peasantry. Three provincial assemblies argued that the easiest way to do this was to make credit more available to peasants through the Peasant Land Bank.<sup>43</sup> The Nizhni Novgorod provincial zemstvo asserted that the government should cut indirect taxes on such items as kerosene, matches, tea, and sugar.

Other plans for reform of the rural economy included the abolition of the communal system of land tenure. The commune had been considered essential by most government officials throughout the nineteenth century. The challenge to this old institution made in the St. Petersburg zemstvo assembly was quite radical by contemporary standards.<sup>44</sup>

Yet zemstvo criticisms of prevailing institutions, however bold they may have seemed to their authors or to their readership in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, were endorsed by a relatively small minority of activists. The bulk of the gentry did not become interested in serious reform until the spring of 1902 when the peasants of Poltava and Khar'kov provinces rose against their landlords.

The 1902 uprising was one of the most interesting episodes in the revival of the peasant movement.<sup>45</sup> In early March peasants on the Karlovka state of Duke Meklenburg-Strelitskii assumed control of over 2000 desiatins of land.<sup>46</sup> They opened up the seigneur's warehouses, took seed grain, and began the spring planting without authorization. Between 9 and 26 March the peasants appropriated foodstuffs from various potato cellars on the domain. These Karlovka raids culminated on the night of 26 March when peasants carried off potatoes and 800 poods of fodder. By 28 March grain seizures had spread to neighboring estates. By 31 March 15 estates had been raided in Konstantinograd and Poltava districts.

Before the end of March peasants had acted in relatively small bands, but on 31 March over 100 peasants from various volosts fell upon the Durnovo estate in the village Chutovo, near the Poltava-Khar'kov

<sup>42</sup> The ten were: Vologda, Viatka, St. Petersburg, Tula, Kherson, Kursk, Samara, Pskov, and Smolensk provincial assemblies, and kologriivskii uезд assembly (Kostroma province).

<sup>43</sup> Moscow, Perm'. and St. Petersburg provincial zemstvo assemblies.

<sup>44</sup> *Nuzhdy sel'skogo khoziaistva . . .*, p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> The documents on the Poltava and Khar'kov uprisings have been published in Khar'kovskii oblastnoi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv, Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv SSSR v Leningrade, *Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie v poltavskoi i khar'kovskoi guberniakh v 1902 g. Sbornik dokumentov* (Khar'kov, 1961). The best article on the uprisings is L. E. Emeliak, "Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie v poltavskoi i khar'kovskoi guberniakh v 1902 g.," *Istoricheskie zapiski* 38 (1951): 154-175.

<sup>46</sup> The economy of the Meklenburg-Strelitskii estate is analyzed by A. M. Anfimov, "Karlovsкое imenie Meklenburg-Strelitskikh v kontse XIX—nachale XX v.," *Materialy po istorii sel'skogo khoziaistva i krest'ianstva SSSR*, 5 (Moscow, 1967),

border. Before the peasant uprising ended 56 estates in Poltava province (17 in Konstantinograd and 39 in Poltava district) and 24 in Khar'kov had been damaged.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of the 1902 uprising from the gentry perspective was not the extent of the peasant movement, but its deliberate character. According to one contemporary source, the peasants acted calmly with complete confidence that they were right. With the village elder and the hundred man in the lead they approached manors and estate headquarters and asked for the keys to warehouses and storage areas. Usually the landowner was advised one day in advance that the peasants intended to take grain.<sup>48</sup> The peasants managed such deliberation because they had convinced themselves that the tsar supported them, and that soon there would be "no more gentry and no more peasants."<sup>49</sup> Even when confronted by army detachments peasants stood their ground. One captain informed a group of rebellious peasants that his orders were to shoot if they did not disperse. The peasants answered: "You are lying. You won't dare shoot. The tsar did not give you that order." After several peasants were shot, the survivors warned the captain that "officers will be held strictly responsible by His Majesty, the Emperor."<sup>50</sup>

The first gentry reaction to the peasant uprising was panic. Khar'kov landowners abandoned their estates for the safety of the provincial capital, where they might store their valuables and drown their anxieties in vodka. Local observers reported that Khar'kov hotels were filled to capacity.<sup>51</sup> In Poltava the district gentry marshals and governor pleaded for the government to declare an emergency alert throughout the province.<sup>52</sup>

The fear and trembling of landowners continued long after the peasantry had acquiesced to superior force, long after 1,092 peasants had been tried for participating in the disorders.<sup>53</sup> In summer 1902 gentry leaders met with officials from zemstvo and municipal assemblies to deliberate about the needs of agriculture. These were the so-called Witte committees, named after the Minister of Finance who sought to divine local sentiment concerning rural problems.<sup>54</sup> Incidentally, the protocols

<sup>47</sup> Emeliak, "Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie," pp. 163-164.

<sup>48</sup> *Iskra*, 1902, no. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Gorn, *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie*, p. 247.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>51</sup> Emeliak, p. 170; *Iskra*, 1902, no. 21.

<sup>52</sup> Emeliak, p. 170; TsGIA, fond 1405, opis' 103, 1902 g., delo 9342, p. 44.

<sup>53</sup> 493 peasants were tried in Khar'kov province; 254 in Konstantinograd district and 345 in Poltava district, Poltava province. Emeliak, p. 172; TsGIA, fond 1405, opis' 103, delo 9342, p. 162.

<sup>54</sup> See Solov'ev, Chapter 4; M. S. Simonova, "Zemsko-liberal'naia fronda (1902-1903 gg.)," *Istoricheskie zapiski* 91 (1973): 150-216.

of these local committee meetings are comparable in some ways to the French *cahiers de doléances* since they represent the only systematic attempt to consult society before the end of the absolutist system.

In Poltava and Khar'kov provinces the gentry were concerned that order be established after the uprising. Yet despite their general conservatism, the gentry pressed the government for economic and social reforms. The gentry had evidently realized that repression alone was no solution to the peasant problem, and that without reform that would pacify the peasants the regime could never protect the nobility. These sentiments were expressed clearly in the report by the Konstantinograd local committee. The committee contrasted the security of farmers in Western Europe to the insecurity of Russian landowners. In the West, even in France with its liberal constitutional order:

You travel on fine roads, down alleys of fruit trees bearing great loads of fruit, and it never occurs to anyone to knock down someone else's fruit. On the roadsides you see rows of wonderful grain, marvelous artificial meadows . . . and nowhere is there evidence of illegal grazing. There are not even any guards or horse patrols. Everywhere you see cattle and horses and when you ask if there is a problem with theft, you encounter surprised and uncomprehending stares. Nothing of the sort occurs here.<sup>55</sup>

In Russia, the Konstantinograd committee found, the situation was quite different. Not only was fruit stolen, the fields poorly controlled, and the harvest insecure, but livestock was forever disappearing. The better the horses, the greater the chance of theft, the committee noted ruefully. Indeed "the landowner spends more than half his time guarding his estate [during the growing season]." Yet if the landowners did succeed in preventing theft for a time, then fate would prepare harsh revenge. The peasants would "reduce a threshing room to ashes, or turn a barn with livestock into cinder."<sup>56</sup>

How could the problem be solved? The Konstantinograd committee recommended a more efficient police force and strict enforcement of laws. But this was not enough. The government would have to abolish the peasant communes, give land to the poorest peasants through resettlement programs, and make the peasants legal equals of other social classes. Even the conservative gentry of Konstantinograd district, with all their concern for economic security and property rights, advocated fundamental economic reforms.<sup>57</sup> The advocacy of reform was quite common in other normally conservative districts as well. For example, of the slightly less than two hundred district committees that discussed

<sup>55</sup> *Trudy mestnykh komitetov o nuzhdakh sel'skokhoziaistvennoi promyshlennosti*, 32, Poltavskaiia guberniia (St. Petersburg, 1903), p. 256.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 259-264.

the problem of communal landownership, the great majority called for an end to communal tenure.<sup>58</sup> The economic problems of the peasantry were debated in nearly every province, and committees offered a panoply of solutions from bank reforms to grain elevator construction, from reduced tax rates for the peasantry, to higher taxes for industry.

If the bulk of the conservative gentry moved to support economic reforms in the wake of the 1902 peasant uprising, the liberal minority gradually shifted further to the left. At first the liberals concentrated on political reforms as opposed to economic ones. In May 1902, under the direction of the Moscow zemstvo activist D. N. Shipov, 52 zemstvo leaders determined on a five-point program for action during the Witte committee meetings. Four of five points concerned political matters: peasant legal equality, educational reform, zemstvo reform, and free discussion in the Witte committees. The Shipov program did not mention the peasant land problem at all.<sup>59</sup>

In mid-June 1902 P. B. Struve published the first number of the liberal journal *Osvobozhdenie*. Besides Struve's well-known editorial, the journal contained two important statements: one by constitutionalists and one by zemstvo activists. The constitutionalist program favored individual rights, equality before the law, civil freedom, and popular representation. The constitutionalists attempted to finesse the peasant question by arguing that there was no sense in writing a catalog of popular grievances. These grievances would be taken up by the legislature after political freedom had been won.<sup>60</sup> The statement by zemstvo activists expressed disappointment with the autocracy's political, social, and economic policies. However, the zemstvo activists avoided mention of constitutional reform, and made no direct endorsement of economic change. The zemstvo group did assert that "the recent agrarian disorders, which produced so many victims and so much violence, especially force us to melancholy reflection. . . . The disorders have been caused

<sup>58</sup> Richard Charques, *The Twilight of Imperial Russia* (Oxford, 1958), p. 75.

<sup>59</sup> The zemstvo leaders are listed in D. N. Shipov, *Vospominaniia i dumy o perezhitom* (Moscow, 1918), pp. 160-161. The program is summarized on pp. 167-168.

It should be noted that Shipov and many other zemstvo activists remained on the right wing of the liberal movement until 1905. The "Shipovtsy" represented those landowners who supported changes in the political order short of the inauguration of constitutional government. These landowners were aware of the agrarian crisis and concerned about peasant disorders, and they believed that the zemstvos could resolve these fundamental problems if the government would institute juridical and educational reforms and would avoid interference with zemstvo activity. It is fair to take the statement by zemstvo activists in *Osvobozhdenie* [see below] as an accurate reflection of Shipov's sentiments.

<sup>60</sup> "Ot russkikh konstitutsionalistov," *Osvobozhdenie*, no. 1 (18 June 1902), pp. 7-12.

by our financial and economic politics, which squeeze the last juices out of the countryside, by the obstacles to popular education, by the absence of order, by the popular mistrust of the judicial system."<sup>61</sup> Although they lacked a specific program, the zemstvo activists did appreciate the severity of the peasant problem.

Few liberal district committees went beyond moderately reformist programs that they hoped would assuage peasant dissatisfaction. One of the exceptions was the Voronezh committee. It called upon the government to establish representative institutions at the local and provincial levels, and a national zemstvo council at the national level. It also pressed for radical economic reforms including the nationalization of land. The Voronezh committee was so radical that Minister of Internal Affairs Pleve decided to arrest two of its members, and to prevent publication of its protocols.<sup>62</sup>

The Voronezh committee was important not only for its courageous example, but for its anticipation of the 1903 liberal land program. Driven partly by fear of peasant revolution, but chiefly by the need to win the political support of the increasingly radical intelligentsia, the liberal leadership agreed at the Switzerland summer conference in summer 1903 to link liberalism and socialism in their land program. In an article in *Osvobozhdenie*, written by S. Bulgakov, the liberals proposed to solve the peasant question by government-sponsored land redistribution<sup>63</sup> If necessary, the government would confiscate gentry land and dole it out to needy peasants. Since the autocracy was incapable of land redistribution as well as political reform, it would have to be overthrown. Political freedom and land distribution thus became twin pillars of the liberal program for rural Russia.

For gentry liberals adherence to the 1903 program meant a conscious rejection of class privilege, and an acceptance of the European revolutionary tradition. As the program stated,

The Russian liberation movement must take as its model the Great French Revolution which destroyed the vestiges of feudalism. . . . Generally the fall of the autocracy must be accompanied, in our opinion, by the eradication of the very terms "nobility" and "peasantry." All social barriers must be categorically broken.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> "Otkrytoe pis'mo ot gruppy zemskikh deiatelei," in *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>62</sup> Simonova, pp. 174-179.

<sup>63</sup> "K agrarnomu voprosu," *Osvobozhdenie*, no. 33 (19 October 1903): 153-158.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157, i. For a solid, but unsympathetic, treatment of the liberal program before the 1905 revolution, see K. F. Shatsillo, "Formirovanie programmy zemskogo liberalizma i ee bankrotstvo nakanune pervoi russkoi revoliutsii (1901-1904 gg.)," *Istoricheskie zapiski* 97 (1976): 50-98.

With the turn of gentry conservatives to reform in 1902 and the radicalization of gentry liberals in 1902–1903, one precondition for revolution had been created: the ruling class had become disaffected from the regime and no longer supported the *status quo*.<sup>65</sup> Even so, the fragmentation of the ruling class between conservative and liberal elements deprived the elite of unity just at a time when united support for a reform program might have compelled the regime to accept changes. In 1902–1903 it was still barely possible to avert revolution through reform. By 1905 it was impossible to stave off popular demonstrations.

Because autocratic absolutism had failed to solve the agrarian crisis and could no longer guarantee the safety of gentry landowners, the Russian monarchy discovered in 1905 that it had no refuge under heaven but its army. After much bloodshed the monarchy defeated rebellious workers and peasants, but it paid a high price. Nicholas II accepted a constitution repugnant to him and signed the death warrant of absolutism. Only a decade before the 1905 revolution, Nicholas had spoken of the senseless dreams of constitutionalists.<sup>66</sup> Now the dreams were no longer senseless, but prophecies fulfilled.

<sup>65</sup> I do not mean to imply here that liberals were ready to rush to the barricades in 1902–1903. The process of liberal political organization and ideological development was exceedingly slow. In January 1904 the First Congress of the Union of Liberation was held in St. Petersburg. In early November zemstvo constitutionalists met in Moscow and endorsed a political platform that called for reforms, but not for a constituent assembly. From November to January 1905 thirty-three political banquets were organized, most of them by the Union of Liberation. These banquets adopted resolutions favoring limited political reforms, and, in some cases, a constituent assembly. What is important, one is convinced, is that well before the outbreak of popular demonstrations in 1905, the mobilization of political liberals—including members of the landed gentry—was well under way. These liberals would later pressure the government for a constitution and would emerge triumphant in elections in the First Duma. On Russian liberalism before 1905, see Galai, *The Liberation Movement in Russia*; N. Smith, "The Constitutional-Democratic Movement in Russia, 1902–1906" (unpublished dissertation, University of Illinois, 1958); Gregory Freeze, "A National Liberation Movement and the Shift in Russian Liberalism 1901–1903," *Slavic Review* 28, no. 1 (March 1969): 81–91. On the banquet campaign, see Terence Emmons, "Russia's Banquet Campaign" *California Slavic Studies* 10 (1977): 45–86.

<sup>66</sup> On 17 January 1895 at his own marriage reception Nicholas II made the following statement:

I am aware that of late, in some zemstvo assemblies, the voices of persons who have been carried away by *senseless dreams* of the participation of zemstvo representatives in the affairs of internal administration have been heard. Let it be known to all that, while devoting all my energies to the good of the people, I shall maintain the principle of autocracy just as firmly and unflinchingly as did my unforgettable father.

*Polnoe sobranie rechei Nikolaiia II, 1894–1906* (St. Petersburg, 1910), p. 7. This remark was interpreted as a categorical rejection of the constitutional aspirations of Russian liberals.