PREFACE/AVANT-PROPOS

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POPULAR POLITICAL CULTURE IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA (1800-1917)

This special issue of Russian History/Histoire Russe reexamines the question of political culture during the last long century (1800-1917) of Imperial Russia's existence. It assumes inadequacies in existing understandings of late tsarist political culture. Before turning to that matter, some definitions are in order. Popular political culture does not here mean specifically the political culture of the narod, that is, in classical Russian discourse, the lower classes, the peasantry, or any other binary formulation that signifies narod versus elites. Popular political culture here signifies the political understandings, aspirations, and outlooks of all sizable or otherwise significant social groups of the Russian Empire, in aggregate or individually. Naturally, this small collection neither addresses nor even identifies all such groups. Rather, the definition used here opens up for potential discussion the political culture of the entire range of the empire's population groups. The articles of this collection will focus on a narrower, although still compendious, selection of groups within Russian society before and during the 1917 revolutions.

To return to the principal problem, the obvious question at this point is: "What is wrong with current definitions of late tsarist political culture?" The chief significant problem is that the question has never been posed as such. Our field has operated under a set of guiding assumptions rather than with an eye open to various possibilities. An example of what we can call the "default interpretation" of late tsarist political culture is Richard Wortman's brilliant Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy, volume 2: Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas II. The underlying approach of both volumes of this groundbreaking study of Romanov political mythology is that the dynasty's myths constituted, virtually by definition, the political culture of the empire and its society. Especially for the period (1855-1917) covered by Wortman's second volume, this is a questionable assumption. The tsarist regime's last turbulent century constitutes a veritable saga, replete with villains, heroes, victims, improbable twists and turns, and an open end, about how more and more of society escaped the ruling dynasty's ascribed political
culture in favor of new approaches. Especially during the last pre-revolutionary decades, few accepted Romanov myths at face value. Not even monarchists still “believed” in the dynasty’s self-portrayal. Most citizens were thinking along entirely different lines. The specific question raised and only partially answered here is, “Along what lines?” The complexity and multiplicity of the answers belie the question’s simplicity.

As intimated, this collection proceeds under a practical definition of political culture. It assumes that political culture develops in connection with the existing social groups that participate in, indeed produce, the culture or cultures under consideration, in this case Russian political culture. By its nature, political culture involves social groups and politics, however defined. Political culture as an artifact meriting examination in its own right is not this collection’s concern. Likewise, an underlying editorial assumption is that culture, political or otherwise, is not unchanging or self-generating. The editor doubts the existence of any single durable “Russian political culture.” The semiotic school’s codes of Russian culture as allegedly unerringly revealed in “texts” are eternal will-o’-the-wisps. (Why is it that in our field the term “underlying codes” inevitably reflects harsh characteristics within overall quite negative generalizations of Russian history and culture?) The history of Russian society and the sub-groups that constituted it during this collection’s long century demonstrates the enormous flux both of the society and of its political understandings and expectations. Our customary cartoonish representations seem to reflect perfervid imaginings, born of resentment, fear, and old grudges.

The articles presented here, as well as Jane Burbank’s commentary about them, raise and address the question of late tsarist Russian political culture, with some suggestions about how to proceed. Answers capable of achieving consensual support in our contentious field will be elusive. Even so, these studies’ strivings toward an analytical reorientation for the period under examination clearly reflect our field’s current realities. Old idols fall, new methodologies and interpretations arise, and everything opens up for discussion. Post-paradigm Russia provides no safe haven for those immured in the certainties of the past.

A few words about the pieces collected here will complete our introductory remarks. Boris Gorshkov’s research about the peasantry and about child labor has already attracted some attention. Here Gorshkov appropriates and interprets central concepts of Jürgen Habermas, who, along with Michel Foucault, has achieved secular sainthood in historical analysis. (When I first came to the field, Eugen Weber and Karl Marx were the equivalents). Readers will agree that identifying a public sphere among Russia’s pre-emancipation peasants and serfs is not run-of-the-mill analysis. Melancon and Pate, two laborers in the recently barren vineyards of party history (the SRs and