THE END OF IMPERIAL RUSSIA, 1855–1917

European History in Perspective

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THE END OF IMPERIAL RUSSIA, 1855–1917

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PREFACE

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the attendant downfall of the political system which had been created when Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power in October 1917, has engendered renewed interest in Tsarist Russia. Russians themselves have become able to examine the history of their own country with greater equanimity than was possible under the Soviet regime. The last decades of Tsarism have become the subject of considerable attention as contemporary Russia seeks to understand the circumstances which enabled the Bolsheviks to come to power.

The experience of imperial Russia also has a wider significance. Between 1855 and 1917 Russia changed dramatically. Modernization – political, economic and social – gripped the state as the old order tried to come to grips with a Europe-wide process of change stimulated by the twin cataclysms of political revolution in France in 1789 and of industrial revolution that left almost no part of the continent untouched. The Tsarist regime tried to maintain a difficult balancing act, torn between the desire to preserve its own authority intact and the need to cope with the stresses brought by rapid economic and social change. This was not a situation unique to nineteenth-century Russia: other contemporary regimes faced the same problems, while the twentieth century has witnessed numerous examples of the impact of economic modernization on political and social structures.

This book seeks to illuminate the chief issues that faced the people of the Russian Empire between 1855 and 1917. A huge, multinational state, playing a major role on the

international stage, Russia was beset by all manner of challenges. By adopting a largely thematic approach, I have tried to draw attention to the continuities in the history of imperial Russia and to show the interplay of political, economic, social and international forces.

Since 1917, historians have debated many aspects of the history of imperial Russia and the origins of the Russian revolution at length and with great skill. Each generation of historians has sought to bring its own perspectives to bear on the problems of imperial Russia. History, however, is not made by historians but by the people of the past and it is their experience – whether peasant or Tsar, Moscow worker or Siberian colonist – that is of central concern to us. I have avoided direct reference to debates between historians: the bibliography provides pointers to enable the reader to get to grips with this dimension of the topic.

Writing a book of this type means drawing widely on the writings of others. I have tried to indicate my most significant sources in the notes and the bibliography, but must beg indulgence of colleagues whose contributions to my ideas I have failed to acknowledge. I am extremely grateful to Don MacRaid and Mike Rapport for reading the manuscript and offering many suggestions that have much improved it. Clare Crowley's comments on the text have been of very great value, as has been her support over the years.

Peter Waldron

NOTE ON NAMES AND DATES

Russian names are always difficult to deal with: I have used the familiar English version of the names of Tsars etc., but have left other names in their Russian form. Until February 1918, Russia operated the Julian calendar. In the nineteenth century, dates were 12 days behind the West and after 1900, 13 days behind. I have used the Russian calendar throughout and have added the Western equivalent where necessary in dealing with international affairs.