Introduction

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During the twentieth century Russia experienced a great number of political, social, and economic upheavals, accompanied by fundamental changes in property relations and the system of government. At the beginning of the century Russia was an enormous empire without any democratic institutions. As an absolute monarchy, the unifying factor in the system of government was the emperor, or tsar; in relations between nationalities, the unifying factor was the Russian language; and in matters of ideology, the unifying factor was the Russian Orthodox Church, which functioned as part of the government, there being no separation of church and state.

In the Russian empire one's rights were not restricted for reasons of race or ethnic origin, but there were restrictions on non-Russian languages and religions. The Austro-Hungarian empire, in contrast, published its legal code in all the languages of the nationalities included in that empire. The Russian empire published its laws only in Russian.

In Russia the autocracy relied mainly on the army to maintain power. For ideological support it relied on the formula "autocracy,

orthodoxy, nationality"—the third item in this formula standing for certain historical traditions of the Russian state.

The main economic conflict in Russia before World War I was not so much the struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat over the ownership of industry as the struggle between the smallholder peasantry and the large landed proprietors over ownership of the land. The main conflict among nationalities had to do with forced Russification, especially after the decrees of Tsar Alexander III making Russian the only official language for use in government, the courts, and educational institutions from elementary school to the university level.

The Russian empire collapsed as a result of the February 1917 revolution and defeat in World War I. After the downfall of the monarchy a bourgeois-democratic republic arose briefly, but in October 1917 it too was overthrown by the more radical socialist parties. As a result of this revolution there began a radical transformation of property relations, which provoked a lengthy civil war. The Communist Party headed by Vladimir Lenin eventually triumphed in this civil war, and on the territory of the former Russian empire a new state took shape—the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The Soviet government did not consider itself the "legal heir" of the Russian empire, and it publicly renounced the treaties signed by the former tsarist rulers of Russia, as well as the debts incurred by them. The dictatorship of the proletariat was proclaimed as the basic principle of government in the Soviet Union, but this soon evolved into the dictatorship of the Communist Party, which later developed de facto into a new form of autocratic rule by the general secretary of the party, Joseph Stalin. The ideology of "Marxism-Leninism" (as interpreted by Stalin) became the official ideology of the country, with repressive measures directed against all forms of religion.

The Soviet government ended forced Russification, replacing it with a policy of "free association of nations," a "family of nations" in which it became possible to construct educational systems (elementary, secondary, and higher education) in all the main languages of the nationalities of the USSR. The principle of internationalism replaced that of Russian nationalism, at least officially. The development of the national cultures of the peoples of the USSR, however, was separated from its roots in the particular history and religion of each people. Cultural development was supposed to follow the formula "national in form, socialist in content."

During the time of the New Economic Policy, roughly 1922 to 1929, the Soviet government permitted capitalist elements in the economy to a limited extent. In the 1930s Stalin's repressive totalitarian regime ended most forms of private economic activity. The socioeconomic system that arose in the USSR in the 1930s combined elements of socialism (a system of social protections, a kind of welfare state; free and universal public education; free health care for all; relatively equal distribution of material goods; and central planning of the economy) with elements of state feudalism (the peasants were bound to the land, not allowed to leave the collective farms or state farms to which they were assigned, while industrial workers were tied to their plants or factories, which they, too, were not allowed to leave). There was even an element of slave-owning society in the form of the "corrective labor" camps (the millions of prisoners doing forced labor in the Gulag system). While the development of modern industry accelerated, in agriculture a substantial sector of primitive natural economy, production for bare subsistence, continued in the form of peasants' household plots and the garden plots used by city dwellers for growing fruits and vegetables.

The destruction of the totalitarian system began in 1956 with Nikita Khrushchev's so-called secret speech about the Stalin "cult of personality." A prolonged and contradictory process ensued during which the Soviet Union was opened to Western influence as far as scientific and technological progress was concerned. Meanwhile internal political processes and foreign policy were shaped by the general condition of confrontation with the West, the Cold War. Not until the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev did the Soviet Union make a decisive turn toward democratization. The totalitarian political censorship of the press was eliminated in 1987 with the advent of the policy of glasnost, and in 1989 a new electoral system brought with it a genuine parliament (the Congress of People's Deputies) and a multiparty system.

Most of the new political parties, with their many and varied programs, did not emerge from social movements active on the level of the USSR as a whole; they arose mostly within the limits of one or another "national republic" (Ukraine, Armenia, Lithuania, and so on) accompanied by a revival of local nationalism. Meanwhile, economic difficulties in 1989–90 resulted in attempts to establish a mixed economy in the USSR combining elements of both socialism and the capitalist "free market" system.

The attempt by the Soviet Communist Party to reassert its monopoly of power (the attempted coup d'etat of August 1991) ended in a fiasco, followed by the disintegration of the USSR in December 1991. The Soviet Union broke apart into fifteen sovereign states, which quickly received international recognition. These were the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia, Tajikistan, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In addition, five states proclaimed themselves independent but did not receive international recognition (the Dniester Republic, Abkhazia, Karabakh, Southern Ossetia, and Chechnya).

The Russian Federation, largest of the new countries in the "post-Soviet space," declared itself the legal and historical heir not only to the USSR (assuming the debts and treaty obligations of the USSR, retaining the Soviet Union's seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and maintaining the status of a nuclear power) but to prerevolutionary Russia as well (reviving the tsarist flag, coat of arms, and honorary orders of old Russia, as well as official Russian nationalism). According to its constitution, however, the Russian Federation is not a "national" state but a *multinational* entity, created by many nationalities "united by a common destiny" within a common territory.

During the years 1991–1999 the new rulers of the Russian Federation introduced a political program that amounted to a new "revolution from above," whose aim was to transform the so-called socialist system of former Soviet Russia into a liberal capitalist system. President Boris Yeltsin, together with a cabinet made up of young reform-minded economists, carried out extensive measures to eliminate state-owned industry and privatize the entire economic infrastructure, as well as nearly all real estate (including houses and apartments), and to make Russia an integral part of the worldwide "free market" economic system. In implementing this "reform" program, Yeltsin and his government had no base of support in the form of a political party; they did not even have a publicly stated program. They used exclusively administrative methods, sometimes employing force and violence (the bloody suppression of the Russian Supreme Soviet in October 1993, for example).

The reform scenario was based on recommendations by Western economic experts and advisers, and the financial means for carrying out these reforms were guaranteed by credits and loans from Western

banks, governments, and international financial institutions, above all the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

This capitalist "revolution from above" also ended in disaster as of August 1998. It took the quite unusual form of a kind of "self-implosion" without any pressure either from within the country or from the outside, under conditions of complete passivity on the part of the population. The revolution of February 1917 was a truly popular revolution in which masses of people took part. It was not organized by parties or politicians. The October 1917 revolution was an organized insurrection that overthrew the bourgeois Provisional Government. The Bolshevik party worked out the strategy and tactics of that revolution, but in the main it was supported by the masses. The anti-Communist revolution of August–December 1991 also had political leaders, with Boris Yeltsin at their head, and enjoyed the support of a substantial part of the population disillusioned with the sorry results of Gorbachev's perestroika. No one organized the collapse, and effective overthrow, of the capitalist system in August 1998. It collapsed of its own accord, under the weight of its own mistakes and miscalculations, for it ended up in financial bankruptcy.

The last "reform" government—of Sergei Kiriyenko—left a political vacuum in its wake. For nearly a month there was hardly a political party in Russia willing to declare its readiness to take the leadership of the country. Not until the middle of September 1998, and only after great difficulties, did a new government begin to take shape. It consisted of leaders who had a fundamentally new political orientation. Chapter 9 of this book ("1998, A Year of Upheaval") examines some of the programmatic priorities these new leaders adopted.

The events of the past decade have been so complex and contradictory, so full of dramatic encounters and confrontations, and they have ranged over so broad a field, that simply to comment on all the events in their interconnectedness is an extremely difficult task. We find ourselves unable to evaluate the full meaning of many conflicts in which we find interwoven, often in a capricious way, the role of mass movements and personal ambitions, intelligent calculation and banal ignorance, rivalry between political and ethnic elites, and between outlying regions and the central government. We find foreign intervention, both open and covert, pressures exerted by particular social and economic interests, even by criminal organizations, and along with all this, besides the lust for profit, the yearning for social justice.

I have tried to outline and analyze the main events that have transpired in the Russian Federation since late August 1991. My primary focus was on the period 1991–1995, but I have also made use of considerable material, including historical documents, from 1996–97 as well as the late 1980s. And separate chapters deal with 1998 and 1999.

This book of course presents my own view of events—what I regard as the most significant aspects. In discussing many of the problems Russia faces, I feel that I am mainly posing the question, not giving the answer. But as one of my mentors at Leningrad University used to say, half the solution to a problem is presenting it correctly.

Undoubtedly a more complete understanding of all the changes that have occurred will come with the passage of time, not only because some historical distance is required but also because there will be more information than we have access to at present.

But our common task—as historians, journalists, scholars, and writers—is to record our impressions of current events in a timely fashion and in a form true to our own point of view, as well as to make some preliminary analysis, no matter how limited our sources might be. The views and opinions of contemporary eyewitnesses are inevitably subjective and admittedly limited. Still, they provide a basis, in fact the *only* basis, for virtually all future historical writing.