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The Crises of Late Imperial Russia and the Mobilization of Civil Society

Guest Editor's Introduction

Civil society institutions—independent courts and universities, public associations, and a society dedicated to freedom of conscience and of confession—emerged in response to the Great Reforms, war, and revolution to support the industrialization and modernization of Russia's agrarian society.

The topic of this issue of *Russian Studies in History* is society in late imperial Russia and its potential to adapt in a time of crisis. By late imperial Russia's "crisis," the authors have in mind the "top-down" reforms of the 1860s, the first Russian revolution of 1905, and World War I, all of which marked important stages for Russian society as it transformed from an estate-based [*soslovnoe*] to a civil society.

Here the authors ask themselves the following questions. How did these crises affect society? How did society work to defuse them, and how did it shape itself through that engagement? What type of society did structural

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reform, wars, and revolutions create in Russia; and how equal was it to a time of crisis?

The authors thus focus their attention on how the institutions of a civil society developed in prerevolutionary Russia. Russia's industrial revolution, urbanization, the emergence of a liberal bureaucracy and a middle class, the compilation of legislation that corresponded to the reality of an industrial society and conferred various rights on the population at large—the rights to an independent judiciary, freedom of religion, public assembly, and engagement in public meetings and publications—all had an influence on that long process.

The reforms of Alexander II, which prerevolutionary Russian historians dubbed "great" and Soviet historians called "bourgeois," constituted a significant stage in the development of a Russian public [*obshchestvennost'*]. Society's involvement in the drafting and implementation of the judicial reform of 1864 and in the activity of the legal institutions created at that time (in particular, the justice of the peace courts and jury trials) supply the topic for Aleksei Demichev's "Society and the Courts in Russia in the 1860s and the 1870s: Changing Mental Patterns and the Development of Civil Society Institutions." In his survey of essential legal planning and the role played in it by public figures, Demichev states that the judicial reform marked an important stage, one that stimulated the development of a civil society in Russia. That reform required the mobilization of resources, both official and social; and the Russian society that emerged from that mobilization was, in Demichev's view, no longer the same. It had developed a taste for independent courts accessible to the whole population, for a public and adversarial legal process. Demichev interprets the Judicial Statutes of 1864 as a set of documents that laid the legal foundations for one institution of a civil society: an independent, democratic, and publicly accessible court system.

The revolution of 1905–7 in Russia constituted the second stage of liberal reforms, which, although not called "great," were no less significant than the reforms of the 1860s and the 1870s to the development of a state based on law [*pravovoe gosudarstvo*] and a civil society. Aleksandr Safonov, the author of "The Right to Freedom of Conscience and of Confession in Late Imperial Russian Public Discourse: The View of a Legal Historian," examines Russian society's involvement in drafting reforms that would grant freedom of religion to the population at large. The reformers were well aware of the controversies over what constituted a religious confession and over the feasibility of introducing religious legislation in Russia that accorded with both the principles of a constitutional state and modern Western standards for religious freedom—controversies that caused deep rifts in Russian secular and ecclesiastical communities and among members of various faiths. The

reform aimed at granting the public the religious freedom without which it would be impossible to establish a civil society in multiconfessional Russia. Since religious organizations were an important civil institution, the accurate prioritization of relations between the state and religious establishments would determine the prospects for the construction of a civil society in Russia.

World War I subjected Russian civil society to yet another endurance test in which the militarization of the economy, the mobilization of all domestic resources for defense, and the reconstruction of the national economy to meet the requirements of a great power at war were important factors in the development of civil institutions. As Russia mobilized its resources for war, a uniquely mobilized society took shape. As Anatolii Ivanov and I show in our articles, this was both an efficient society that demonstrated the capacity for adaptation and for rapid transition to the military track and a politicized society embroiled in controversies that were tearing its populace apart.

Ivanov's "Russian Academia's Defense Projects During World War I" explores the role played by professors and university-level instructors to support the country's scientific, technical, and ideological potential in wartime. It also illustrates how that work affected the educational institutions that employed these scholars. Ivanov notes that the war brought fundamental change to professors' everyday lives, "which went from purely academic to tightly dovetailed with the everyday defensive, socioeconomic, and ideological needs of a state at war." At the same time, Ivanov believes that the war left an "imprint on the political culture of Russia's liberal academics by depleting" their trust in monarchical government and causing them to put their faith in the ideals of a bourgeois republic, which explains the events of February 1917 and the Provisional Government's rise to power.

Another important part of the Russian Empire's defensive potential was its public organizations. My "The Public and the Organization of Aid to Refugees During World War I: Institutional and Legal Aspects" deals with the involvement of the Russian public in resolving the refugee problem, which was one of the farthest-reaching and most significant wartime issues. Refugees made up approximately 5 percent of the Russian Empire's entire population—double the size of the industrial proletariat in 1917 and three times the number of Russians killed in the war (where losses totaled two million). I show that the mobilization of Russian civil society to aid the victims of war was the result of smooth cooperation between the state and public organizations. Using refugee organizations as my example, I detail numerous instances in which public organizations combined their potential and resources with those of the state to help refugees and the displaced adapt after relocation to the central provinces. I also note (in a conclusion of some importance for the historical literature on World War I) that "the creation of a mobilized society

was largely inspired and guided by Russian society itself, which adopted the goals of supporting the state and bringing the war to a victorious end." That mobilized society built the framework within which organizations to assist Russian refugees and national societies to aid their Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian, and so on counterparts appeared and functioned. The mobilized society that emerged during the intensive militarization of Russian civil society's public sphere was unique in nature and in many ways pivotal to whatever success Russia would enjoy in World War I.

Thus, as evidenced by the material presented in this issue's four articles, certain critical periods in late imperial Russian history provided the growing medium for the molding and reinforcement of such civil institutions as the justice of the peace courts and trials by jury created by the judicial reform of 1864, an updated Russian Orthodox Church (which underwent modernization in 1904 and 1905), universities that were granted autonomy during the war, and, not least, volunteer associations. These civil institutions, in turn, facilitated the adaptation of the Russian state and the Russian legal system during the industrialization of what had until then been an agrarian society.