FRANCIS W. WCISLO

BUREAUCRATIC REFORM
BEFORE WORLD WAR I

"At A Standstill [Na mertvoi tochke]." Thus did the conservative St. Petersburg daily Novoe vremia entitle one of its leading editorials on 22 May 1914. The column attacked the recent decision of the State Council to reject, without a first reading, the so-called township (volost') zemstvo bill, which had languished in a State Council committee ever since the Third State Duma approved the legislation in 1911.1 Readers of Novoe vremia were familiar with a story that long had remained one of the newspaper's editorial concerns. They had read accounts of the vitriolic criticism that had descended upon the Octobrist-sponsored Duma bill from the upper chamber's right wing. They most likely suspected that these opponents, whose arguments had been crucial in defeating the measure, exaggerated fears of a democratized zemstvo. They were aware that State Council supporters, who advocated a conservative conversion of existing peasant estate (soslovie) institutions into all-estate (vsesoslovnymi) zemstvo organs, nevertheless lacked support from the Goremykin cabinet and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. And finally, in stark contrast to this current bureaucratic passivity, they no doubt remembered that P. A. Stolypin initially sponsored a similar bill during the turbulent winter of 1906-07 and continued to defend the measure until he died in 1911.2 Thus, the State Council's rejection of the township zemstvo bill, a vestige of the assassinated premier's legacy, possessed a particular poignancy and only seemed to reinforce the growing impression that the central government had lost its political will. Such, at least, seemed to be the opinion of the editorialist from Novoe vremia.

He pointedly distinguished the authoritative bureaucratic leadership of the Stolypin years and the aimlessness characteristic of the government by mid-1914. If, as the present cabinet of I. L. Goremykin claimed, it recognized "in principle the necessity of a number of fundamental reforms," did it then, the newspaper queried, "have the right simply to wash its hands and stand aside, remaining a passive observer" of such petty political infighting as that which

---

* The author would like to thank Richard Wortman for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
recently had taken place in the State Council? The implicit answer was no, it did not; to emphasize the point, the editorialist contrasted the actions of "the late Stolypin" at the time of the 1911 Western zemstvo crisis. The premier then had "indicated categorically the obligation of the government to influence the successful passage of (its) legislative projects with every legal means" at its disposal. Of course, the editorialist was well aware, as were contemporaries, that the author of the June 1907 coup d'etat had defined legality quite broadly indeed. Yet, despite, and perhaps because of such thinking, Stolypin's frequent insistence that the government assert its influence in national political debate, as well as his propensity to do so, contrasted starkly with the "sorrowful fact of governmental absenteeism" that by 1914 even a supportive daily like Novoe vremia recognized.3

This vignette from the old regime's last months of peaceful high politics illustrates three theses important to an understanding of Russian autocratic government on the eve of war and revolution. In this context, they must be treated at differing levels of detail. The first of these, cited here as a premise, has motivated considerable research and, despite some objections, surprising consensus. From the abolition of serfdom through the First World War, and with particular zeal after the 1905 Revolution, the imperial bureaucratic government mounted a significant effort to reform the economic, social, and political structures of the old regime. By 1914, however, as Novoe vremia would have agreed, the impetus behind bureaucratic reform had lessened dramatically, if it had not disappeared altogether.4

The two other theses, which will be examined at greater length in what follows, seek to explain this failure. The first of these posits the need to reverse the traditional historiographical assumption that the state so dominantly shaped Russian society and culture that its actions can be understood independently of the historical milieu in which it existed. In fact, bureaucratic policy and the perceptions of the bureaucratic actors who made it only can be understood fully when set within the social and political context of the late imperial era.5 Related to the first, the second thesis maintains that bureaucratic reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not a mere reflexive reaction to the rising threat of revolution, but instead was