The marked increase in both the scope and significance of the volunteer and philanthropic activity that swept through both town and countryside during the last years of the Romanov dynasty suggests that educated society (obshchestvo) had undertaken a solemn commitment to participate in civic activity in order to effect the regeneration of Russian social and political life. Recent research along these lines seems to support the contention that obshchestvo was in fact becoming increasingly active and reformist and that a civil society was in the making during what formerly could be called the "lost decade" of Russian history. The relative neglect of the period 1905-1914 was largely due to the momentous impact of Russia's revolution in 1917 and to the uncritical acceptance of Trotsky's observation that her revolution in 1905 was but the "dress rehearsal" for the zusamenbruch. This led many scholars to look primarily for the antecedents of the 1917 revolution while ignoring or minimizing countervailing trends, including the marked increase in public initiative. Notable examples of this public activity (obshchestvennost') include the various alimentary, medical relief and refugee assistance campaigns undertaken by the organs of local self-government (zemstvo).

The zemstvo had an anomalous and ambiguous status in Russia, as finance minister Witte noted in his famous memorandum Autocracy and the Zemstvo (1899). Established in the European provinces and counties of the empire to manage local welfare and needs, the regime needed the zemstvo to assist in rural administration and economic development. As an elected institution, however, it ran counter to Russia's autocratic traditions and served as a well-spring for constitutionalist aspirations. The government sought to maintain its primacy through the prohibition of interzemstvo contacts. Article 3 of both

Zemstvo Statutes (1864 and 1890) limited the activity of the zemstva to the boundaries of the province or county. Designed to ensure that the zemstva would have no lateral contacts between themselves, the tsarist regime intended the zemstva to be but a link in the administrative chain stretching from St. Petersburg to the countryside.

There were those occasions, however, when united zemstvo activity had been tolerated by the government because the scope and magnitude of disasters such as crop failures or epidemics necessitated inter-zemstva coordination in order both to avoid any duplication of efforts and to guarantee the maximum efficiency of relief operations. In December 1880 a zemstvo congress was permitted to meet in Kharkov to discuss measures to be taken to combat a diphtheria outbreak; in February 1881 another congress was allowed to meet in Odessa to take steps to alleviate damage caused by an infestation of crop-damaging beetles.2 Such congresses were to consider only the specific reasons for which they were called.

Many zemstvo activists (zemtsy), however, complained that the suppression of public initiative could not but lead to revolutionary unrest. Educated society had acquired a consciousness of civic duty; the zemtsy and other public activists demanded that they be permitted "to participate in state life and activities." The nobles that participated as delegates to the zemstvo assemblies had gained confidence as a result of their experience in local self-government while the non-noble technical specialists (the so-called "Third Element") that implemented the policies adopted by the zemstva had also come to consider themselves to be engaged in public service as opposed to those who were employed in the tsarist civil service.3 The implementation of the 1890 Zemstvo Statute, however, seemingly resolved the struggle between state and obshchestvo over the jurisdiction of the zemstvo and the amount of autonomy to be allotted it in favor of the state's position. There would be no independent activity by the organs of local self-government; there would be merely a deconcentration of power wherein the zemstvo would be assigned specific duties and exist simply to implement state policies.4 More than a quarter century after the establishment of the zemstvo, the men in St. Petersburg thought that they finally had created the single, integrated bureaucratic apparatus from which it would be possible to govern a changing Russia.


3. Charles Timberlake makes this point in his "The Zemstvo and the Development of a Russian Middle Class," in Between Tsar and People, pp. 164-79. The term "Third Element" was first hung on the zemstvo professionals by V. Kondoidi, the Vice Governor of Samara province. The "First Element" was the government itself, and the "Second Element" was composed of the elected zemstvo deputies.

4. Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii, Sobranie tret'e, vol. 10 (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvennaia Tipografiia, 1893), #6922, June 12, 1890