Political development in Russia was anomalous by nineteenth-century Western European standards, for a vigorous socialist movement pre-dated modern liberalism by more than a generation. Not until the end of the century would a social base and political sphere for liberal activity emerge. And until then theoretical justification for liberalism would also remain stunted. The growth of the liberal movement at the turn of the century was accompanied by the first serious attempts to substantiate its belief theoretically. This article will be devoted to an effort to elucidate that work.

Tsarist Russia was an environment which stifled liberalism. Its doctrines were in direct conflict with the state's autocratic ideology, but simple resistance to the regime could not be a satisfactory program for liberals, for they had no acceptable alternative to autocracy. In the West, liberals argued that given freedom to pursue its own rational self-interest, the responsible part of the nation, the only part which should be endowed with political rights, would institute policies that would broaden the scope for political initiative, respect individual autonomy, and lead to the greatest possible economic productivity. In Russia, however, means and ends did not coincide. The reforms of Alexander II showed that liberal goals—civil liberties, equal justice under the law, and an economic system based on competition and labor mobility—could be achieved only by an autocratic bureaucracy forcing change against the wishes and interests of the landowners, who constituted the only major social group capable of participation in political life. The extension of political power to them would have resulted in the continued enserfment of the peasantry. In other words, social reform and political emancipation contradicted each other, leaving no ground for a consistent, Western liberal position.¹

During the promulgation of Alexander's reforms a whiggish liberalism, concerned with winning a share of political power for the nobility to compensate

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for its economic losses, emerged. Such a doctrine could not strike root, however, for neither the government nor the radical intelligentsia would support it, and the planter-liberals were neither willing nor able to make common cause with the broad masses of the population, with whose interests their own clashed head-on. In the government, reformers knew that granting political power or influence to elected representatives of the nobility would destroy their own efforts to improve the lot of the peasants. After the government tired of its reform initiative and moved to the right, reactionary bureaucrats denounced as subversive any form of liberalism, however moderate, for its desire to shift the locus of decision-making outside the St. Petersburg chancelleries.

Liberalism fared no better among the radical intelligentsia, who soon came to use the word as a pejorative term. Public opinion within the intelligentsia quickly moved to the left, and liberalism was denounced as the self-interested creed of the wealthy. Moreover, Alexander Herzen’s disgust with the bourgeois tenor of life of Western Europe doubtless inspired a significant portion of the radical movement to scorn the self-regarding virtues praised by Bentham and Mill. Liberalism became associated in the public mind with bourgeois values and Manchester economics; with no powerful bourgeoisie able to impose these values on the rest of society, they were condemned.

Although the reforms demonstrated that Western liberal doctrines could not easily be applied to Russia, they also legitimated the idea of liberal political and social change; men born after 1860 would accept as natural the notion of the fundamental equality of all citizens and the desires for a free press, free speech and academic freedom. Moreover, the significant economic and social developments of the late nineteenth century made new political ideologies possible. Industrial growth provided Marxism with a popular base, albeit one that responded quite differently from the disciplined proletariat of Germany. It also brought to prominence an entrepreneurial class, with its own approach to the country’s dilemmas. Socially conservative, dependent on the state for subsidies and tariff policies, and fearful of working-class unrest, the Russian bourgeoisie was politically quite timid and ready to sanction repression for the sake of preserving order. This was not the milieu to bring forth the self-assured, self-righteous demands for political reform of Bright and Cobden. However, a segment of the Moscow industrialists, younger and less hidebound than most, formed the Progressive Party in 1912 under the leadership of P. P. Riabushinskii. This group effected a rapprochement with the liberal
