

Preface to the Second edition*

Bromley, Kent, November, 1906

by *Pëtr Kropotkin*

When the first edition of this book was brought out at the end of 1899, it was evident to those who had followed the development of affairs in Russia that, owing to the obstinacy of its rulers in refusing to make the necessary concessions in the way of political freedom, the country was rapidly drifting towards a violent revolution. But everything seemed to be so calm on the surface, that when a few of us expressed this idea, we were generally told that we merely took our desires for realities. At the present moment Russia is in full revolution. The old system is falling to pieces, and amidst its ruins the new one is painfully making its way. Meanwhile the defenders of the past are waging a war of extermination against the country – a war which may prolong their rule for a few additional months, but which raises at the same time the passions of the people to a pitch that is full of menaces and danger.

Pëtr Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a revolutionist*, Swan Sonnenschein, London, 1906.

Looked upon in the light of present events, the early movements for freedom which are related in this book acquire a new meaning. They appear as the preparatory phases of the great breakdown of a whole obsolete world – a breakdown which is sure to give a new life to nearly one hundred and fifty million people, and to exercise at the same time a deep and favourable influence upon the march of progress in all Europe and Asia. It seems necessary, therefore, to complete the record of events given in this book by a rapid review of those which have taken place during the last seven years, and were the immediate cause of the present revolution.

The thirteen years of the reign of Alexander III, 1881-1894, were perhaps the gloomiest portion in the nineteenth century history of Russia. Reaction had been growing worse and worse during the last few years of the reign of his father – with the result that a terrible war had been waged against autocracy by the Executive Committee, which had inscribed on its banner political freedom. After the tragic death of Alexander II, his son considered it his duty to make no concessions whatever to the general demand of representative government, and a few weeks after his advent to the throne he solemnly declared his intention of remaining an autocratic ruler of his Empire. And then began a heavy, silent, crushing reaction against all the great, inspiring ideas of Liberty which our generation had lived through at the time of the liberation of the serfs – a reaction, perhaps the more terrible on account of its not being accompanied by striking and revolting acts of violence, but slowly crushing down all the progressive reforms of Alexander II, and the very spirit that bred these

reforms, and turning everything, including education, into tools of a general reaction.

Sheer despair got hold of the generation of the Russian «intellectuals» who had to live through that period. The few survivors of the Executive Committee laid down their arms, and there spread in Russian intellectual society that helpless despair, that loss of faith in the forces of «the intellectual», that general invasion of common-place vulgarity which Tchékoff has pictured with such a depressing sadness in his novels.

True, that Alexander III, since his advent to the throne, had vaguely understood the importance of several economic questions concerning the welfare of the peasants, and had included them in his programme. But with the set of reactionary advisers whom he had summoned to his aid, and whom he retained throughout his reign, he could accomplish nothing serious; the reactionaries whom he trusted did *not* at all want to make those serious improvements in the conditions of the peasants which he considered it the mission of autocracy to accomplish; and he would not call in other men, because he knew that they would require a limitation of the powers of autocracy, which he would not admit. When he died, a general feeling of relief went through Russia and the civilized world at large.

Never had a Tsar ascended the throne under more favourable circumstances than Nicholas II. After these thirteen years of reaction, the state of mind in Russia was such, that if Nicholas II had only mentioned, in his advent manifesto, the intention of taking the advice of his country upon the great questions of inner policy which required an immediate solution, he would have been received with open arms.

The smallest concession would have been gladly accepted as an asset. In fact, the delegates of the Zemstvos, assembled to greet him, asked him only – and this in the most submissive manner – «to establish a closer intercourse between the Emperor and the provincial representation of the land». But instead of accepting this modest invitation, Nicholas II read before the Zemstvo representatives the insolent speech of reprimand, which had been written for him by Pobiedonostseff, and which expressed his intention of remaining an autocratic ruler of his subjects.

A golden opportunity was thus lost. Distrust became now the dominating note in the relations between the nation and the Tsar, and it was striking to see how this distrust – in one of those indescribable ways in which popular feelings develop – rapidly spread from the Winter Palace to the remotest corners of Russia.

The results of that distrust soon became apparent. The great strikes which broke out at St. Petersburg in 1895, at the time of the coronation of Nicholas II, gave a measure of the depth of discontent which was growing in the masses of the people. The seriousness of the discontent and the unity of action which this revealed were quite unsuspected. What an immense distance was covered since those times, of which I speak in this book, when we used to meet small groups of weavers in the Viborg suburb of St Petersburg, and asked them with despair if it really was impossible to induce their comrades to join in a strike, so as to obtain a reduction of the hours of labour, which were fourteen and sixteen at that time! Now, the same working-men combined all over St. Petersburg, and brought out of their ranks such speakers and such organisers, as if they had been trade-union hands for ages.

Two years later, in 1897, there were serious disturbances in all the Russian universities; but when a second series of student disturbances began in 1901, they suddenly assumed a quite unexpected political significance. The students protested this time against a law, passed by Nicholas II, who had ordered – again on the advice of Pobiedonostseff – that students implicated in academical disorders should be sent to Port Arthur as soldiers. Hundreds of them were treated accordingly. Formerly, such a movement would have remained a university matter; now it assumed a serious political character and stirred various classes of society. At Moscow the working-men supported the students in their street demonstrations, and fought at their side against the police. At St. Petersburg all sorts of people, including the workmen's organizations, joined in the street demonstrations, and serious fighting took place in the streets. When the manifestations were dispersed by the lead-weighted horsewhips of the Cossacks, who cut open the faces of men and women assembled in the streets, there was a strikingly unanimous outburst of public indignation.

I have mentioned in this book how tragical was the position of our youth in the seventies and eighties, on account of «the fathers» having abandoned entirely to their sons the terrible task of struggling against a powerful government. Now, «the fathers» joined hands with «the sons». The «respectable» Society of Authors issued a strongly worded protest. A venerated old member of the Council of the State, Prince Vyazemsky, did the same. Even the officers of the Cossacks of the Bodyguard notified their unwillingness to carry on such police duties. In short, discontent was so general and so openly expressed, that the Committee of Ministers, assum-

ing for the first time since its foundation the *rôle* of a «Ministry», discussed the Imperial order concerning the students, and insisted upon, and obtained, its withdrawal.

Something quite unexpected had thus happened. A rash and ill-tempered measure of the young autocrat had thus set all the country on fire. It resulted in two ministers being killed in bloodshed in the streets of Kharkoff, Moscow and St. Petersburg; and it would have become the cause of further disasters if Nicholas II had not been prevented from declaring the state of siege in his capital, which surely would have led to still more bloodshed.

All this was pointing to such a deep change in the mind of the nation, that already in the early spring of 1901 – long before the declaration of war with Japan – it became evident that the days of autocracy were already counted: «Speaking plainly», I wrote in the «North American Review», «the fact is that Russia has outgrown the autocratic form of government; and it may be said confidently that if external complications do not disturb the peaceful development of Russia, Nicholas II will soon be brought to realize that he is bound to take steps for meeting the wishes of the country. Let us hope that he will understand the proper sense of the lesson which he has received during the past two months» (May 1901, p. 723).

Unfortunately, Nicholas II understood nothing. He did, on the contrary, everything to bring about the revolution. He contributed to spread discontent everywhere: in Finland, in Poland, in Armenia (by confiscating the property of the Armenian Church), and in Russia itself amongst the peasants, the students, the working-men, the dissenters, and so on. More than that. Efforts were made, on dif-

ferent sides, to induce Nicholas II to adopt a better policy; but always he himself – so weak for good – found the force to resist these influences. At a decisive moment he always would find enough energy to turn the scales in favour of reaction, by his personal interference. It has been said of him that obstinacy was a distinctive feature of his character, and this seems to be true enough; but he displays it exclusively to oppose those progressive measures which the necessities of the moment render imperative. Even if he occasionally yields to progressive influences, he always manages very soon to counteract them in secrecy. He displays, in fact, precisely those features which necessarily lead to a revolution.

In 1901 it was evident that the old order of things would soon have to be abandoned. The then Minister of Finances, Witte, must have realized it, and he took a step which certainly meant that he was preparing a transition from autocracy to some sort of a half-constitutional *régime*. The «Commissions on the Impoverishment of Agriculture in Central Russia» which he convoked in thirty-four provinces, undoubtedly meant to supply that intermediary step, and the country answered to his call in the proper way. Landlords and peasants alike said and maintained quite openly in these Commissions that Russia could not remain any longer under the system of police rule established by Alexander III. Equal rights for all subjects, political liberties, and constitutional guarantees were declared to be an urgent necessity.

Again a splendid opportunity was offered to Nicholas II for taking a step towards constitutional rule. The Agricultural Commissions had indicated how to do it.

Similar committees had to be convoked in all provinces of the Empire, and they would name their representatives who would meet at Moscow and work out the basis of a national representation. And once more Nicholas II refused to accept that opening. He preferred to follow the counsels of his more intimate advisers, who better expressed his own will. He disowned Witte and called at the head of the Ministry of Interior Von Plehwe – the worst produce of reaction that had been bred by police rule during the reign of Alexander III!

Even that man did not undertake to maintain autocracy indefinitely; but he undertook to maintain it for ten years more – provided full powers be granted to him, and plenty of money be given – which money he, a pupil of the school of Ignatieff, freely used, it is now known, for organizing the «pogroms» – the massacres of the Jews. More than that. Prince Meschersky, the well-known editor of the *Grazhdanin* – an old man, a Conservative of old standing, and a devotee of the Imperial family – wrote lately in his paper that Plehwe, in order to give a further lease to autocracy, had decided to do his utmost to push Nicholas II into that terrible war with Japan. Like the Franco-German conflict, the Japanese war was thus the last trump of a decaying Imperial power.

I certainly do not mean that Plehwe's will was the *cause* of that war. Its causes lie deeper than that. It became unavoidable the day that Russia got hold of Port Arthur – and even much earlier than that. But this move of Plehwe, and the support he found in his master, are deeply significant for the comprehension of the present events in Russia.

Plehwe was the trump card of autocracy. He was invested with unlimited powers, and used them for placing all Rus-

sia under police rule. The State police became the most demoralized and dangerous body in the State. More than 30.000 persons were deported by the police to remote corners of the Empire. Fabulous sums of money were spent for his own protection – but that did not help; he was killed in July 1904, amidst the disasters of the war that he had been so eager to call upon his country. And since that date the events took a new and rapid development. The system of police rule was defeated, and nobody in the Tsar's surroundings would attempt to continue it.

For six weeks in succession nobody would agree to become the Tsar's Minister of Interior; and when the Prince Svyatopolk-Mirsky was induced at last to accept it, he did so under the condition that representatives of all the Zemstvos would be convoked at once, to work out a scheme of national representation.

A great agitation spread thereupon in all Russia, when a Congress of the Zemstvos was allowed to come together «unofficially» at Moscow in December 1904. The Zemstvos were quite outspoken in their demands for constitutional guarantees, and their «Memorandum» to the Tsar, signed by 102 representatives out of 104, was soon signed also by numbers of representative persons of different classes in Russia. By-and-by similarly worded «Memoranda» were addressed to the Tsar by the barristers and magistrates, the Assemblies of the Nobility in certain provinces, some municipalities, and so on. The Zemstvo memorandum became thus a sort of ultimatum of the educated portion of the nation, which rapidly organized itself into a number of professional unions. The year 1904 thus ended in a state of great excitement.

Then a new element – the working-men – came to throw the weight of their intervention in favour of the liberating movement. The working-men of St. Petersburg – whom that original personality, Father Gapon, had been most energetically organizing for the preceding twelve months – came to the idea of an immense manifestation which would claim from the Tsar political rights for the workers. On January 22, 1905, they went out – a dense and unarmed crowd of more than 100.000 persons, marching from all the suburbs towards the Winter Palace. Up to that date they had retained an unbroken faith in the good intentions of Nicholas II, and they wanted to tell him themselves of their needs. They trusted him as if he really was their father. But a massacre of these faithful crowds had been prepared beforehand by the military commander of the capital, with all the precautions of modern warfare – local staffs, ambulances, and so on. For a full week the manifestation was openly prepared by Gapon and his aids, and nothing was done by the Government to dissuade the workers from their venture. They marched towards the Palace and crowded round it – sure that the Tsar would appear before them and receive their petition – when the firing began. The troops fired into the dense, absolutely pacific and unarmed crowds, at a range of a few dozen yards, and more than a thousand – perhaps two thousand – men, women and children fell that day, the victims of the Tsar's fears and obstinacy.

This was how the Russian revolution began, by the extermination of peaceful, trustworthy crowds, and this double character of passive endurance from beneath, and of blood-thirsty extermination from above, it retains up till now. A deep chasm is thus being dug, deeper and deeper every day,

between the people and the present rulers, a chasm which – I am inclined to think – never will be filled.

If these massacres were meant to terrorize the masses, they utterly failed in their purpose. Five days after the «bloody Vladimir Sunday» a mass-strike began at Warsaw and similar strikes soon spread all over Poland. All classes of Polish society joined more or less actively in these strikes, which took a formidable extension in the following May. In fact, all the fabric of the State was shattered by these strikes, and the series of massacres which the Russian Government inaugurated in Poland in January and in May 1905, only led to an uninterrupted series of retaliations in which all Polish society evidently stands on the side of the terrorists. The result is, that at the present time Poland is virtually lost to the Russian autocratic Empire. Unless it obtains as complete an autonomy as Finland obtained in 1905, it will not resume its normal life.

Gradually, the revolts began to spread all over Russia. The peasant uprising now assumed serious proportions in different parts of the Empire, everywhere the peasants showing moderation in their demands, together with a great capacity for organized action, but everywhere also insisting upon the necessity of a move in the sense of land nationalization. In the western portion of Georgia (in Transcaucasia) they even organized independent communities, similar to those of the old cantons of Switzerland. At the same time a race-war began in the Caucasus; then came a great uprising at Odessa; the mutiny of the ironclads of the Black Sea; and a second series of general strikes in Poland, again followed by massacres. And only then, when all Russia was set into open revolt, Nicholas II

finally yielded to the general demands, and announced, in a manifesto issued on the 19th of August, that some sort of national representation would be given to Russia in the shape of a State's Duma. This was the famous «Bulyghin Constitution» which granted the right of voting to an infinitesimal fraction only of the population (one man in each 200, even in such wealthy cities as St. Petersburg and Moscow), and entirely excluded 400.0000 working-men from any participation in the political life of the country. This tardy concession evidently satisfied nobody; it was met with disdain. Mignet, the author of a well-known history of the French Revolution, was right when he wrote that in such times the concessions must come from the Government *before* any serious bloodshed has taken place. If they come *after* it, they are useless; the Revolution will take no heed of them and pursue its unavoidable, natural development. So it happened in Russia.

A simple incident – a strike of the bakers at Moscow – was the beginning of a general strike, which soon spread over all Moscow, including all its trades, and from Moscow extended all over Russia. The sufferings of the working-men during that general strike were terrible, but they held out. All traffic on the railways was stopped, and no provisions, no fuel reached Moscow. No newspapers appeared, except the proclamations of the strike committees. Thousands of passengers, tons of letters, mountains of goods accumulated at the stations. St. Petersburg soon joined the strike, and there, too, the workers displayed wonderful powers of organization. No gas, no electric light, no tramways, no water, no cabs, no post, no telegraphs! The factories were silent, the city was plunged in darkness.

Then, gradually, the enthusiasm of the poorer classes won the others as well. The shop assistants, the clerks in the banks, the teachers, the actors, the lawyers, the chemists – even the judges joined the strike. A whole country struck against its government, and the strikers kept so strict an order, that they offered no opportunity for military intervention and massacres. Committees of Labour Representatives came into existence, and they were obeyed explicitly by the crowds, 300.000 strong, which filled the streets of St. Petersburg and Moscow.

The panic in the Tsar's *entourage* was at a climax. His usual Conservative advisers proved to be as unreliable as the *talons rouges* were in the surroundings of Louis XVI. Then – only then – Nicholas II called in Count Witte and agreed on the 30th of October to sign a constitutional manifesto. He declared in it that it was his «inflexible will» «to grant to the population the immutable foundations of civic liberty, based on real inviolability of the person, conscience, speech, union, and association». For that purpose he ordered to elect a State's Duma, and promised «to establish it as an immutable rule that no law can come into force without the approval of the State Duma» and that the people's representatives «should have a real participation in the supervision of the legality of the acts of the authorities appointed by the Crown».

Two days later, as the crowds which filled the streets of St. Petersburg were going to storm the two chief prisons, Count Witte obtained from him also the granting of an almost general amnesty for political offenders.

These promises produced a tremendous enthusiasm, but, alas, they were soon broken in many important points.

It appears now from an official document, just published – the report of the Head of the Police Department, Lopukhin, to the Premier Minister Stolypin – that at the very moment when the crowds were jubilating in the streets, the Monarchist party organized hired bands for the slaughter of the jubilating crowds. The gendarme officers hurriedly printed with their own hands appeals calling for the massacre «of the intellectuals and the Jews» and saying that they were the hirelings of the Japanese and the English. Two bishops, Nikon and Nikander, in their pastoral letters, called upon all the «true Russians» «to put down the intellectuals by force»; while from the footsteps of the Chapel of the Virgin of Iberia, at Moscow, improvised orators tried to induce the crowds to kill all the students.

More than that. The same Prince Meschersky confessed in his paper – «with horror» as he said – that it was a settled plan, hatched among some of the rulers of St. Petersburg, to provoke a serious insurrection, to drown it in blood, and thus «to let the Duma die before it was born, so as to return to the old *régime*». «Several high functionaries have confessed this to me» he adds in his paper.

I have endeavoured in this book to be fair towards Alexander II, and I certainly should like to be equally fair towards Nicholas II, the more as he, besides his own faults, pays for those of his father and grandfather. But I must say that the cordial reception which he gave at that time in his palace to the representatives of the above party, and his protection which they have enjoyed since, were certainly an encouragement to continue on these lines of breeding massacres of innocent people – even if the encouragement be unconscious.

But then came the insurrection at Moscow, in January 1906, provoked to a great extent by the Governor-General, Admiral Dubassoff; the uprising of the peasants in the Baltic provinces against the tyranny of their German landlords; the general strike along the Siberian railway; and a great number (over 1.600) of peasant uprisings in Russia itself; and in all these cases the military repression was accomplished in such terrible forms, including flogging to death, and with such a cruelty, that one could really come to totally despair of civilization, if there were not by the side of these cruelties acts of sublime heroism on behalf of the lovers of freedom.

It was under such conditions that the Duma met in May 1905, to be dissolved after an existence of only seventy days. Its fate evidently had been settled at Peterhof, before it met. A powerful league of all the reactionary elements, lead by Trépoff, who found strong support with Nicholas II himself, was formed with the firm intention of not allowing the Duma, under any pretext, to exercise a real control upon the actions of the Ministers nominated by the Tsar. And as the Duma strove to obtain this right above all others, it was dissolved.

And now, the condition of Russia is simply beyond description. The items which we have for the first year of «Constitutional rule» since October 30, 1905, till the same date in 1906, are as follows: Killed in the massacres, shot in the riots, etc., 22.721; condemned to penal servitude, 851 (to an aggregate of 7.138 years); executed, mostly without any semblance of judgment, men, women and youths, 1.518; deported without judgment, mostly to Siberia, 30.000. And the list increases still at the rate of from ten to eighteen every day.

These facts speak for themselves. They talk at Peterhof of maintaining «autocracy» but there is none left, except that of the eighty governors of the provinces, each of whom is, like an African king, an autocrat in his own domain, so long as his orders please his subordinates. Bloodshed, drumhead military courts, and rapine are flourishing everywhere. Famine is menacing thirty different provinces. And Russia has to go through all that, merely to maintain for a few additional months the irresponsible rule of a camarilla standing round the throne of the Tsar.

How long this state of affairs will last, nobody can foretell. During both the English and the French Revolutions reaction also took for a time the upper hand; in France this lasted nearly two years. But the experience of the last few months has also shown that Russia possesses such a reserve of sound, solid forces in those classes of society upon whom depends the wealth of the country, that the present orgy of White Terror certainly will not last long. The army, which has hitherto been a support of reaction, shows already signs of a better comprehension of its duties towards its mother country; and the crimes of the joined reactionists become too evident not to be understood by the soldiers. As to the revolutionists, after having first minimized the forces of the old *régime*, they realize them now and prepare for a struggle on a more solid and a broader basis while the devotion of thousands upon thousands of young men and women is such, that virtually it seems to be inexhaustible. In such conditions, the ultimate victory of those elements which work for the birth of a regenerated, free Russia, is not to be doubted for a moment, especially if they find, as I hope they will,

the sympathy and the support of the lovers of Freedom all over the world. Regenerated Russia means a body of some 150.000.000 persons – one-eighth part of the population of the globe, occupying one-sixth part of its continental parts – permitted at last to develop peacefully – a population which, owing to its very composition, is bound to become, not an Empire in the Roman sense of the word, but a Federation of nations combined for the peaceful purposes of civilization and progress.



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