
Dominic Lieven's collective biography of 215 members of the Council of State appointed by Nicholas II between 1894 and 1914 is more than a substantive contribution to the growing literature on the Imperial civil service and the relationship of the nobility and the bureaucracy. It is also a revisionist challenge to much of the received wisdom on the social and political history of Imperial Russia. For Lieven, this group of individuals was the closest approximation to an "imperial ruling elite" that Russia produced, and it was recruited primarily from noble landowners whose ancestry reached into the Muscovite period. In claiming this, Lieven not only asks us to reconsider the traditional view of the Russian gentry as socially impermanent and economically unstable, but he also brings into question the emerging consensus in recent studies of the Russian bureaucracy that the Imperial civil service in the nineteenth century was becoming a social entity in its own right, divorced from the land and possessed of its own professional and service ethos. While accepting the possibility of this hypothesis for the civil service "as a whole" by 1900 (p. 25), Lieven dismisses its applicability to the governing circles of the Empire.

There is much to admire in Lieven's book, its core was adumbrated in his previously published articles and is now bracketed by more speculative chapters, a structure that manifests some rough edges. Lieven's study is by far the most sophisticated and evocative analysis of the turn of the century world of St. Petersburg officialdom and aristocratic high society in modern scholarship. The author copiously documents the diversity of mentalities and outlook within the Imperial civil service, its social and ethnic origins, cultural predilections, and educational and career patterns. The bureaucratic elite included aristocratic amateurs with a Whiggish orientation, pragmatic professionals, authoritarian elitists, and liberal moderates who favored the rule of law and institutions of representative government. Lieven is a master at analyzing personality in its social context, and his chapters on A. N. Kulomzin, P. N. Durnovo, and the Obolenskii brothers are models worthy of emulation.

Lieven convincingly demonstrates that the Russian bureaucracy comprised several overlapping political cultures. His warnings against facile generalizations about tsarist officialdom and the nature of the autocratic polity are well-taken, as is his contention that "Russia's rulers" belonged to the world of European culture and politics. At the same time, using as his primary criteria landownership and lineage, Lieven contends that this was an elite of aristocrats and old gentry (defined as noble families pre-dating 1600 but more loosely seen as pre-Petrine in character) that manifested remarkable socio-economic and political continuity until it was swept from power in 1917. The governing elite, competent but hapless, failed to overcome objective problems confronting the Empire, the weaknesses of autocracy, and its own socio-cultural exclusiveness. While Lieven's argument is always carefully nuanced, it is not wholly persuasive.

To begin with, there is the issue of whether the Council of State is the best place to seek a ruling elite. Lieven makes a strong case for his choice,
rather than, for example, high rank in state service; but he does not ade-
quately counter the objection that the Council of State was an institution,
and, as all institutions, had an organizational and functional configuration
with direct bearing on selection criteria for membership. Moreover, he dis-
regards the reform of the Council of State in 1906 other than to deny its
significance (except for military appointments, whose proportion declined).
Finally, Lieven's approach precludes analysis of the elite's dynamics. The
Council of 1894, appointed by Alexander II and Alexander III, was differ-
ent in 1914, albeit with some overlap. What Lieven's study demonstrates is
the shape and character of Nicholas II's choices. Given the policy of gentry
favoritism dating to the 1880s and the political resurgence of the landed
nobility after the revolution of 1905, one could expect these facts to be re-
flected in the appointments to the Council of State. As in the case of
France, an aristocratic revival seems to have preceded the revolution in
Russia.

Lieven's monograph, generally superb when dealing with mentalities
and individuals, is weaker when analyzing the institutional matrix of the
tsarist autocracy and its systemic characteristics. For example, in his last
chapter, when evaluating the role of autocracy in bringing about the
Russian revolution, Lieven focuses on the personality and behavior of
Nicholas II, not on the function of the monarch and his interrelationship
with other organs of government in the political system of Imperial Russia.

Lieven's prosopography also presents problems of methodology and
analysis. This is most apparent in chapter 2, which sets forth Lieven's key
ideas and which profiles the socio-economic and career backgrounds of the
Councilors with extensive use of statistical evidence. To begin with,
Lieven's conceptualization of Russian social hierarchy is sketchy and im-
plicit, although central to his argument. Table O, for example, divides the
Council's membership into five groups on a numerical point scale (0 for
bourgeois, 1 for minor gentry, 2-5 for gentry, 6-9 for aristocrats, and 10 for
magnates). Lieven awards status points to individuals for various social
characteristics that also serve as ex post facto predictors of their subse-
quent rise in the official hierarchy (the seventeen magnates, as an excep-
tional category, are all assigned 10 points). These attributes are grouped in
four subcategories of equivalents, ranging in value from 1-4. For example,
the son of an official of the top three ranks is assigned one point, equiva-

tent, inter alia, to ownership of 500 desiatiny or graduation from
Alexander Lycée or School of Jurisprudence, while the son of a senator or
an official of the top two ranks is awarded two points, equivalent to owner-
ship of 4000 desiatiny of land, or attending the Page Corps. This rather
simple and at first glance commonsense classification is really neither.
What is the rationale for the numerical value of these attributes, their
progression, and their equivalency? The above illustration implies real dif-
fference in social status between the son of a senator and the son of an offi-
cial of the third rank unless one recalls that most senators held rank 3 in
the state service. What is the meaning of "bourgeois" in Russia and how
different is it from "gentry"? A hypothetical graduate of St. Petersburg
University, whose father was a colonel, whose ancestors had become
hereditary nobles in 1785 and whose family owned an estate of 450 desi-
atiny near Vladimir as well as a distillery, would get no points on Lieven's