

The Radical Right in Late Imperial Russia: Dreams of a True Fatherland?

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Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an independent Russia, much scholarship, both in Russia and the West, has been concerned with the pre-revolutionary monarchist and nationalist parties which had attracted relatively little attention earlier.

Beginning in 1904–5, Tsarist Russia faced its most serious crisis since the Time of Troubles in the early 17th century. Defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, a wave of assassinations of officials and the outbreak of mass rebellion among peasants, workers, sailors and soldiers reduced the country to near chaos, especially during the autumn and winter of 1905–6. The regime responded both by making concessions (notably the creation of an elected legislative assembly, the State Duma), and by employing traditional repressive measures through the police and the army. Meanwhile supporters of monarchy, who had hitherto been politically almost entirely passive, began for the first time to feel that to save monarchy and empire they needed to organise themselves, create political movements and mobilise the mass of the population to defend the monarchy against the socialist and liberal parties.

It is true that some monarchist organisations existed prior to 1905, reflecting the fears some felt about political stability already then, but they tended to be highly conservative and traditionalist; they prioritised the maintenance of existing hierarchies and worked through personal links at court and among the nobility. Those formed during and after 1905, on the contrary, were infused with a sense of immediate crisis; they aimed at mass membership and active participation in national politics. Most notable in this respect was the Union of Russian People (henceforth URP), which at its height claimed some tens of thousands of members, and had active branches in many provincial towns.

George Gilbert's book examines the most important of the movements which emerged from this wave of political activity. He analyses them from a variety of viewpoints: their formation and principal personalities, their political programmes and tactics, their relationships with the existing authorities, their attempts to draw in peasants and workers, the symbolism of their appeals and of their public events. He draws on a wide variety of sources: central and local newspapers, contemporary brochures and other right-wing publications,

together with the archive funds of the main movements and their leaders, of the political police and of the Emperor. He also places the Russian experience in a wider European context, indicating parallels with analogous movements in Germany, France, Spain and Romania.

As Gilbert shows, there was an inherent contradiction in the Rightists' political aims. The very existence of monarchist mass movements (they avoided the subversive word 'party') indicated a lack of public faith in the imperial government's capacity to preserve public order. In other words, they had little confidence in the very regime they were trying to preserve. Moreover, their mode of political activity contradicted their professed aims. Hitherto, in the eyes of the regime, workers and peasants were supposed to be passive subjects, respectful and obedient to the authorities' commands. Encouraging them to play an active and independent role in politics implicitly challenged the regime's whole *raison d'être*, especially since this mobilisation encouraged the struggle, sometimes violent, against internal 'enemies', notably Jews and students. The URP, the largest such organisation, was especially good at mass mobilisation, but also especially thuggish: it spread virulent anti-Jewish propaganda and incited pogroms, it murdered two Kadet deputies of the First Duma, and attempted to assassinate Prime Minister Witte. Some Rightists, then, were in effect promoting disorder to defend order.

The same ambivalence marked the Rightists' overall strategy. They wanted to maintain autocratic monarchist rule in a country where the monarch had himself created an elected legislative assembly and given it the power to both initiate and veto laws. How were they to relate to the Duma? Some took the view that the Duma was an illegitimate aberration and should be abolished as soon as possible; others that the Duma existed and that one must make use of it to spread Rightist ideas. These tensions caused a split in the URP in 1908. Whereas the leader, Aleksandr Dubrovin, stuck to the line that the Duma had no right to exist, a faction led by Vladimir Purishkevich, a Duma deputy from Bessarabia, broke away and formed the Union of Archangel Michael, maintaining that, since the Duma did in fact exist, the Rightists should use it to spread their propaganda. Not that Purishkevich had the slightest intention of augmenting the Duma's reputation or influence; on the contrary, he made a long series of demagogic and inflammatory speeches designed mainly to attract media attention. (In 2016 one is bound to think of his similarity to Donald Trump.)

Another right-wing nationalist movement in 1909 went further and actually decided to take the Duma seriously. Its leaders formed a Nationalist Party (using the taboo word 'party' for the first time), with its centre in Kiev and its members mostly from the western provinces where Polish landowners were dominant in the countryside and there were a large number of Jews in the towns. Their aim was to work with the government of Prime Minister Stolypin and save a modified (even – whisper it not – constitutional) monarchy, using the Duma as a means of attracting popular support and communicating with the public, rather than as a grudgingly tolerated irritant. Their outlook was no less anti-Semitic than that of most Rightists, but their strategy was quite different.

Given the Rightists' contradictory principles and practices, it is natural that the authorities' response to them was ambivalent. Some governors, mayors and police chiefs, beset by mass violence and terrorism on all sides, were delighted to find any political organisation prepared to support them; others looked on them, with some misgivings, as at least a lesser evil than the socialists; yet others abhorred their irresponsible behaviour and regarded their mass demonstrations with positive disapproval, as they were always liable to turn violent. Stolypin began in 1906 by welcoming their support and offering them subsidies, but gradually became disillusioned by the brash and impetuous behaviour of their leaders, as well as by their factionalism and corruption. Besides, with the decline of the revolutionary movement from 1907 their support no longer seemed indispensable.

One of the most valuable sections in the book is the comparative study of three regions, which shows that the Rightists had most success, and were most violent, where they faced ethnic diversity (especially a large Jewish population), a rapidly changing and unpredictable economic situation and a well-organised revolutionary movement. This applied especially to Odessa and Kiev, while in Astrakhan', where there were fewer Jews and the revolutionaries were less active, the monarchist associations formed relatively late and

remained weaker. In Odessa and Kiev, moreover, the authorities were especially irresolute: facing violence from both right and left, they tended to devote fewer resources to suppressing the former; even if they could not wholeheartedly approve of it, they passively tolerated it.

A concept all Rightists could revere was the *narod*, the Russian people. But their visions of the Russian people differed greatly. The more traditionally minded looked on them as the mainstay of a great multi-ethnic empire – in which case non-Russians had their place among them, provided they spoke at least some Russian and acknowledged the legitimacy of Russian imperial authority. (It was always doubtful whether Jews and Poles quite fitted into this picture, but on that matter too views could differ.) Increasingly, though, Rightists were adopting an ethnicised and sometimes even racist view, proclaiming 'Russia for the Russians' (which would automatically include Ukrainians and Belorussians), and viewing all non-Russians within the empire as potential enemies. Such an approach created dividing lines within the population which the more traditionalist abhorred. No coherent 'dream of a true fatherland' was ever convincingly articulated.

Everyone agreed that Jews were the main 'enemy within'. But why they were was not so clear. For some activists it was their commercial, financial and professional success which made them such dangerous rivals for 'simple' Russians (ignoring the large majority of Russian Jews who were actually impoverished too). Others objected mainly to their religion, while a minority, but a growing minority, found their racial identity repellent. Russian anti-Semitism was just beginning to take on the racist characteristics found in European fascist parties a little later.

An interesting chapter is devoted to Rightists' social activism, probably the aspect of their work which we previously knew least about. Many of them viewed Russia as a society in decay, degraded by hooliganism, alcoholism and sexual debauchery. These Rightists were prepared to join with colleagues of very different political views to support temperance movements, open tea rooms and libraries, and organise public lectures on improving themes. Yet others organised funding to support poor peasants and workers, as well as maimed army veterans. Most Rightists were worried by what they considered the subversive educational programmes promoted by Western-educated liberals in the universities and secondary schools. They proposed as an alternative a syllabus centring on the 'hard' sciences, the Orthodox religion and the glories of Russian culture, from Pushkin to Dostoevskii and from Glinka to Chaikovskii.

The land question was a tough issue for Rightists to handle. They wanted a mass peasant membership, but the evidence of 1905–6 suggested quite clearly that what most peasants wanted was to expropriate land belonging to private landowners. Not only would this disrupt the traditional social order, but it was also the policy adopted by the hated socialists and radical liberal Kadet Party. At the Fourth Congress of the URP in 1908, the policy of total expropriation in favour of the peasants was propounded by the flamboyant and irrepressible monk Ilidor, and the subsequent discussion was so heated that delegates almost came to blows. In the end the congress passed a compromise motion recommending the transfer of land to the peasants, but only after the Tsar's ratification.

Gilbert does give some attention to the Orthodox Church, but might have treated the subject more systematically. As he points out, church hierarchs were ambivalent, like their secular counterparts. While Rightist movements organised processions carrying icons and church banners, the behaviour of the participants was sometimes irreverent and offensive to the pious. The Procurator of the Holy Synod complained to the Archbishop of Kherson that members of the URP accompanying an Easter procession had sung not only Easter hymns but also 'verses from operettas' which 'appalled the majority of the pilgrims' (pp. 98-9). On the other hand, most of the priests elected to the Duma were Rightists and some of them members of the URP. Moreover, one of the church's best-known monasteries, the Pochaev Lavra in Volynia province, actually functioned as the local branch of the URP.

Two organisations which would have benefited from greater attention in this book were the United Nobility and the upper house of the legislature, the State Council. The United Nobility was, like all Rightist associations, half way between a traditional and a modern form of politics. On the one hand it represented

what was traditionally the leading *soslovie* (estate) of Russian society; on the other it took up the economic interests of large landowners facing a growing challenge from the rivalry of merchants and even peasant cooperatives. It was both a systematic cabal of nobles with connections in high places and an interest group speaking for large commercial enterprises. Many of its leaders were also involved in Rightist politics, and used the platform it presented to obstruct some of the reforming measures going through the Duma.

The State Council, like the Duma, had the right to veto legislation, and it utilised that prerogative to block some of those same reforming measures. Its right wing – people like former Interior Minister P.N. Durnovo and former Tauride governor V.F. Trepov – had much in common with the more staid and less populist Rightists. As Gilbert points out, their opposition to the Western Zemstvo bill in 1911 was a decisive turning point in the Rightists' fortunes. This bill highlighted one of the salient dilemmas in Rightist politics: should one support one of the traditional pillars of the empire, the noble estate, or the Russian ethnos? In the western provinces most nobles were Poles, while the majority of the population was Ukrainian and Belorussian – in Rightist understanding, Russian. To introduce zemstvos there thus required either giving preference to Poles or democratising the electoral curiae so as to ensure the dominance of the 'Russian' majority. One could not do both together. The State Council right wing opted for traditional noble privilege and blocked the bill. Stolypin, with the support of the Nationalists, artificially (and unconstitutionally) used emergency laws to force the bill through in its Duma version, an action which lost him the support of many Rightists and weakened those who hoped to promote nationalist policies through the Duma.

Gilbert is good on the whole on drawing parallels with other European countries. But there is one intriguing distinction which he ignores. In France, Germany and Spain army and naval officers played a leading role in right-wing politics. This was not so in Russia, where the separate system of military education led most cadets to assume that the existing empire was eternal, that all politics was illegitimate and that they in particular should have nothing to do with it. Although their attitudes had much in common with those of the Rightists, nearly all of them held aloof from politics of any kind. That was to change in 1917, when the monarchy had fallen, but by that time their intervention was counter-productive and helped to precipitate the victory of the Bolsheviks. Their apolitical mentality was further to cost the Whites dearly during the civil war, when their military leaders revealed their utter political incompetence.

Although this book has its lacunae, it offers a good general guide to the radical Right. Moreover, it must be said that the Rightist phenomenon was a complex one, and no scholar has yet succeeded in covering all its aspects. Gilbert comes to the conclusion that the Russian Rightists prefigured European fascism in a number of respects, but never formed a fully fascist movement, as they were operating not within a divided and corrupt parliamentary regime which they could wholeheartedly oppose, but under a semi-autocratic monarchy which on the whole they supported.

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