



Old Russia

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Old Russia

Review of Marvin Lyons, *Russia in Original Photographs 1860–1920*, ed. Andrew Wheatcroft, and Kyril FitzLyon and Tatiana Browning, *Before the Revolution: A View of Russia under the Last Tsar*, *The Guardian*, 24 November 1977, 14



Tolstoy and Chertkov

SIXTY YEARS AGO an entire society was swept away by a revolution which, for the first time, managed to annihilate entire classes: individuals and families survived, both in Russia and in exile, but the social structure to which they belonged vanished in its entirety. The French aristocracy and bourgeoisie survived the fall of the *ancien régime*, however deeply they were transformed; the upper and middle classes in Russia did, as Marx intended, disappear from the stage of history.

Those who wish to construct a portrait of the old order must content themselves with a glimpse derived from memoirs and diaries (of which not many are in fact available in English), novels and a handful of biographies, and official and semi-official records, access to many of which is not easy for foreign, or even native,

scholars; hence the exceptional value – the value of scarcity – of such surviving snapshots as those accumulated in the pages of both these volumes.

A great many are unique, arresting and, above all, marvellously evocative. The larger (and more expensive) of these collections contains wonderfully well-reproduced photographs of royalty, the imperial court, the gentry, peasants, soldiers, Tatars, Caucasian and Central Asian tribesmen, religious minorities, revolutionary scenes of 1917 – among the most vivid that I have ever seen. The second volume provides a wider and more discriminating selection, confined to the reign of the last Emperor.

Yet something vital is missing from both collections. The Russia known to the Western readers of Tolstoy, Turgenev, the reminiscences of aristocratic émigré and exiled politicians, is here: the Russia of Dostoevsky, Goncharov, Chekhov, Bunin, Pasternak is not. The middle classes are absent: of the world which Tolstoy so deeply despised, the world of ‘barons, bankers and professors’,¹ only the barons are here; there are virtually no merchants, lawyers, doctors, engineers, schoolmasters, students, government officials. It may be that the material was not available, but whatever the cause, these galleries of portraits perpetuate the myth that Russia was a land of nobles and peasants with an insignificant middle class.

In this case, statistics mislead gravely: without the Russian bourgeoisie, neither cultural achievement, nor the rise of liberal reform or of the revolutionary movement (which did not merely shake, but changed our world for ever), begins to be intelligible. This deficiency is in large measure made good by Mr Fitzlyon’s admirable introduction. (Mr Wheatcroft’s sketchy commentary, with its somewhat shaky historical statements and shakier transliterations, is little more than what the Americans call ‘connective tissue’ between magnificent and deeply fascinating photographs).

Mr Fitzlyon’s essay is genuinely illuminating: it makes no serious effort to account for, but provides a lucid and beautifully written description of, the social structure of pre-Revolutionary Russia. Among other things it makes clear that it is absurd to translate the elaborate hierarchy of the Russian ‘estates’ into familiar English

¹ ‘Progress i opredeleniye obrazovaniya’ (‘Progress and the Definition of Education’, 1862), L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1928–64) viii 345.

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terms: Turgenev's heroes are not 'noblemen'. Lenin's father, the school inspector, sometimes referred to in English studies as a member of the 'nobility' or (a little more plausibly) of 'the gentry', is no more so than the holder of the British OBE.

Mr Fitzlyon provides an exceedingly succinct and lucid account of the effectiveness of Stolypin's agrarian reforms, of industrial and educational progress, of the renaissance of Russian poetry, theatre and painting, and the influence of the astonishingly bold Russian art collectors (but Manet should not appear as Monet) in the years preceding the Revolution. He describes, among other interesting things, the considerable financial support given by the radical sons of merchant princes to the most extreme of the revolutionaries (the parallels in our own time are not far to seek), and his careful avoidance of explicit value judgements makes his story a model of its kind, all that the common British reader will need by way of antidote to the slanted accounts of propagandists and apologists.

Both these books tend to underplay the social horrors of the old order: in particular, the treatment by the government of some among the ethnic minorities and the political repression which made it impossible for morally sensitive men to cooperate with it. Both sets of authors display an unexpressed sympathy with the old regime, which may not be shared even by those who deplore the even greater brutalities of its successor.

Nevertheless, the reader who feels curious about what kind of world it was that Lenin's Revolution destroyed for good will learn a great deal from both these remarkable albums. Some of the photographs of Russian peasants, Caucasian mountaineers, the curiously dowdy fancy-dress balls in great houses – and the extraordinary snapshot of Tolstoy with his faithful follower, the ex-Guards officer Chertkov – are, for better and for worse, impossible to forget.