

SUMMARY

The theme of this dissertation relates to the perception of Russia as this is evidenced in European reflections on the Great Reforms in Russia during the period from 1861 to 1881, under the rule of Tsar Alexander II. The Russian Empire had suffered a humiliating defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856) by a coalition of modern Western powers. As a result, the Russian government felt compelled to introduce drastic reforms in order to modernise the country so that it could maintain its position in international competition with the West. The authorities sought to maintain the autocratic political system by incorporating elements borrowed from Western types of societies. Such elements included the abolition of serfdom and of inequality in law and the introduction of locally elected self-governing authorities, public trial by jury, general conscription and a degree of freedom of education and the press.

These changes excited the interest of the Western public. Until that time, Russia had been fairly unknown in Europe and its image was largely stereotypical as an oriental despotic and barbaric empire. This image of Russia lent itself to the development of both black (Russophobic) and white (Russophilic) myths in the discourse on the country. But the Russia of the Great Reforms seemed to draw nearer to Europe. This attracted a new generation of Western observers and researchers who strove for a more empiric factual knowledge and a more realistic understanding of Russia. Journalists and scholars spent several months, or even years, in Russia, learned the language, made personal contacts with Russians and studied official and unofficial sources to improve their knowledge of the contemporary situation. They also published their findings in the different countries of Europe, both in popular and in more scientific works. The images presented in these works ensured a certain demythologizing of Russia and contributed to the formation of a richer and more refined image of the Russians than previously. In this way, these

works lay the foundation for the subsequent systematic and scholarly study of Russia.

This dissertation endeavours to reconstruct the images of reforming Russia as presented in the European works in their original form, to place them in the context of the personal backgrounds of the different observers, to compare them with one another and to examine the significance of these representations for the modern image and concept of Russia. The research is restricted to works published in book form in Europe, in English, French, German or Dutch in so far as these are available in Dutch libraries. The total number of authors in this category amounts to several dozen. These include three authors whose works in terms of scope, depth and comprehensiveness far exceed those of all other authors. Firstly, August von Haxthausen (1792-1866), a romantic conservative of German noble descent who was a pioneer in field research and the study of primary sources concerning Russian peasant communities as the cornerstone of a patriarchal collectivist society. Secondly, the Scottish journalist, Donald Mackenzie Wallace (1841-1919), an aloof sceptic who observed the functioning of the new institutions from close by and continuously tested theory against practice. Thirdly, the Frenchman Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu (1842-1912), an inspired liberal and scholar who in the positivist tradition attempted to give a comprehensive description and interpretation of Russia as a developing civilisation. These are followed by other remarkable observers who have also made an original contribution to knowledge about Russia in this period. These include the Austrian-Slovenian teacher of classical languages, Franz Celestin (1843-1895) on the reforms in Russian education, the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes (1842-1927) on the nature of the Russian intelligentsia, and the Dutch publicist and amateur philosopher Hendrik Wolfgang van der Meij (1842-1914) on the radicalisation of nihilism in Russia. The research into these (and other) individuals and their ideas is intended as a contribution to the history of ideas, aimed at identifying the building blocks in understanding Russia as a nation related to Europe and yet at the same time perceived as an alien civilization. How do we know the Other?

The analysis of perceptions of Russia is largely structured along the most notable dividing lines in the images of the country as they are presented by the authors

studied, namely between the autocratic political system, the traditional estate-ordered society and the modern middle-class groups. The first chapter addresses the state. It was Alexander, bearer of the honorary title of Tsar Liberator, who took the initiative for the reforms with the emancipation law of 1861. A logical consequence of this was the introduction of administrative and legal institutions which were intended to enable the now free Russian subjects to take responsibility for themselves. From the outset Western observers detected an ambivalence in the attitude of the Tsar and his state apparatus towards the reforms. The impetus for emancipation came from above, but they had little confidence in the effects from below, which caused them to resort to authoritarian measures, thus to an extent nullifying the efforts towards emancipation. In the eyes of the West, the Russian state bore a Janus head. The government was progressive yet at the same time reactionary. The legislation was able to implement changes, but these could be frustrated by the administration. The Tsar was well-loved, but his officials were abhorred. These aspects together resulted in a rift in the legitimacy of state authority.

The second chapter deals with how the Russian population was divided socially into two opposing estates of simple peasants and land-owning gentry, and how this was held together in terms of religion by a parallel hierarchy of orthodox clergy. In Russia during the period of the Great Reforms the European visitors and researchers were faced with sharp social contrasts and advancing fragmentation. The distance between the common people in the peasant communities and the gentry with their state offices and large-scale land ownership appeared to have increased as a result of the changes, rather than diminished. Two Russias with differing assumptions and attitudes clashed with one another in the new institutions. This process of dualism was made more apparent than ever in the descriptions from direct observation. Russia experts also wondered what could hold this society together. They held different opinions on the ability of either the orthodox religious sentiments or the modern mentality of public involvement to bind society together. But all were aware of the precarious state of the unity of Russian society.

Given the images of a split state and a divided population, the third chapter focuses on seeking a moderate middle-ground. The question arose whether modernising Russia would facilitate a public arena for a constructive exchange of ideas and

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initiatives between government and subjects. An independent citizenry such as that which has played a defining role in the political and economic progress of Europe, was absent in Russia. Various Russia experts investigated in what places and in which groups of Russian society such a responsible citizenship could function. They focused their attention on the urban environment of merchants and tradesmen, on the environment of the educated classes or on the isolated circles of politically-aware activists and revolutionaries. But there appeared to be no public confidence of the government nor public responsibility on the part of the subjects in any of these three cases. In spite of all the Western modifications, Russia remained ill-disposed towards Western forms of citizenry.

The conclusion can be drawn that in the eyes of Europe the Russia of the Great Reforms undeniably modernised, but did not necessarily also westernise. The three decades after the Crimean War, saw the publication of numerous new and original works on Russia. The assumptions contained in these works were to a degree influenced by the attitude of their countries of origin, but primarily bore the mark of the experiences and personal vision of the different observers. With their realism and positivism, they added value to Western knowledge about Russia. Paying attention to detail and authenticity they pointed out the many facets and contrasts in Russian life. They presented a more sophisticated image of Russia as a multi-layered civilization in transition. The dynamics and dialectic in the modernisation of Russia acquired their own identity in these reflections. For this reason, Russia experts of this period can be regarded as the 'founding fathers' and consequently, as a source of inspiration for present-day Russian studies.