MONARCHISTS AGAINST THEIR MONARCH: THE RIGHTISTS’ CRITICISM OF TSAR NICHOLAS II

In turbulent 1905, when the revolution shook the traditional pillars of the Russian autocracy, Nicholas II called his loyal subjects to rally around the throne and to help in the struggle with the rebels. Those responded formed the Right (pravoe) movement. It turned out to be extremely divergent. The idea to save the autocracy as a Russian national foundation attracted old-fashioned intellectuals – Slavophiles and high-ranked bureaucrats, peasants seeking patronage of the tsar and rich gentry, nationalistic populists and police officers. The Union of Russian People (SRN) headed by A. I. Dubrovin became the main party of the extreme Rightists or the Black Hundreds. It suffered two major splits, and as a result somewhat less extreme parties – the Union of the Archangel Michael (SMA) of V. M. Purishkevich and the “renovated” SRN of N. E. Markov came into being.¹ The major party of the moderate right wing, the All-Russian National Union (the VNS, or the Nationalists), where V. V. Shul’gin became the most remarkable figure, emerged in the Third Duma period to support Stolypin and his reforms.² Traditional Slavophiles like Lev Tikhomirov or General Alexander Kireev hated party politics and preferred to stay outside the party organizations. Yet they clearly belonged to the same political camp as convinced monarchists who strongly opposed constitutionalism and were sympathetic to the Right. Despite their divergent backgrounds and views, many Rightists from various groups displayed one surprising common feature which historians have almost completely overlooked and which will be discussed in this article: hidden or open criticism of Tsar Nicholas II.

In accordance with the main party doctrine of autocracy, the emphasized declaration of loyalty and faithfulness to Nicholas II was the distinguishing

¹. For the Union of the Russian People, see: Hans Rogger, Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia (London: Macmillan, 1986); Don Rawson, Russian Rightists and the Revolution of 1905 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); S.A. Stepanov, Chernaia sotnia v Rossii (Moscow: Nauka, 1992).

². A recent monograph about the Nationalists is D. A. Kotsiubinskii, Russkii natsionalizm v nachale XX stoletiya. Rozhdenie i gib el' ideologii Vserossiiskogo Natsional'nogo Soiuza (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001).
mark of the Right. They sprinkled their numerous petitions to the tsar with expressions of "truly faithful feelings"; "in the name of the people" deputations of the supporters of autocracy presented themselves to Nicholas II; the right wing declared war on all genuine or imagined enemies of the tsar. Among the extreme Rightists the cult of the autocrat took on excessive and often pseudo-religious forms: the tsar was compared with "the sun that warmed the just and the guilty"; he was called "our only support at present and our bright happiness in the future", "all hopes" were pinned only on him; his words on autocracy were the motto of the movement; tsarist portraits were venerated like holy relics. This last trait moved Nicholas II; with pleasure he presented his pictures to his favorite, and, as he believed, the most loyal subjects.

However, the other side of the coin of this monarchist movement was that its target in the circumstances of the worsening crises of the autocracy could be Nicholas II himself. This movement considered that the autocratic order was the most ideal for the country, but reality testified appallingly to the national crisis. Correspondingly, responsibility for such a state of political affairs had to lie inevitably not with objective shortcomings of the system but rather with the character of the reigning tsar himself.

The method of pointing out scapegoats - Jews, students, bureaucrats - was suitable for public propaganda especially among the lower classes. By contrast, in private conversations of the right-wing elite, Nicholas II himself was subjected to sharp and often well-grounded accusations. Disseminating critical views of the tsar could be risky because of the police repression; however, to have one's personal opinion in tsarist Russia (unlike in the Soviet Union) was not too dangerous.

For revolutionaries it was not particularly important who was sitting on the throne. From their point of view the Russian system was by definition

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4. Among recipients of a tsarist portrait signed by the tsar himself were various cells of the SRN, the oldest Rightist organization Russkoe Sobranie (Russian Assembly), the Russian Monarchist Party from Moscow, the Monarchist Congress of 1909, and personally Purishkevich, Shul'gin, the infamous leader of Odessa Black Hundreds A. I. Konovnitsyn, the editor of the Rightist magazine Grazhdanin V. P. Meshcherskii (Lowe, "Political Symbols and Rituals of the Russian Radical Right, 1906-1914," 459; Pravye partii, 1: 463; (Moscow, 1998), 2: 167, 534; Sovremennik, "Nikolai II," Rasoblacheniiia (Berlin 1909), 266; Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 601, op. 2, d. 68; op. 1, d. 1288, l. 5; W. E. Mosse, "Imperial Favourite V. P. Meshchersky and 'Grazhdanim'," The Slavonic and East European Review, 59, no. 4 (1981), 530.