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[Chekhov's Russia]

Geography

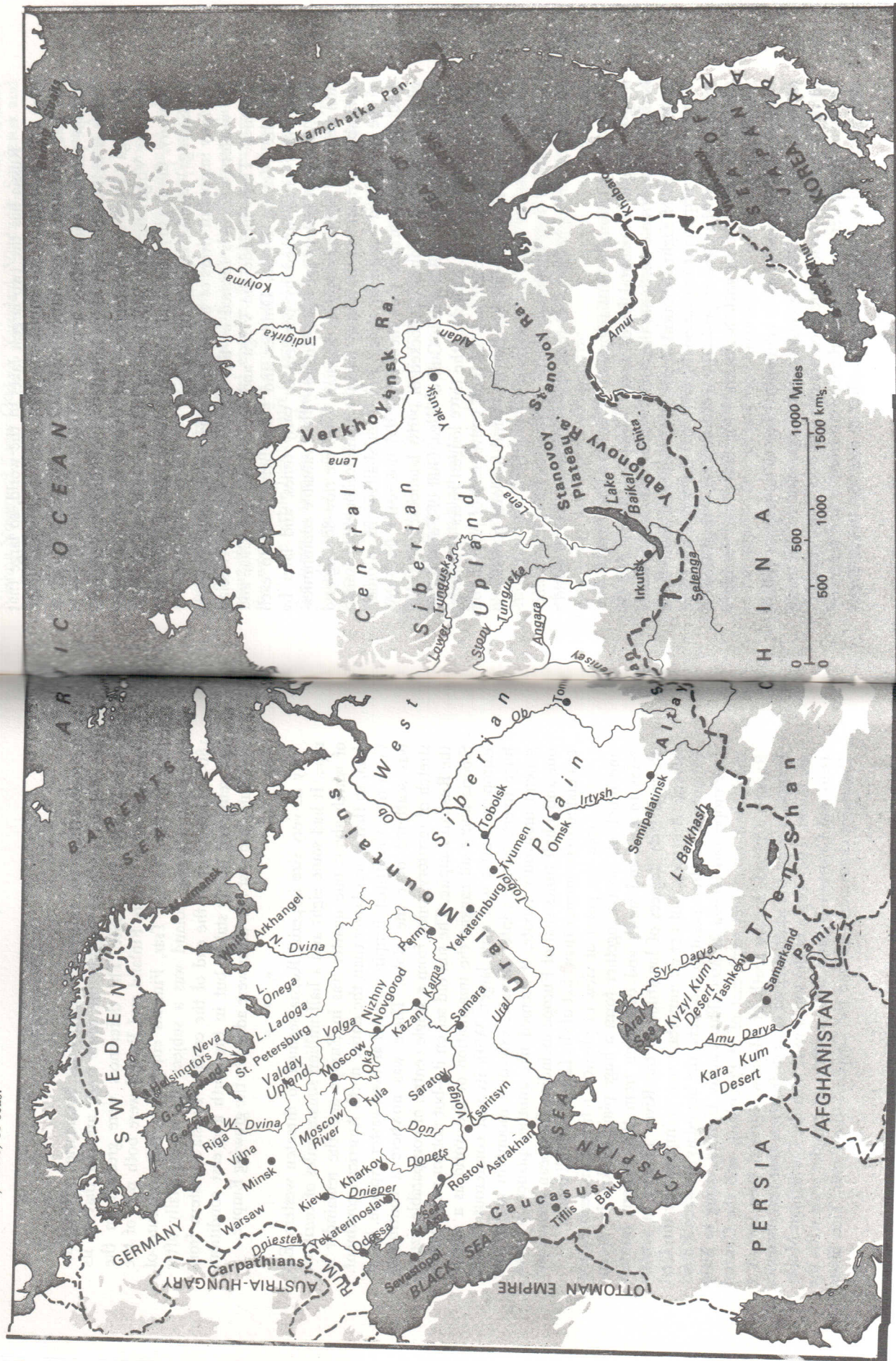
By the end of the nineteenth century the boundaries of the Russian Empire enclosed roughly the same huge area as that of its successor state the USSR. The differences were greatest on the western frontiers where Finland and Poland were both part of the territory ruled by the Tsar, Finland enjoying a large measure of autonomy, whereas Poland was a subject nation, especially after 1863. From 1815 to the end of the century Russia's western frontiers remained nearly stable, but in the south and east conditions were fluid, and vast new areas were added to the growing Empire.

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By its very size imperial Russia seemed to threaten western Europe. It had some eight and a half million square miles of territory, of which about one quarter was in Europe and the remainder in Asia, so that it was larger than the entire north American continent. For a time the British Empire covered an even vaster expanse, but it was scattered over the globe. There was nowhere a continuous stretch of territory, ruled from a single centre, of comparable size to the Russian Empire. The sun did set on it—but not for many hours. Siberia above all caught the imagination of the world as a sort of European Russia writ even larger. With its vast coniferous forests, huge rivers, savage winter climate, extensive mountain ranges and general unsavoury repute, it seemed like another planet. Its area, one and a half times that of Europe including European Russia, was calculated to be greater than that of the face of the full moon.

* * * From the point of view of physical relief, European Russia and much of Siberia together form a huge plain flanked by mountains to east and south and extending from the western frontier through sixty degrees of longitude to the River Yenisey in central Siberia. A barrier, but not an important one, is imposed by the Ural Mountains (highest point, 6,210 feet), the boundary between Russia in Europe and Russia in Asia. The Valdai Upland, rising to little more than 1,000 feet south-east of St Petersburg, and the Central Russian Upland, to the south of Moscow, formed even less of a barrier. It is on the southern and eastern frontiers that real obstacles are found. They begin in the south-west with the Carpathian Mountains and Crimean Upland, and continue in grander style with the Caucasian chain and—beyond the Caspian—the Pamir, Tien Shan,

Imperial Russia in the nineteenth century, showing the main rivers, lakes, seas, mountains, towns, and cities. From the western frontier to the River Yenisey in Central Siberia, the greater part of the Empire consisted of a vast plain. To the south and east the frontiers almost everywhere coincided with mountains, rivers, or seas.



Altay and Sayan ranges. Eastern Siberia is crossed by mountain chains, the Yablonovy, Stanovoy and others. Thus the southern border of the Empire was almost everywhere fenced off by mountains or seas.

* * * Russia has the two largest lakes in the world, so large that they are termed seas: the Caspian and the Aral. Apart from these she has the largest lakes in Asia (Baikal and Balkhash) and in Europe (Ladoga and Onega).

She is well stocked with rivers too, having the longest in Europe, the Volga (2,300 miles in length), and three in Siberia that dwarf even the Volga: the Ob (3,500 miles from the source of its chief tributary, the Irtysh), the Yenisey (3,700 miles from the source of the Selenga) and the Lena (2,670 miles).

Many important rivers of European Russia rise in a small area of the western midlands formed by the Volga and Central Russian Uplands. These include the Volga and its tributary the Oka, and also the Western Dvina, Dnieper and Don. Being close to each other and easily linked by portages in early times, and later by canal, the river system provided Russia with a valuable communication network, especially as most Russian rivers are slow-flowing and navigable far upstream. But many rivers become icebound for much of the year, flood heavily in spring and form shallows in summer. And Russians often felt that their rivers did not really lead anywhere. So many pour into landlocked or partly landlocked seas: the Caspian, Sea of Azov, Black Sea, Gulf of Riga, Gulf of Finland and the White Sea. Others, including the three longest rivers of Siberia, drain into the Arctic Ocean, not the most convenient of jumping-off points. Many Russian ports become ice-bound for long periods. So although Russians could move around effectively, if not very comfortably, inside their Empire by sledge, carriage or train, they sometimes felt claustrophobic about their restricted access to the world's sea routes.

* * * Vegetationally Russia consists of uneven broad zones running in roughly horizontal bands across European Russia and Siberia. In the extreme north are the Arctic wastes and tundra, thinly populated and of slight historical importance. South of those come the two most important vegetational zones: first the forest and then, to the south of that, the steppe—the word denotes a large treeless plain or prairie covered with herbaceous vegetation and having a dry climate.

Most of the forest zone is coniferous and is sometimes called, especially with reference to Siberia, the *tayga*. But in European Russia a wedge of mixed forest, coniferous and deciduous, stretches south of the coniferous belt from the western frontier and tapers off near Kazan on the Volga. Though smaller in area, the mixed forest

is important as the cradle of the modern state, where Russia, centred on Moscow, made a second start after the decline of the old Russian state based on Kiev. Besides Moscow itself the area of mixed forest included such other historic cities as Novgorod, Nizhny Novgorod (now Gorky), Yaroslavl, Vladimir, Smolensk and St. Petersburg.

As one moved southwards there was no sudden change from forest to steppe. First came a transitional area, part woods and part steppe, sometimes termed the wooded steppe or meadow-grass steppe—found, for example in Oryol Province, scene of Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*. South of it comes the steppe proper, also called feather-grass steppe. This in turn blends into arid (also called saline or wormwood) steppe, merging further to the south-east with the sand or stone deserts of Central Asia.

Not being fit for cultivation, the arid steppe was thinly populated, being the preserve of pastoral nomads. But the steppe proper and the wooded steppe are good crop-raising country, coinciding partly with the fertile black earth (*chernozem*) belt which stretches from the western frontier to the Altay foothills and reaches its greatest breadth of just under two hundred miles in European Russia. This became famous as one of the world's granaries and was supporting about a hundred people to the square mile at the beginning of the twentieth century. But the incursions of raiding horsemen had hampered cultivation of these lands until fairly late in Russian history, and insufficient rainfall made the raising of crops somewhat hazardous even on black earth.

* * * Poor conditions for growing food, the attacks of outside enemies, unsettled internal conditions and the exactions of central authority—all tended to make Russia a place where mere survival was an achievement. And there was also the Russian climate, which, as Yepikhodov rightly says in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* (1903-4), 'isn't exactly co-operative'.

Russia has an arctic climate in the extreme north, a subtropical climate on parts of the Black Sea coast, of Transcaucasia and of Central Asia, and a monsoon-type climate on the Pacific coast of the Far East. But these are only the fringes. The rest of the country, by far the greatest part of Russian territory, has a continental climate with long, cold winters and short, fairly hot summers. As one travels from west to east the range of temperature, between the cold of winter and the heat of summer, becomes ever wider. Eastern Siberia has an extreme continental climate. It can have heat waves in summer, but its winters are very severe, and it includes at Verkhoyansk what is often claimed as the cold pole of the northern hemisphere with a mean temperature in January of -58°F . and a lowest recorded temperature of -83.6°F . Over most of European Rus-

sia too, winter is the longest and perhaps most typically Russian season. The average number of days with a below-zero temperature has been put at a hundred and forty and a hundred and fifty in Moscow and St Petersburg respectively, with a hundred and eighty in the middle Urals and a hundred and ninety in Archangel in the far north. Even in the southern port of Odessa the figure is as high as ninety.¹

* * * The Russian winter can be monotonous, but is also awe-some and picturesque. It is rendered more bearable by a tendency for the coldest days to be windless, at least in the north and centre. In the south blizzards are more common, so that the winters there can also be severe. But for Russian society in Moscow and St Petersburg, winter was a gay time with visits to the theatre and balls, and with sleighs whirring through the streets almost silent on the snow except for the tinkling of their bells. On fine days the low sun glittered blindingly on snow and ice. To Russian merchants winter was the time when heavy loads could be transported more easily than over the atrocious ruts and mire of the roads in spring and autumn. For the peasants field work came to an end in winter, but they might take seasonal jobs in a town and their families might have work to do at home, the organisation of cottage industries being widely developed.

The beginning of winter, with the arrival of the 'new road'—for sledges instead of carts—was a glad occasion, bringing the end of autumn slush. Another exhilarating event was the onset of spring, with the bleak, silent monochrome of winter rapidly giving way to colours, smells and bird song, while the breaking ice on the rivers thundered like an artillery barrage. For the farmer the summer was all too short, the sowing and reaping of a crop often being crowded into a mere hundred days. So spurts of intense effort were needed at sowing, haymaking and harvest time, in contrast to the long periods of winter inactivity.

The "Estates"

The Empire's population, both Russian and non-Russian, fell into a number of social categories according to a complicated system. In the first instance the vast majority of the inhabitants could be classed as native subjects. These comprised the entire population (including non-Russians) except for three relatively small groups: foreign nationals resident in Russia; the inhabitants of Finland; and

1. M. L. Schlesinger, *Land und Leute in Russland* [Land and people in Russia], 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1909), p. 238. [Unless

the peoples termed 'those of other race' (*inorodtsy*), consisting of Jews, but also of various primitive tribes.

Among the above the inhabitants of Finland were further subdivided into social classes according to a separate system which was inherited from Finland's period as a dependency of Sweden and need not be considered here. What must be explained now is the array of social groups into which the native subjects of the Empire, and also the Jews, were subdivided. To one or other of these groups (*sosloviya* or *sostoyaniya*), which may be termed estates, every individual was obliged at least in theory to belong. Each estate had its own special status in law and its own peculiar advantages or obligations.

There was thus no general category of Russian citizen. There were instead the estates of the gentry (hereditary and personal), clergy and peasantry. There were also several groups into which 'town-dwellers' were divided, those of: honorary citizens (hereditary and personal); merchants; craftsmen; and burghers (*meshchane*). But to make matters more complicated, only about half of the actual population of the towns consisted of members of these town-dwellers' estates, the remainder belonging to other estates, chiefly that of the peasantry. * * * The borderline between these groups was not always very precise, and membership of one estate need not exclude membership of another. It was customary also to speak of members of the armed forces as belonging to the military estates, though of course many officers were also members of the gentry. Officials were also often spoken of as forming an estate, though some of them belonged to that of the gentry as well.

Closer examination only confirms the unsystematic pattern presented by the Empire's social strata. In certain groups children automatically inherited the social status of their parents, as was the case with the hereditary gentry, hereditary honorary citizens, burghers and peasants. In other groups—those of the merchants, personal gentry and personal honorary citizens—status was not so transmitted. Most groups possessed a corporate organisation—the assemblies of the gentry; the merchants' guilds; the craft corporations; and the burghers' and peasants' communes. But the honorary citizens had no such organisation. Corporate organisations might exist below and up to the level of provinces, as they did in the case of the gentry. In one case there was overall control over a whole estate on an all-Russian level, since the whole clergy came under the supervision of the Holy Synod.

The legal position of the estates changed during the course of the century and the situation became more fluid. Originally the two estates of gentry and clergy were called privileged because their

members enjoyed three advantages: freedom from conscription, from corporal punishment and from personal taxation. Hence the other estates were sometimes termed 'taxed'. With the restrictions on corporal punishment enacted in 1863, the introduction of universal liability to conscription in 1874 and the abolition of the poll-tax by 1887, the position changed. But other things being equal it was still worth being a gentleman rather than a member of the other estates. There was, it should be added, a certain amount of mobility military or civil rank automatically conferred entry to the gentry, as might the possession of sufficient funds to the estate of the merchants.

The relative size of the groups may be judged by the following figures showing the membership of the main estates or groups of estates as a percentage of the population at the end of the nineteenth century²:

Peasants	81.5 per cent
'Town-dwellers'	9 per cent
Military estates	6.5 per cent
Gentry	just over 1 per cent
Clergy	just under 1 per cent

Landowners and Gentlemen

The gentry's importance in Russian culture is completely out of proportion to its numbers—just over one per cent of the population at the end of the nineteenth century. Much Russian literature was written by landowners for landowners about landowners, and by the time of Turgenev the squire's country seat, such as the 'nest of gentlefolk' in the title of one of his novels, had become an established setting for Russian fiction.

Two overlapping concepts are involved here, those of landowner (*pomeshchik*) and gentleman (*dvoryanin*), the latter term denoting membership of one of the estates into which society was divided. It is sometimes rendered 'nobility', so that Turgenev's novel may be alluded to as *A Nest Of Noblemen*, but since the English word nobility implies possession of a title, the less misleading term gentry is preferred here.

Before 1861 a provision (sometimes circumvented, like all Russian provisions) existed whereby no one except a gentleman could own serfs, and as land tenure was usually combined with serf-

ownership, a large landowner at the time of serfdom was almost inevitably a member of the gentry class. After emancipation there was a continual decrease in the amount of land held by the gentry, whose holdings passed more and more to members of other classes. Thus Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, in which Lopakhin, the self-made son of a former serf, buys a vast estate from feckless gentry owners, seems to sum up over a hundred years of decline from the late eighteenth century under Catherine the Great, the gentry's golden age.

The estate of the gentry could be entered by non-gentlemen who attained high rank in the civil service or armed forces. Though the actual rank giving this right varied according to the regulations currently in force, the important point is that the estate was not exclusive, as some of its members would have liked to make it. Certain civil and military awards—those of St Vladimir and St George, as also the first class of other decorations—likewise conveyed the status of hereditary membership of the gentry. An inferior grade of gentry was that conferred by the status of personal, as opposed to hereditary, gentleman. Personal status was conferred by lower rank than that which gave hereditary gentry status, and, as the title implies, did not devolve to children.

The emperors tended to look to the gentry to resist revolution and support the *status quo*. One of Nicholas I's³ police chiefs, Dubelt, summed up the position as follows: 'The landowner is the most reliable bulwark of the sovereign. . . . If his power is destroyed, the people will become a flood, endangering in time even the Tsar himself. . . . The landlord is the most faithful, the unsleeping watchdog of the state; he is the natural police-magistrate'.⁴ The landowners' privileges were intended to preserve their loyalty and encourage them in the performance of specific services. Themselves exempt from flogging, conscription and personal taxation during the period when these inconveniences remained in force, they were responsible under serfdom for collecting poll-tax paid by their peasants, for drafting them into the army and for administering local justice—functions which all passed to the village commune or to the canton after 1861.

The gentry had an elaborate corporate organisation, including gentry assemblies at provincial and district level, presided over by marshals of the gentry who were chosen through a combination of election by their peers with appointment by the ministry of the interior. One of their duties was to see that delinquent gentlemen toed the line. Thus in Chekhov's story *My Life* (1896) the provincial

3. 1825–55 [Editor's note].

4. B. H. Sumner, *Survey of Russian History* (London, 1944), p. 142.

2. V. I. Kovalevsky, ed., *Rossija v konce XIX veka* [Russia at the end of the nineteenth century] (St. Petersburg, 1900), p. 67.

marshal of the gentry reports the hero, Misail Poloznev, to the governor of the province for working as a labourer—conduct unbecoming in a gentleman and son of the local architect.

After the local government reforms of 1864, the marshals of the gentry became *ex officio* chairmen of the assemblies of the newly instituted rural councils, the *zemstvos*. The institution of land captains appointed from among the gentry in 1889 *** was another provision whereby the landowning gentry regained some of the control over peasant affairs lost at the time of emancipation.

*** The Russians had a titled nobility or aristocracy, but it formed only a small section of the gentry as a whole. Their oldest hereditary title was that of prince (*knyaz*), and many Russian princes traced their descent from the semi-legendary founder of the Russian state, Rurik, said to have died in 879 A.D. Others were descendants of Gedimin, Prince of Lithuania, or of Tatar or Georgian princes. Members of the Tsar's family held the title *veliki knyaz* (literally 'great prince'), for which grand duke is used in English. Prince was the only Russian title in use in the nineteenth century that dated from before Peter the Great⁵ who introduced new grades of nobility: those of count (*graf*) and baron. The latter title was held by many members of the German nobility in the Russian Baltic, who so often reached high rank in the administration. When awarded to Russians it came to be granted to successful businessmen, so that princes and counts somewhat looked down on it.

By contrast with French and English practice, titles were inherited by all the children of a titled father, whence the large number of princes, princesses, counts and countesses scattered through the pages of Russian novels. It was also usual for property to be split among all the sons of a family, not left exclusively to an eldest son—hence a tendency for members of the aristocracy to be poorer than their rank suggests. There was thus nothing improbable in Dostoevsky beginning his *Idiot* by introducing a penniless Prince Myshkin almost in the role of beggar and suppliant, while if the name of a Prince Golitsyn cropped up in real life, the question was apt to be asked: 'Who is this Golitsyn? A rich one or a poor one?'⁶

*** Peter the Great had compelled the gentry to dress like western Europeans by wearing what the peasants called 'German clothes', whereas clergy, merchants and peasants continued wearing traditional Russian dress. In the nineteenth century this differentiation by dress was maintained. Thus the heroine of Pushkin's *Young Lady as Peasant*, one of his *Tales of Belkin*, was able to pass herself off as a peasant girl only after getting her maids to run her up a

5. 1682–1725 [Editor's note].

6. Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1961), p. 376.

rustic shirt and *sarafan*⁷ specially for the occasion. While remaining distinct from the clothing of other classes, the dress of the gentry did of course change according to changes in fashion. For ladies it was full skirts in the thirties and cinolines in the sixties. At the beginning of the nineteenth century men were wearing tail-coats. These continued to be formal wear, but were ousted for more ordinary occasions by frock-coats and later by jackets and dinner-jackets, as were top hats by bowlers. Waistcoats were considered essential wear for a gentleman. By the end of the nineteenth century, distinction of dress was becoming less marked in the sense that gentry and non-gentry townspeople were dressing more and more alike.

*** As readers of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* will remember, French was a common means of communication for the Russian gentry at the beginning of the nineteenth century—in fact there were many Russian gentlemen who spoke it better than their own language. In a way Pushkin knew Russian better than anyone else before or since, but he regularly wrote to his Russian wife in French. Herzen⁸ explains that his father wrote better French than Russian and would never so much as read a Russian book. He did once take up Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*, hearing that Alexander I⁹ had read it, but soon laid it down, saying: 'All these Izyslaviches and Olgoviches—what a bore!' (*My Past and Thoughts*, ch. v). After the discovery of Anna Karenina's adultery, her husband found it convenient to speak to her in French, for you seemed chilly enough to express his disapproval, whereas the polite second-person plural would have meant too harsh a transition from the intimate form *ty*. As for Dostoevsky, being a rabid Russian nationalist he objected to the practice of bringing up genteel infants to speak French: 'Mummy doesn't know with what venom she is poisoning her child as early as the age of two, when she invites a French *bonne*¹ to look after him' (*Diary of a Writer*, May–June 1877).

In time the use of French declined socially, and by Chekhov's day it was almost becoming a genteel vulgarity. It is typical that some of Chekhov's non-approved characters, including Natasha in *Three Sisters* (1900–1901), should speak inaccurate French. The habit of using French names for Russian, for instance of addressing an Ivan as *Jean*, had also become a sign of social pretentiousness.

7. Russian peasant women's dress, without sleeves and buttoning in the front. which was smuggled into Russia and widely read [Editor's note].

8. A. I. Herzen (1812–70), Russian revolutionary philosopher, left Russia in 1847 and published a free Russian weekly

1. Nursery maid [Editor's note].

Towns

Though most Russians were countrymen, the population of the towns was growing fast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—more than six times as rapidly as that of the countryside. The following figures show the increase of Russian urban population and the way in which it was rising as a percentage of the whole.²

Year	Number of town-dwellers	Percentage of whole population
1812	1,653,000	4.4
1835	3,025,000	5.8
1851	3,482,000	7.8
1867	8,157,000	10.6
1897	16,785,212	13.0

There were few large towns. In 1867 there were only four in the whole Empire with a population of over one hundred thousand (St Petersburg, Moscow, Warsaw and Odessa), and even then one of those was Polish. By 1897 the number (of towns in the Empire with a population over one hundred thousand) had risen to nineteen. These were, in descending order of size: St Petersburg, Moscow, Warsaw, Odessa, Lodz, Riga, Kiev, Kharkov, Tiflis, Vilna, Tashkent, Saratov, Kazan, Yekaterinoslav (now Dnepropetrovsk). Rostov-on-Don, Astrakhan, Baku, Tula and Kishinyov. By no means all the above towns were fully or even partly Russian, though all belonged to the Empire.

* * * Observers from western Europe hardly recognised Russian towns as towns at all. Less tactful foreigners, and some Russians too, described Moscow itself or even the whole Empire as one vast village. Observers also noted a lack of variety in Russian towns. Ample available space and danger of fire encouraged a tendency to sprawl, and the wide unpaved streets were often no better than those found in ordinary villages. Paved roads, sewage systems, street lighting and piped water were not unheard of, but even by the beginning of the twentieth century they were still restricted to small, prosperous sections of the larger towns.

Most houses were single-storied and made of wood, but stone-built apartment houses of several storeys were also going up in the towns where population pressure was greatest. It was common practice to rent apartments and houses rather than to own them, and the more salubrious might be occupied by wealthy officials, while the very poorest citizens might have to hire the corner of a room in some unsavoury doss-house. Among these that of Khitrov Market

in Moscow was a notorious haunt of tramps, prostitutes and thieves. Here professional beggar-women could hire emaciated babies by the day to attract alms from passers-by, and if the baby died during the course of the day they would continue exhibiting it so as to get their money's worth.³

Despite such grotesque examples of private enterprise, the general atmosphere of Russian towns was torpid. There were few shops as understood in western Europe, shopping often being done in markets consisting of small, ill-lit stores, each exactly like its neighbour and known as the trading rows. As in some villages, churches with painted domes and characteristic outlines might supply variety to the eye. And in provincial capitals the governor's residence, court of justice, administrative offices, gymnasiums (grammar schools), hospitals, theatres and so on provided a relatively imposing centre to the sprawling, ramshackle outskirts.

* * * Russian novelists were cautious about identifying provincial towns, preferring to call them 'the town of N.' (or any other letter of the alphabet). Or such places may, like the setting of Dostoevsky's *Devils* and the town in Chekhov's *My Life*, be called simply 'our town'. The identity of the town which forms the centre of Chichikov's intrigues in *Dead Souls* is concealed, but it was conceivably suggested to the author by Kursk. Similarly the identity of the provincial capital in *Three Sisters* is not revealed in the text of the play, though Chekhov did tell Gorky⁴ that 'the action takes place in a provincial town such as Perm' (letter of 16th October 1900). The trouble is that there were so many Kursks and Perms in Russia with little to differentiate one from another. 'In Russia all towns are identical,' Chekhov once wrote to his sister from Yekaterinburg—now Sverdlovsk. 'Yekaterinburg is just like Perm or Tula. It's also like Sumy and Galyach' (letter of 29th April 1890). Even his home town, Taganrog, impressed Chekhov as boring, though it was a port on the sea of Azov with a polyglot population of sailors and merchants, including Greeks, Armenians and Bulgarians. It had quite a good theatre too and a passable library, but to Chekhov it was completely Asiatic, a place where people 'do nothing but eat, sleep and multiply and have no other interests' (letter of 7th April 1887). Chekhov's works abound in denunciations of provincial Russian towns so outspoken that it is no wonder if he was cryptic about their identity. One such speech is that delivered by Andrey Prozorov in Act Four of *Three Sisters*.

* * * Towns tended less to be organic growths than in western Europe, and to exist as the result of administrative policy. Catherine

3. Henri Troyat, *Daily Life in Russia under the Last Tsar*, tr. Malcolm Barnes (London, 1961), p. 61.

4. Maxim Gorky, pseudonym of Alexey Maximovich Peshkov (1868–1936), notable Russian writer [Editor's note].

2. Kovalevsky, p. 60.

the Great set up over two hundred towns in just over twenty years, being persuaded that Russia required a *bourgeoisie* such as it clearly did not possess, but mainly with the intention of strengthening administrative control over her far-flung Empire. It was easy to create a town by decree. 'To transform a village into a town, it was necessary merely to prepare an *izba*, or log-house, for the district court, another for the police-office, a third for the prison, and so on. . . . All this required very little creative effort.'⁵ A hundred years after Catherine's death a Russian *bourgeoisie* had indeed come into being, and the usual claim that it was not very numerous is belied by statistics, since about half the urban population consisted of burghers, merchants and members of other bourgeois categories. But it is true that this was not a *bourgeoisie* on the European model and that it was not influential in affairs of state.

* * * Many town-dwellers were peasants temporarily or permanently absent from their villages. Members of the non-landowning gentry also tended to reside in towns, while landowners themselves often wintered in town, spending only part of the year on their estates. According to the 1897 census the peasants accounted for 38.8 per cent and the gentry for 6.2 per cent of all town-dwellers.⁶ Most of the remainder, 44.3 per cent of the overall urban population, belonged to the estate of the burghers. Though no better translation of the word *meshchanin* suggests itself, it must be added that "burgher" conveys too solid an impression for a group which excluded merchants, a more prosperous category, and included small traders, owners of apartment-houses, craftsmen, factory workers and indeed more or less anyone who could not be fitted in elsewhere. The burghers had their own communes with elected elders—less vital institutions than the village commune, but by no means ornamental, since they too could exile offending members to Siberia.

* * *

The merchants (*kuptsy*) formed a special class within Russian society, and they included factory-owners as well as traders, so the term merchant may be misleading and it might be better to call them businessmen. Merchants did not form an estate in the same sense as did the gentry and clergy, since the status of merchant was more precarious. It was not hereditary, but was obtained by paying the dues required to join one of the two (before 1863 three) merchants' Guilds, of which the First Guild was for the wealthier, including those engaged in foreign trade, while the Second was for humbler operators. At the beginning of the twentieth century the First Merchant Guild numbered 30,000 members and the Second

about 400,000. If a merchant was unable to meet his dues he would probably revert to being a burgher or peasant.

In contrast to gentry and officials, the merchants belonged with clergy and peasantry to the least europeanised part of the community. They were apt to sport huge beards and have the hair of their heads parted in the middle. The more old-fashioned continued to wear long black double-breasted coats buttoned down the middle in traditional Russian style, whereas gentlemen dressed in the European manner. Merchants did not usually speak any language except Russian. They might even be unable to read or write that, but it could be an expensive mistake to assume that such illiterates were poor businessmen. Many successful merchants were Old Believers, and also clung to the ways of old Moscow by keeping their wives and daughters in comparative seclusion. They liked to dispense hospitality, staging lavish banquets at vast expense with plenty of sturgeon, champagne flowing freely, and with luck a high official or a general or two among the guests to lend tone. Successful merchants built elaborately appointed houses and spent money on large ornate mirrors, grand pianos which were never played and other costly furniture. But all this was for show. When not entertaining, the host might occupy poky little rooms in some corner of the house with his family.

In the works of Russian literature best known outside Russia, Russian merchants do not figure prominently. One merchant in Russian literature familiar to the foreign theatre-goer is Lopakhin in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, and for a fuller study of the merchant milieu in Chekhov the reader can turn to his story *Three Years* (1895).

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* * * The general category of town-dwellers included, in addition to burghers and merchants, further subdivisions with smaller membership. These were honorary citizens, who might have either hereditary or life status. To this group were assigned for example sons of the clergy who had not entered the church, certain officials, and merchants who had made outstanding gifts to charity. The grade of honorary citizen was introduced in 1832 and conferred exemption from corporal punishment, recruitment and the poll-tax. Yet another estate, which existed in some towns, was membership of one of the craft corporations (*tsekhi*). But by the end of the nineteenth century formal distinctions between all estates were breaking down, and an individual might even not know his own social status until he needed a passport. As this suggests, Russian society was proceeding in the direction taken by western Europe.

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5. D. Mackenzie Wallace, *Russia* (London, 1877), I, 261.
6. V. A. Aleksandrov, et al., eds., *Narody evropejskoj časti SSSR* [The peoples of the European part of the USSR]. (Moscow, 1964), p. 326.

* * * Provincial centres all possessed their gentry clubs and there were often clubs for professional people, small officials and merchants. Clubs might contain a restaurant, a reading-room and a large hall for staging elaborate receptions and balls—such as that described in the provincial gentry assembly hall in Chekhov's *Order of St Anne* (1895). But the main activity, according to literary and other evidence, was gambling over the card-table—often regarded as the main vice of the Russian privileged classes.

Another characteristic urban institution of increasing popularity was the practice of hiring country cottages (*dachi*) not far away from one's place of residence and preferably on a lake, river or sea accessible by railway. To such resorts urban husbands would pack off their wives and children for the summer, often themselves commuting to their place of work at special seasonal reduced fares. The *dacha* husband, a joke figure as one particularly vulnerable to cuckolding, became a staple feature of *fin-de-siècle* funny stories.

One practice not exclusive to Russian society was that of keeping open house on the afternoon or evening of a fixed day each week, when it was possible for friends of the family to drop in without any specific invitation. Hence such information as 'we receive on Thursdays', sometimes dispensed in Russian novels by the lady of the house, who usually took the leading role on social occasions. Such was the practice of polite society, but Russians of all classes were celebrated among foreigners for their hospitality, which erred if at all by its very excess. The celebration of namedays and birthdays of members of the family was one pleasant excuse for dispensing good cheer and another practice confined to urban Russia—as opposed to the village, where it was not much followed.

* * *

Officials

Imperial authority was enforced by a complex system of pressures and controls, some of which have been indicated already—the use made of the landowning gentry to keep the peasantry in line, and also of the Orthodox Church, conceived by authority as a bulwark of the state and custodian of its ideology.

The system of controls must now be further explored. This involves examining the civil service, * * * army, and also education, which was constantly under review with the aim of using it to combat revolution and produce malleable citizens. * * * Political opposition often reared its head within the very apparatus of control, especially in the law-courts, in the *zemstvos*, in education and above all in publishing. * * * It is important to note that imperial Russia was, after all, a going concern, even if its progress was a

stumbling and painful affair. It did work, and it is the concern of the present [section] to show how, with particular reference to the imperial civil service.

* * * Foreign visitors were often struck by the vast numbers of officials who seemed to be found all over the place in imperial Russia, all wearing some kind of uniform, with dark green the dominant colour. Besides civil servants of various kinds, they also included many persons who would not automatically be regarded as functionaries in other societies, but who in Russia held official rank and wore uniforms. Members of the liberal professions were often employed by the state, and so many lawyers, doctors and architects held official rank. So did university professors, who, if sufficiently distinguished, might rate the title 'Your Excellency' like Professor Serebryakov in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. Gymnasium (grammar school) masters, being state employees, also rated as officials, which is why a schoolmaster like Kulygin in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* may appear on the stage in uniform and even introduce himself as a 'court councillor'. Students, such as Trofimov in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, also wore a uniform, though this provision was not in force throughout the period. But the idea that every other Russian was an official of some sort is an exaggeration. The total number of persons belonging to the class was only about one in two hundred and fifty of the population at the beginning of the twentieth century,⁷ and they were naturally most thickly congregated in the two capitals where foreigners were likely to notice them.

* * * The imperial word for official, *chinovnik*, has become a term of abuse in Soviet Russia. If the evidence of nineteenth-century literature is anything to go on, this use of the word is thoroughly justified, for so many Russian authors portray the workings of the imperial bureaucracy as an indecorous farce. The first writer of note to explore the theme thoroughly was Gogol, himself briefly an official in St Petersburg. He produced two especially memorable studies—one comic, the play *The Inspector-General*, and the other tragi-comic, the story *The Overcoat*. Among many followers of Gogol the young Dostoevsky took up the theme with his wretched Makar Devushkin, hero of his first novel, *Poor Folk*, and with the fantastic twin heroes of his second novel, *The Double*.

A practice puzzling to the uninitiated reader is that of calling civil servants of the first four ranks 'general', though they might never have donned military uniform or know one end of a gun from another. Civil service generals abound in Russian literature, as the result of which Virginia Woolf once claimed that, in a typical Russian novel, 'we open the door and find ourselves in a room full

7. Schlesinger, p. 60.

of Russian Generals'.⁸ Such generals were often comic figures like General Pralinsky in Dostoevsky's *Nasty Anecdote* (1862), who intrudes on the wedding celebrations of a subordinate, gets helplessly drunk, collapses face down in a plate of blancmange and has to be put to bed on the nuptial couch. As this episode shows, authors did not always defer to rank when it came to ridiculing the civil service, though by common consent a lowish grade, that of titular councillor (class nine), was the most comic of all. The mere mention of a titular councillor was enough to create pleasurable tension in the reader, who could assume that some kind of slapstick comedy was likely to follow.

But were imperial officials really quite as funny as all that? Herzen did not think so, and he knew the milieu well, having himself been employed as a provincial official during exile to Vyatka and Novgorod. * * *

Among the points scored against officials in literature, sympathy towards those of higher rank, as in Chekhov's early *Fat and Thin* (1883), is prominent. But the most common accusation is that of taking bribes. As Chekhov stated * * * in *My Life*: 'If you applied to the municipal offices, . . . the health centre or any other institution they would shout after you, "Remember to say thank you", and you would go back and hand over thirty or forty copecks.' It has been argued in defence of these exactions that civil servants were badly paid and that bribery, pretty well in accordance with a fixed tariff, had become a traditional way of supplementing inadequate incomes. The dishonest official was not the one who took bribes (since that was absolutely normal), but the one who hung on to a bribe when he could not perform the service for which it had been paid, or who would not stick to the usual tariff—like one of Gogol's officials, accused of taking bribes 'above his station'.

* * * The official class was a creation of Peter the Great, who in 1722 set up the celebrated hierarchy of fourteen official grades, termed the table of ranks, which remained in force with few alterations until 1917. These ranks had cumbersome titles borrowed from Prussian and other western European models, and care is needed in translating them from Russian. 'Privy councillor' is, for example, a tempting rendering for *tayny sovetnik*, and is in fact adopted below for want of a better alternative, but can give a misleading impression in English. The fourteen ranks are listed on the next page.

Classes eleven and thirteen fell into abeyance in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the military rank of major, formerly equivalent of collegiate assessor, was discontinued in 1884.

8. Virginia Woolf, "The Russian Point of View," in *The Common Reader: First*

Class	Civilian Rank	Military Equivalent (after 1884)
1	Chancellor	Field Marshal
2	Actual Privy Councillor	General
3	Privy Councillor	Lieutenant-General
4	Actual State Councillor	Major-General
5	State Councillor	
6	Collegiate Councillor	Colonel
7	Court Councillor	Lieutenant-Colonel
8	Collegiate Assessor	Captain
9	Titular Councillor	Staff Captain
10	Collegiate Secretary	Lieutenant
11	Ship's Secretary	
12	Provincial (<i>gubernsky</i>) Secretary	Sub-Lieutenant
13	Provincial (<i>provintsialny</i>) Secretary	
14	Collegiate Registrar	

Each official had an appropriate honorific title with which he was addressed by subordinates and on official occasions. Classes one and two above were 'Your Supreme Excellency'; three, four and five rated as 'Your Excellency'; six to eight inclusive were 'Your Supreme Honour' and the remainder 'Your Honour'. Wives enjoyed these honorifics too, whence the occasions on which Anna Karenina is referred to as 'Her Excellency'.

Among the preoccupations of Russian officials was the award of various decorations called orders for which they might from time to time qualify. Most of these had several different grades, like that of St Vladimir with its four classes, even the lowest of which (class four) conferred hereditary membership of the gentry on the recipient. The order of St Anne (with three classes) was slightly less exalted—after receiving his St Anne class two, the hero of Chekhov's *Order of St Anne* planned to move on to the St Vladimir ladder and was rash enough to hint as much by making an execrable pun to the local provincial governor when, in accordance with etiquette, he paid a call to thank His Excellency for the award. * * *

* * * As already indicated, even the most exalted governmental organs had the function of executing the sovereign's will rather than of initiating policy. This is true of four bodies which must now be mentioned. The Senate was originally set up by Peter the Great in 1711 to supervise the whole administration and as the chief legislative, administrative and judicial organ. Its actual powers fell far short of this, especially in the period studied here, having decreased notably in the 1810s with the institution of the ministries (which were formally subordinate to it) and of the Committee of Ministers. But from 1864 onwards the Senate did operate as an effective court

Series (London, 1938), p. 177.

of appeal besides discharging numerous minor functions. The Committee of Ministers functioned from 1802 to 1906 with the task of co-ordinating the work of different departments. Its capacity was mainly advisory, as was that of the Council of State, set up in 1810 to discuss, but not initiate, prospective legislation. A similar role was fulfilled by a shorter-lived body, the Council of Ministers, which met at the Tsar's discretion and under his presidency between 1861 and 1882.

The ministries, establishment of which was completed in 1811, played an important part in the administration. These have been described as 'state departments of the usual west-European type, each with a well-defined competence and each under the direction of a minister who was personally responsible for the legality of his actions'.⁹ To this must be added a reminder that ministers were appointed and dismissed as and when the Tsar saw fit, and that he could take their advice or not as he wished.

* * *

It will be remembered that the reforms of Alexander II¹ included provisions for a new kind of local government, that of the zemstvos (rural councils) instituted by a law of 1864, and also of town councils (*gorodskije dумы*) instituted by a law of 1870. These bodies were elective, albeit on a complex system with heavy weighting in favour of the gentry and of property owners. The zemstvos existed both on provincial and district level, having their headquarters in provincial and district capitals. Their members, elected for periods of three years, in turn elected executive boards, also for three years, to manage current business. Provincial councillors were elected by district councillors, and they also elected executive boards. The town councils had a similar organisation, being elected for four years and forming an executive board, and they also chose a mayor. Thus alongside state officials were functioning officials of a different kind—unpaid, self-consciously public-spirited and the repository of the hopes of liberal-minded Russians, who saw in these new institutions a school of practical democracy.

The rural councillors often saw themselves in this light too. So, unfortunately for them, did the central authority, which proceeded to hamper them in various ways. They did not even exist in all provinces, for by the end of the century they were functioning in only thirty-four. And the 'counter-reforms' of Alexander III² included a law of 1890 limiting their power and increasing their dependence on the state. They were in any case impeded by various powers of near-veto exercised by provincial governors, by the ulti-

mate control of the ministry of the interior and by the difficulty of levying adequate taxes to meet their requirements. They were also compelled to accept the local marshal of the gentry (of district or province as the case might be) as chairman, thus confirming the gentry's dominant position. Still, peasants did find their way on to the councils, and incidentally often showed themselves more conservative than the representatives of the gentry on whom the government relied to keep them under control.

The councils were largely concerned with local economic needs—with the upkeep of roads and bridges, anti-famine precautions, medical care and elementary schools. By the end of the century they were employing many teachers and doctors, among whom they attracted the more radical-minded. Attempts by the councils to exercise wider political influence, outside the confines of local affairs, were carefully watched and thwarted by central authority. A certain tension existed between the local council with their new, progressive traditions, and the state officials, though the latter were by no means all the hidebound reactionaries of popular mythology.

* * *

The Army

The armed forces were an important pillar of the imperial Establishment, not least because of the tradition of appointing army generals to high administrative office. * * *

Though the Russian army in the first half of the nineteenth century was in many ways a backward and cruel institution, it also showed gleams of liberalism. Only perhaps in a land of surprises such as imperial Russia might one find guards officers, of all people, in the vanguard of a movement for reform. Yet this is what happened during the period of subversive secret societies which preceded the Decembrist revolt of 1825.³ The campaigns following Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 had opened the eyes of Russian soldiers serving in western Europe to the backwardness of their own country, showing them that forms of government other than the autocratic did exist elsewhere.

A Russian guards regiment, the Semyonovsky, had mutinied in 1820. Yet the guards were just as much of a social *élite* in Russia as elsewhere, 'quite fit to be compared with the German in the social position of their officer corps', as one authority states.⁴ But officers

3. The Decembrist revolt is named after the month (December) in which a group of liberal noblemen, primarily officers in the army, led their regiments into the Senate Square in St. Petersburg, anticipating popular support that did not materialize. The revolt was put down by the incoming tsar, Nicholas I; about 120 persons were arrested and tried; five were hanged, and those remaining were sent to prison or exiled to Siberia [Editor's note].

4. Schlesinger, p. 361.

9. Michael Karpovich, *Imperial Russia, 1801-1917* (New York, 1932), p. 18.

1. 1855-81 [Editor's note].

2. 1881-94 [Editor's note].

of less smart, non-guards regiments, normally dependent on their meagre pay, could not cut such a dash. One may contrast Lieutenant-colonel Count Vronsky, lover of Anna Karenina and owner of race horses and vast estates, with the less resplendent Lieutenant-colonel Vershinin, the battery commander in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, who had an unpresentable wife with suicidal tendencies and spent all his life 'knocking around from one lot of rooms to another, with a couple of chairs and a sofa and stoves smoking all the time'.

* * *

Duels fought in defence of marital or regimental honour, reckless gambling, exciting love affairs and alcoholic orgies are among the features that lend glitter to the life of the Russian officer in nineteenth-century Russian fiction. There was another aspect to the officer's life, as Tolstoy himself did not conceal, and for an account more concentrated on the seamy side of the mess and less likely to stimulate recruiting than Tolstoy's, readers could turn to Kuprin's *The Duel* (1905).⁵

* * * Conditions were greatly improved by the army reforms of General D. A. Milyutin, who was minister of war from 1861 to 1881. In the law of 1874 he took the class bias out of conscription, to which all male citizens over the age of twenty-one now became liable, though in peace time it was not usually necessary to call up more than about a third of them, and certain categories—including the clergy, only sons and men who had brothers with the colours—were exempt. The period of active service was reduced to six years followed by a number of years in the reserve and militia. Further concessions gave advantage to those who had attended school and university. Thus university students were liable to only six months with the colours, while ex-pupils of the gymnasiums and other secondary schools need only serve eighteen months or three years, and pupils of primary schools need serve four. For university and secondary school graduates who cared to enlist voluntarily rather than take their chance of not being conscripted, the above terms were halved.

The army became a place where peasants first learned to read and write, for Milyutin was successful in putting army education on a sound footing. Discipline was made less harsh, corporal punishment being now confined, at least in theory, to penal units, though it was no uncommon thing even after the reforms for an officer to strike a soldier. Conditions remained bad by absolute standards, but the situation had been transformed by Milyutin's reforms if comparison is made with the early part of the century.

5. A. I. Kuprin (1870–1938) has often been compared to the American writer Jack London (1876–1916), since both

Chekhov was sympathetically disposed towards the Russian army. According to Stanislavsky,⁶ he sent his own military representative to supervise the rehearsals of *Three Sisters*, in which army officers figure so prominently. Chekhov wanted his officers shown as 'charming, decent people,' not as blimpish heel-clickers. If Stanislavsky is to be believed, he also used to become lyrical about the cultural mission performed by the Russian army when posted to remote parts of the country, to which it took 'knowledge, art, happiness and joy'.⁷

Like so much else in life, the Russian army had its good and bad sides, and the bracket between them, as befits the 'broad Russian nature', was especially wide.

Education

The progress of nineteenth-century Russian education follows the pattern of imperial development in general by showing fairly impressive improvement on modest beginnings. Thus all educational facilities had greatly expanded by the end of the century. For instance, in 1899 the Empire had nine universities with about 17,000 students, whereas back in 1809 there had been a mere 450 students in four universities⁸ (these figures do not include the non-Russian universities of Helsingfors and Vilna). On the other hand, imperial education is less impressive if compared with that offered by the advanced countries of western Europe in the same period. An eloquent figure reflecting educational backwardness is the high proportion (seventy-four per cent) of citizens of the Empire between the ages of nine and forty-nine recorded as illiterate in the 1897 census.

* * *

Education of a more conventional type for a writer was received by Chekhov, who attended the gymnasium (grammar school) at Taganrog where Greek and Latin formed a large part of the curriculum. This was a most respectable form of education by the standards of the day, and Chekhov, though no outstanding pupil, was able to proceed to the University of Moscow. There he qualified as a doctor and unofficially as a writer by stories and sketches published during his student years.

Gorky received little formal education, being taught to read by the cook on a Volga steamer for whom he worked as pantry-boy. Of

6. Stanislavsky was the stage name of K. S. Alekseev (1863–1938), actor, stage director, and co-manager with V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858–1943) of the Moscow Art Theatre, which the two founded in 1898. All of Chekhov's major plays, except *The Sea Gull* and *Uncle Vanya*, received their première produc-

tion at the Moscow Art Theatre [Editor's note].

7. Anton Chekhov, *The Oxford Chekhov*, tr. and ed. Ronald Hingley, (London, 1964), III, 314–16.

8. Michael T. Florinsky, *Russia: A History and An Interpretation* (New York, 1953), II, 726; Kovalevsky, p. 482.

this skill, once acquired, he made good use, besides receiving a rough but thorough education in the 'university of life'. He ironically gave the title *My Universities* to the section of his autobiography devoted to what would have been his student years if he had succeeded, as he had hoped, in gaining admission to the University of Kazan.

* * *

After the Crimean War, and increasingly during the rest of the period under review,⁹ Russian universities became centres of political unrest. This was the age of student demonstrations, riots and strikes, supported by the more liberal university teachers, who risked dismissal by such displays of sympathy. Peasant disturbances at the time of emancipation and the Khodynka disaster of 1896¹ * * * were among occasions evoking student protests. Worse riots followed in St Petersburg University in 1899, sparked off by an official warning that unruliness would not be tolerated during the University's annual celebration on 8th February.² A student demonstration was dispersed by mounted police with whips, after which a general strike of students was declared and carried out in many other universities too. Student demonstrators were liable to harsh treatment, being sent down from the university in large numbers and often drafted into the army as privates—the deferment or curtailment of military service, to which they were entitled as students, conveniently lapsed when they were expelled. But this sort of thing only inflamed the situation, and in 1901 a former student assassinated the minister of education, N. P. Bogolepov, thus carrying academic protest to its ultimate limit.

Student unrest was due to political dissatisfaction aggravated by specific grievances, such as the disciplinary powers exercised by university inspectors and a virtual ban on free corporate activities. Many students were poor, as is not unknown in other countries, and they often lived in squalor, as does the student Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Even Raskolnikov was better housed than many of his fellow-students, for at least he did not have to share his miserable garret in St Petersburg with anyone else.

Another well-known representative in literature of Russian uni-

versity life is Peter Trofimov, the 'eternal student' in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*. There are references in the dialogue to him 'already having been sent down from the university twice', and 'having been landed in some pretty queer places', from which it seems clear that Soviet commentators are not being entirely fanciful when they claim Trofimov to have been conceived by Chekhov as a budding revolutionary. To portray him as such was impossible under censorship conditions of the time, as Chekhov implied in a letter to his wife: 'You see, Trofimov is in exile off and on, and gets chucked out of the university every so often, and how is one to depict that sort of thing?' (letter of 19th October 1903).

* * * So far as educational policy is concerned, a period of relative liberalism corresponding to the reign of Alexander II³ was sandwiched between two slices of intolerance in the reigns of Nicholas I⁴ and Alexander III⁵, followed by some relaxations in the first part of Nicholas II's reign⁶ and considerably more after 1905. But things were not quite so simple as that. During most of Alexander II's reign—from 1866 to 1880—the minister of education was an extreme reactionary, Count D. A. Tolstoy, whose views on education had little in common with those of his more famous namesake the novelist. D. A. Tolstoy's tenure of office did see a big increase in the number of schools and of the pupils attending them, but he kept a firm grip on appointments and syllabuses, particularly those of the gymnasiums (grammar schools). A feature of his policy was the emphasis laid on the study of Greek and Latin as a means of curbing political unrest. It was thought that concentration on these classical languages, especially on their syntax, might nip revolutionary sentiments in the bud—a vain hope because the gymnasiums in fact became centres of political disaffection, like the universities which many gymnasium pupils would later attend. Chekhov, the only nineteenth-century Russian writer of the very front rank to complete a full course at a gymnasium, never turned into a political firebrand, but was left with a distaste for Greek and Latin which apparently lasted him for life. Classicists may take some comfort from the fact that Chekhov, who received the most intensive classical education among leading Russian writers, also wrote exceptionally disciplined and elegant Russian prose, though how much credit for this can be given to the model of Cicero and Demosthenes is not clear. In his *Man in a Case* (1808) Chekhov has a brilliant description of a repulsive gymnasium teacher of Greek whose only pleasures in life are interfering with his colleagues' activities and rolling the Greek word *anthropos* round his tongue.

One aim of educational policy-makers in periods of political reac-

9. To 1905 [Editor's note].

1. Mass festivities celebrating the coronation of Nicholas II (1894–1917) were held on the Khodynka Field in Moscow in 1896, wherein an estimated two thousand persons died by falling into ditches since the police were unable to control the crowds. That very same night the French embassy held a ball, and the Russian imperial party attended—an action that only intensified the feeling among

many Russians that the imperial family and officials were simply inhuman [Editor's note].

2. The student strike on February 8, 1899, at St. Petersburg University was the first successful student strike; it spread throughout all institutions of higher learning in Russia within ten days, by which time all were closed down until the following autumn [Editor's note].

3. 1855–81 [Editor's note].

4. 1825–55 [Editor's note].

5. 1881–94 [Editor's note].

6. 1894–1917 [Editor's note].

tion was to make it impossible for pupils of humble social origin to enter the gymnasiums and universities. Increases in school and university fees, and insistence on irksome formalities were used from time to time to discourage lower-class children from claiming places in these establishments, which should be the monopoly of the gentry according to the more diehard social engineers. An official circular issued in 1887 proclaimed the need to keep out of the gymnasiums such undesirables as the children of coachmen, footmen, cooks, laundresses, small shopkeepers and similar people. This came out nearly ten years after Chekhov had received his leaving certificate from the Taganrog Gymnasium—otherwise he, being the son of a struggling shopkeeper, might have had to seek his schooling elsewhere.

*** Despite attempts to use dead languages as a political narcotic, the gymnasiums did on the whole provide the best schooling widely available. They were first developed on any scale under Alexander I⁷, when the initial aim was to provide every provincial capital with its gymnasium. By the end of the century this modest plan had been overfulfilled, and there were nearly two hundred gymnasiums in all. The gymnasium course was pretty well uniform throughout Russia, and had been expanded from four years to eight. Unsatisfactory pupils were kept down to do a second year in the same form—as happened to Chekhov in both the third and fifth forms—because of an inadequate performance in the annual examinations, a dreaded event. There were also pro-gymnasiums—similar institutions, offering the first part, four years, of the gymnasium course. Then there were also modern schools (*realnyye uchilishcha*). These placed emphasis on mathematics, science and modern languages, and they gave entry to technical colleges, whereas the gymnasiums proper provided their graduates with entry to the universities and preferential access to civil service posts. The above were all boys' schools, but girls too had their gymnasiums, being better served with secondary school education than they were at either university or primary level. Girls' gymnasiums offered a seven-year course with an extra year for those who wished to qualify as schoolmistresses. They also inflicted less Latin and Greek on their pupils.

* * *

In the same year the overall tally of primary schools throughout the Empire was nearly eighty thousand, with a total of nearly four million pupils. There was only one authority with wider control over primary education than that exercised by the Synod—the ministry of education itself, responsible in 1896 for some two-fifths of

the Empire's primary schools with nearly two-thirds of the pupils. At the same time the ministry of war was responsible for over ten thousand primary schools with some three hundred thousand pupils.⁸

Schools were set up by village communes, by town councils and also by the zemstvos, the zemstvo schools being of particular importance by the end of the nineteenth century. Many schools were founded by private individuals, including writers, and that established at Yasnaya Polyana by Tolstoy in 1859 became especially famous. A noted theorist of education, as of almost everything else in human life, Tolstoy also liked teaching peasant children and produced a fairly successful reading primer, his *ABC Book*, in 1872. Chekhov too founded schools for the peasants during his residence in the village of Melikhovo, south of Moscow, and his story *My Life* illustrates the sort of difficulties which this might involve.

*** Besides the institutions mentioned above, Russia also possessed a variety of boarding-schools including the quaintly named 'pensions for well-born spinsters' for daughters of the gentry. There were Sunday schools designed to teach, not religious knowledge but reading and writing, and officially suspected as hotbeds of revolutionary agitation. And there were increasing numbers of technical and vocational colleges, including the Moscow Higher Technical School. It also became a common practice for factories to provide schools for the children of employees.

Even by the end of the period considered here, this rapidly growing system was on too small a scale for the gigantic Empire. With her large proportion of illiterates, Russia was still a long way from achieving universal primary education by 1904. And that of girls was particularly neglected. In 1896 less than a quarter of the overall number of primary school pupils were girls. No wonder that, according to a favourite proverb of the (male) Russian peasant: 'A woman is long on hair and short on brain'.

8. For figures in this paragraph, see Kovalevsky, pp. 476 ff.