Chapter 2

On some Observations by Max Weber about Long-Term Structural Features of Russian Policy*

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Remember the years 1904–05? They saw the outbreak of the war between Russia and Japan, a war which was disastrously lost by Russia after several naval battles—most notably Tsushima—in May 1905. This was the first defeat of a Great European imperialistic Power by an Asian competitor. They also saw, after a long period of profound social and political tensions, the first Russian Revolution of the 20th century. And according to the encyclopedias, the initial eruption of that revolutionary period in Russia dates back to the so-called “Bloody Sunday” in St. Petersburg on January 22 1905.1

As may sometimes happen in the complex and at times mysterious interrelations between the internal and external situations of a state, the deep seated constitutional and social tensions of the Russian Empire found an outlet through the war that pointed in two principal directions. On the one hand, this resulted in the constitutional projects of the Sojuz Osvoboždenija—the “Union of Liberation” of the exiled bourgeois elite2—and, on the other hand—terrorism, bloodshed, upheaval and revolt. The revolutionary movement, which was supported mainly by the Social Democrats, that is to say, the competing parties

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1 One of the recent books about the complex interrelations between state, society and economy in the period of war and revolution is Jan Kusber, Krieg und Revolution in Rußland 1904–1906. Das Militär im Verhältnis zu Wirtschaft, Autokratie und Gesellschaft (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des östlichen Europa, vol. 47), Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1997.

of the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, came close to the brink of overthrowing
the czarist state.

At that moment, the political opposition in Russia obviously struggled to
successfully achieve their constitutional goals; socialists strove towards a soviet
constitution, bourgeois politicians for a parliamentary and democratic constit-
tution. Confronted with the probability of such a drastic change in Russia,
many people in Western Europe—including Max Weber, who occasionally
classed himself with the democrats—felt electrified.

Perhaps some basic historical data may help to contextualize this discussion.³

In October 1905 the Czar promised to give his country a parliamentary
assembly and a constitution.

Simultaneously, he gave up his position as an absolute autocrat, that is, his
position as the supreme legislative, executive and judicial power of the state.
For the first time in its history, Russia was governed by a council of ministers
which was formed by departmental ministers and was presided over by the
prime minister. The latter was the only person who was entitled to approach,
and to be received by, the Czar.

In August and December 1905, the electoral laws for a Parliament called the
Imperial Duma were enacted by the Czar, a Parliament that, together with the
Imperial Council (an assembly of delegates of the feudal corporations and also
of appointees of the Czar), was to be involved in the process of legislation.

Following the elections in April 1906, the Duma assembled, with the bour-
geois Democrats as its strongest political group. It was their draft that formed
the basis of one of the bills for a new Russian Constitution,⁴ a bill that was,
however, rejected by the Czar. In June 1906 he dissolved the Duma. Only in May
1907 did a new Duma assemble.

But this is only a historical outline. It was during the period between Bloody
Sunday in St. Petersburg (January 1905) and the naval battle at Tsushima (May
1905) that Max Weber began studying Russia and the Russian Revolution.⁵ He

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³ This outline of the events of 1904/05 follows the article “Russisches Reich. Geschichte: Das
Kriegsjahr 1904/05,” in one of the best encyclopaedias of the time: Meyers Großes Konversations-


⁵ For Max Weber’s interest in Russia, cf. Mommsen’s introduction, ibid.; Wolfgang J. Mommsen,
Max Weber and German Politics 1890–1920, 2nd ed., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1984:
56ff.; Stefan Breuer’s review of recent literature on Weber in the journal Neue Politische Literatur