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FORMER PEOPLE

The Last Days of the Russian Aristocracy

MACMILLAN

There is no more Russian nobility. There is no more Russian aristocracy . . . A future historian will describe in precise detail how this class died. You will read this account, and you will experience madness and horror . . .

—*The Red Newspaper* (Petrograd),
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PROLOGUE

THE CORNER HOUSE, MOSCOW, NOVEMBER 23, 1918, LATE EVENING

The nurse was preparing a fresh bandage when the men from the Cheka, the feared Bolshevik political police, burst into the room. "Can't you see there's a man dying in here?" she asked, and turned, stopping them in their tracks.[1] There before them in the half-light lay Count Sergei Dmitrievich Sheremetev, aged seventy-three, aide-de-camp to the late emperor Alexander III, member of the Imperial State Council, chief master of the hunt, and scion of one of Russia's great aristocratic families. In poor health for years, Count Sergei was near death, the gangrene in his legs spreading toward his torso and requiring the doctors to make one last attempt to save his life by radical amputation. The unexpected visitors, all except one, filed out of the room. The leader of the group, Yakov Peters, an intense man with thick dark hair and a prominent forehead, stayed to observe the operation and see whether the man he had come to arrest would survive.

They had arrived without warning, driving up Vozdvizhenka Street in several cars from the direction of the Kremlin. After turning into the courtyard of the Corner House, the grand Sheremetev home, they parked and locked the gate behind them to keep anyone from escaping. Panic gripped the servants on the main floor of the Corner House. At first it was not clear what was happening; ever since the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II the previous year and the collapse of the old regime

the country had descended into chaos and lawlessness. Armed gangs roamed the streets at night, robbing, looting, and killing at will. Once powerful and still enormously rich families like the Sheremetevs were their preferred victims. Yet as the men in their dark leather jackets barged into the house, it became clear these were not mere bandits, but members of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage, the so-called Cheka.

After mounting the main staircase, they charged into the dining room, where they found the Sheremetev family seated at the table. "Hands up!" shouted Peters, leveling his Nagant revolver at them. Stunned, they all remained seated and raised their hands. Even the old butler, Dmitry Fyodorovich, just then serving Countess Yekaterina Sheremetev, Count Sergei's wife, laid the food platter on the floor and put his hands in the air. Not seeing Count Sergei at the table, Peters and a few of the other Chekists went to find him. The adults were locked in the dining room for the night, while the Sheremetev grandchildren were permitted to go to their nanny in another part of the house. Among the children were Yelena Sheremetev, in a gold silk skirt, her long hair tied up with a big white bow, and her older brother, Nikolai. When the children told their nanny what was happening, she took the family jewels that had been sewn to a long piece of velvet and dropped them into a water tank, just as she had been instructed to do in such an event.

Many in the family had sensed this day was coming; there had been numerous signs during the past months that the Bolsheviks had placed the Sheremetevs in their sights. That summer two of Count Sergei's sons-in-law had been briefly arrested: Alexander Saburov, a former officer of the Chevaliers Gardes and civil governor of Petrograd, and Count Alexander Gudovich, a gentleman of the bedchamber at the court of Nicholas II. Shortly thereafter, a Red Army soldier had come to the house and arrested Baron Joseph de Baye, a French citizen and old friend of Count Sergei's, who had lived with the family for many years. When the count asked on whose orders his friend the baron was being arrested, the soldier pointed at the Kremlin, saying, "Theirs." In September, the count's son, also named Sergei, was arrested at the family estate of Ostafievo, the Cheka agents mistaking him for his father. A group of worried scholars wrote to Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik commissar of enlightenment, requesting that he extend "special protective measures" to the count and his son Pavel at their Vozdvizhenka home.

Lunacharsky replied that "all Revolutionary powers" would be used for their protection.[2] The commissar evidently had little power to offer protection.

The importance the Bolsheviks attached to Count Sheremetev, one of the most prominent representatives of old Russia, the Russia now being swept away by the whirlwind of the revolution, was evident by the presence of Yakov Peters that night at the Corner House. Born to the family of a poor Latvian farmer, Peters had been a committed revolutionary since the beginning of the century. He had been arrested by the tsarist police for taking part in labor strikes and tortured after the Revolution of 1905. For the rest of his life he had the mangled fingernails to prove his commitment to the cause. After his release he fled to London in 1908. Peters returned to Russia in the spring of 1917 and played an active role in the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October. Together with Felix Dzerzhinsky, he established the Cheka and for years served as one of its leaders, notorious for his cruelty.[3]

Peters was among the authors of the Red Terror unleashed in September 1918 after the murder of Moisei Uritsky, head of the Petrograd Cheka, and the failed assassination attempt on the life of Lenin by Fanya Kaplan in late August. The goal of the Cheka's terror was to unleash a campaign of class warfare against "counterrevolutionaries" and so-called enemies of the people. In September, the Communist leader Grigory Zinoviev pronounced: "To overcome our enemies we must have our own socialist militarism. We must carry along with us 90 million out of the 100 million of Soviet Russia's population. As for the rest, we have nothing to say to them. They must be annihilated."[4] Peters's Cheka colleague Martin Latsis let there be little doubt where these unfortunate ten million were to be found: "Do not look in the file of incriminating evidence to see whether or not the accused rose up against the Soviets with arms or words. Ask him instead to which class he belongs, what is his background, his education, his profession. These are the questions that will determine the fate of the accused. That is the meaning and essence of the Red Terror."[5] Peters himself had expounded on the role of terror: "Anyone daring to agitate against the Soviet government will immediately be arrested and placed in a concentration camp." The enemies of the working class will meet with "mass terror [. . .] and will be destroyed and crushed by the heavy hammer of the revolutionary proletariat."[6]

The hammer of the Red Terror had now been lowered on the Corner House. Yakov Peters and Sergei Sheremetev embodied the epochal struggle facing Russia in 1918: on one side stood Peters, young, strong, and armed with the righteous conviction of the Bolshevik cause; on the other lay Sheremetev, sick, weak, defeated, and dying. In Count Sergei's room that night, two Russias stood face to face—that of the future and that of the past.

History, we are told, is written by the victors. What is less often stated, though no less important, is that history is usually written *about* the victors; winners get more attention in the history books than losers. The literature on the Russian Revolution proves the point. The biographies of Lenin vastly outnumber those of Nicholas II, as do the books on the Bolsheviks compared with those on the Mensheviks. Yet losers are no less worthy of being remembered than winners, if only to help us to appreciate the full richness of what came before and to preserve the memory of those unjustly forgotten by history.

I came across this forgotten history while writing a book on Count Sergei's grandfather Count Nikolai Sheremetev, an eccentric and fabulously rich aristocrat famous for his private serf opera company and his scandalous marriage to its prima donna, a singer named Praskovya Kovalyova, who performed as "The Pearl."[7] Through my research I came to know several of Nicholas and Praskovya's descendants, and hearing their stories about what had happened to the family during the revolution, I was drawn to the larger history of the fate of the nobility during these tumultuous years. While on a visit to Moscow in the spring of 2006 I searched the many drawers of the card catalog devoted to the "Great October Socialist Revolution" at the Russian State Library (the former Lenin Library, not fully online at the time) but could not find anything on the nobility. Surprised, I asked a librarian why there was nothing in the catalog. The look she gave me was one of disbelief, as if I had asked who was buried in the Lenin mausoleum. "*Shto?* What?" she stuttered. "The revolution and the nobility? Of course not, because the revolution had nothing to do with the nobles, and they had nothing to do with the revolution," she instructed this clueless American historian.[8] While researching this book, I have received similarly dismissive

comments from people in the West. Of course, the nobility was destroyed, I have been told, and rightly so. There is a belief among some people that the nobility got what was coming to it, and so we need not be surprised or even care. Both points of view—that the revolution had nothing to do with the nobility or that it did but need not concern us—are wrong, historically and morally.

As one of the overlooked stories of the Russian Revolution, the fate of the nobility warrants being told. The destruction of an entire class cannot help eliciting our interest. But there are other reasons as well. The destruction of the nobility was one of the tragedies of Russian history. For nearly a millennium, the nobility, what the Russians called *bélaya kost'*, literally "white bone" (our "blue blood"), had supplied Russia's political, military, cultural, and artistic leaders. The nobility had served as the tsars' counselors and officials, as their generals and officers; the nobility had produced generations of writers, artists, and thinkers, of scholars and scientists, of reformers and revolutionaries. In a society that was slow to develop a middle class, the nobility played a preponderant role in the political, social, and artistic life of the country disproportionate to its relative size. The end of the nobility in Russia marked the end of a long and deservedly proud tradition that created much of what we still think of today as quintessentially Russian, from the grand palaces of St. Petersburg to the country estates surrounding Moscow, from the poetry of Pushkin to the novels of Tolstoy and the music of Rachmaninov.

The story of the Russian nobility also warrants telling since its fate foreshadowed that of other groups in the coming decades. The Bolsheviks' decision to single out the nobility for political persecution, for the expropriation of its property, for imprisonment, execution, and its designation as "former people" signaled a ruthless, Manichaean mentality that condemned entire collectives of people to harsh repression and even death. What is more, the tactics used against the nobility would be adopted against all of the regime's supposed class enemies. Lenin saw such enemies everywhere, whether among the more moderate socialists who refused to endorse his radical vision or the Russian peasant slightly better off than his neighbors. He insisted such enemies had to be crushed, and they were. Yet in one of the strange dynamics of the revolution, defeating one's class enemies was no guarantee of safety, for

as the old enemies were defeated, new ones had to be found to justify the continuing struggle for the bright future of the Communist tomorrow. And so just as Stalin later destroyed the Old Bolsheviks, including Yakov Peters, who was arrested and killed in the Great Terror, so too would the entire peasantry be brutally subjugated. A revolution made in the name of the poor would destroy their lives in even greater numbers than those of the rich, the revolution's original targets.

On a larger scale, the tragedy of the nobles' fate also foreshadowed future atrocities of the bloody twentieth century when race, class, ethnicity, and religion were used both to incite and to justify oppression and mass killing, from Hitler's Germany to Pol Pot's Cambodia and Kambanda's Rwanda. Chased from their homes and their property expropriated, forced to clean the streets as a form of public humiliation, sent to labor camps, killed with a bullet to the back of the head for the crime of their social origin, Russian nobles were one of the first groups subjected to a brand of political violence that became a hallmark of the past century.

Former People tells the story of how the Russian elite was dispossessed and destroyed between the revolutions of 1917 and the Second World War. It is filled with tales of looted palaces and burning estates, of flights in the night from marauding peasants and Red Army soldiers, of imprisonment, exile, and execution. Yet it is also a story of survival and accommodation, of how many of the tsarist ruling class—abandoned, displaced, and repressed—overcame the psychic wounds inflicted by the loss of their world and struggled to find a place for themselves in the new, hostile order of the Soviet Union. It reveals how even at the darkest depths of the terror, daily life went on: men and women fell in love; children were born; friends gathered; simple pleasures were cherished. Ultimately, *Former People* is a testament to humans' remarkable ability to find happiness even amid the most harrowing of circumstances.

How does one begin to describe the destruction of an entire class? It is a process so vast as to defy comprehension. The scale is too large, the point of observation required to encompass it all too remote to make individual lives intelligible. Appreciating the fate of nearly two million people strains the imagination, and we as humans seem somehow constructed to better apprehend, and empathize with, much

smaller numbers. Over the past six years I have been fortunate to meet and correspond with many individuals whose families are the subjects of *Former People*. Their generosity and willingness to share their experiences and collections of family documents have been the most pleasant part of writing this book. Reading dozens of personal accounts and listening to even more stories in homes, archives, and libraries in Russia and the West, I found myself drawn to the experiences of two families in particular—the Sheremetevs and the Golitsyns. Both belonged to the highest level of the nobility, the aristocracy; both had esteemed and ancient histories; both suffered horribly during the revolution and after; both were torn apart, some family members leaving Russia forever; and both left behind a wealth of letters, diaries, memoirs, and photographs that provide the kinds of sources required to write this history in a full, accurate, and convincing manner.

The Golitsyns formed an extensive clan—unlike the titled Sheremetevs—with more than a dozen separate branches at the time of the revolution. One of these descended from Prince Fyodor Golitsyn, a gentleman of the bedchamber in the reign of Catherine the Great and later trustee of Moscow University. Prince Vladimir Golitsyn, Fyodor's grandson and the long-serving mayor of Moscow, was a contemporary of Count Sergei Sheremetev's. Whereas the Sheremetevs maintained connections with the court and particularly with the royal family in St. Petersburg, the Golitsyns were a true Moscow family that had little to do with the imperial capital. Nevertheless, the families knew each other—nothing unusual in the small world of the Russian aristocracy—and even though Vladimir (liberal Westernizer) and Sergei (conservative monarchist) could barely tolerate each other, some of their children socialized and worked together. Two of their grandchildren—Yelena Sheremetev and Vladimir Golitsyn, named after his grandfather—fell in love at the Corner House in the early 1920s and married. Thanks to their large numbers, the princely line of the Golitsyns managed to survive in Russia; the Sheremetevs, however, did not.

The lives of several generations of the Sheremetevs and Golitsyns form the unifying thread that runs through *Former People*. While every noble experienced the revolution and the transition to the new Soviet order in his own way, what happened to the Sheremetevs and Golitsyns, and how they reacted to these events, were true for the majority

of the nobility. Their lives were simultaneously exceptional, as is the case for every individual, and ordinary for the members of their class in Russia in those years.*

In late September 1917, a month before the Bolsheviks seized power, Lenin wrote: "A revolution, a real, profound, a 'people's' revolution to use Marx's expression, is the incredibly complicated and painful process of the death of the old order and the birth of the new social order, of the mode of life of tens of millions of people. Revolution is a most intense, furious, desperate class struggle and civil war."[9] The Bolshevik Revolution was seen by its creators as a Promethean leap into a new era of human history that would leave the past behind forever, and it is largely this half of the story, Lenin's "birth of the new social order," that historians have been most intent on exploring. Less well known, though no less important, is the other half: "the death of the old order."

In 1920, while riding on a train from Siberia to Moscow, Dmitry Fedotoff-White, a former tsarist naval officer, fell into conversation with a group of Red soldiers. He was reading *The ABC of Communism*, the new popular primer on bolshevism by Nikolai Bukharin and Yevgeny Preobrazhensky, which prompted a discussion on Marxism and the revolution. What struck Fedotoff-White in talking with the men was the large gap between the lofty ideals espoused by the leaders of the revolution and the goals that motivated its foot soldiers. These men had no understanding or even interest in Marxist theory, nor were they concerned with what the new Russian society would look like. Rather, they were motivated by one thing: the desire to destroy the old order. "To all of them, the Bolshevik revolution meant the destruction of monarchy, aristocracy, bureaucracy, and the officer class," he wrote. "They were all rebels against the old order of things, but that was about all there was to their political feelings."[10]

The role of ideology in the revolution and subsequent civil war is a complex one (more than this one interaction implies), but Fedotoff-White makes a crucial point in understanding the sheer ferocity of

*Although *Former People* explores the fate of the entire nobility (*dvoriánstvo*, in Russian), since so much of the book follows the aristocratic Sheremetev and Golitsyn families, I have chosen "aristocracy" for my subtitle.

these years—namely, that the will to destroy was stronger than the will to create and that it was the major force directing the course of events. From the beginning of the revolution, Lenin and the Bolsheviks feared the restoration of the old order; the surest way to prevent this was to rip it out by the roots and kill it. To destroy every vestige of the tsarist past was to deny their enemies any chance to revive it. The Bolsheviks soon realized, however, that they could not survive without the knowledge, skills, and education of the old elite. The workers and peasants, in whose name the Bolsheviks claimed to rule, were simply not qualified to run a vast state. And so began an uneasy collaboration between the old and new masters of Russia that was to last for more than two decades.

The persistence of the former educated elite, many of whom were nobles, stoked frustration and anger amid the classes in whose name the revolution had been made. If the Great October Socialist Revolution signaled a new dawn in human history, why then, many asked, were former counts and princesses, former landowners and tsarist officials still in positions of authority, still living in their homes or on their estates; indeed, why were they even still alive if they belonged to a world that had been buried long ago? Reliance on the former elite posed a threat to the Soviet regime. But it also presented it with a convenient excuse for why the reality of life did not measure up to the regime's grand promises. If socialism had yet to be achieved, if workers were not living better, if life was still a struggle, then this was not the fault of the leaders or a sign of the flaws within Marxist ideology; rather, it could be explained by the existence of class enemies—of saboteurs, wreckers, White Guards, and monarchists—waging a secret war from within to destroy the Soviet Union. Like other despised minorities, these former people became an easy scapegoat upon which to lay the blame for the Bolsheviks' failures and a target at which popular anger could be directed without fear of reprisal.

For many Russian nobles the revolution came as no surprise. Even as early as the eighteenth century some far-seeing noblemen could imagine the day when they would be swept away by the masses. At the height of the French Revolution in 1792, Count Semyon Vorontsov, Russia's ambassador to Great Britain, wrote to his brother back home:

> France will not calm down until its vile principles have established themselves in Russia. As I have already told you, this will not be a war for life, but a war till death between those who have nothing and those who own property, and since the latter are few in number so must they inevitably perish. This infection shall become universal. Our distance from this turmoil will protect us for a time; we shall be the last ones, yet nonetheless we shall be victims of this worldwide plague. We shan't witness it; not you or I, but my son will.[11]

Vorontsov erred about the revolution's timing, but he was right that it would be a war to the death between the haves and the have-nots and that the former would lose. For centuries the Russian nobility had lived off the numbing toil of the peasant serfs. Noble landowners, whether cruel tyrants or benevolent masters, enjoyed equally the fruits of this favored status. Their wealth, culture, indeed their entire manner of life were made possible by a harsh system of forced servitude that by the eighteenth century hardly differed from American slavery. The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 did little to change the subservient relationship of the peasant to his former owner. The chasm that separated the world of the masses from the thin layer of the powerful and the privileged lasted right up until 1917.

The peasants had little choice but to tolerate their condition. At times they did rise up, and the results were inevitably violent and bloody. The great rebellions of Stenka Razin and Yemelian Pugachev in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which scorched much of Russia and left tens of thousands dead, inspired hope in the downtrodden and instilled fear in the upper classes. The Russian countryside erupted again in the summer of 1917. This time, however, it would be different, and the peasants would not be subdued. For the nobles on the land it was like waking up and finding oneself trapped behind enemy lines. "It seems we have suffered a shipwreck," Zenaide Bashkiroff's grandmother informed her at their estate of Kourbatika. "We are in the position of the Swiss Family Robinson. [. . .] We shall live in perpetual fear of attacks from the wild tribes outside."[12] The "wild tribes" had become even wilder after three years of war. The pointless slaughter of World War I had inured the peasant-soldier to the most horrific violence, and he returned to his village from the front brutalized and shorn of restraint.

Not long after Princess Vera Urusov fled her estate of Kotovka in

southern Russia, deserters and peasants tore it apart board by board, stone by stone, before burning what was left to the ground. When they finished, they defiled her father's grave. Two servants tried to stop them, but they were grabbed by the mob and beheaded; the peasants fed one of the heads to the dogs. Later, when asked to account for the viciousness of their attack on the Urusovs' property, they replied, "Because they sucked our blood." A few nobles, Vera among them, were able to see beyond their own personal loss and acknowledge in the tide of violence sweeping across Russia a moment of historical reckoning. She, and her generation of the nobility, would be the ones to pay for the injustice of serfdom. It seems that even at a young age Vera sensed this day would come. One of her favorite childhood games had been pretending she was an aristocrat caught in the French Revolution trying to escape the fury of the mob.[13]

In many ways the fate of the Russian nobility mirrored that of the French a little more than a century before. In the early 1790s, French nobles became targets of repression and violence as the forces of revolution rallied behind the slogan of "War on the castles, peace to the cottages!" The nobility was stripped of its titles, its ancient privileges, and much of its wealth. At the height of the Terror châteaus were ransacked and plundered, thousands of nobles were imprisoned and killed, and hundreds lost their heads to the guillotine in Paris.[14] Nobles who fled the country were branded traitors and enemies; their property was confiscated, and in extreme cases their family members in France were taken hostage. Nobles who remained became known as ci-devants, the first instance of former people. And following a strange dynamic that would be repeated in Russia, as the revolution progressed and the counterrevolutionary threat retreated, the perceived danger the nobles represented and the repressive measures against them increased. When the revolution did not develop as its leaders had promised, they pointed to the nobles as the reason, as would happen in Russia too. Attacking the old elite became an easy way to gain popularity and prove one's commitment to the cause and to the people.[15]

But there were important differences as well. Despite the great violence and bloodshed of the French Revolution, what happened in the first few decades of the twentieth century in Russia was on an incomparable scale. Of the 16,594 persons condemned to death by extraordinary courts during the Terror in France, 1,158 of them were nobles, less

than 1 percent of the entire noble estate. And when the total number of the Terror's victims is taken into account, fewer than 9 percent of the victims were nobles.[16] The numbers killed in Russia were of an entirely different magnitude. Between 1917 and 1941, the nobility faced several successive waves of terror that likely killed tens of thousands, if not more; given the chaotic manner in which so much of the violence was carried out, accurate records were not kept, and so the exact number will likely never be known. The fate of the Golitsyns offers stark proof of the extent of the terror. Of its many branches extant in 1917, only one survived in Russia; all the others were killed off or forced into exile. Dozens of Golitsyns were arrested by the Bolsheviks and then shot or died in prison; dozens more simply vanished in the storm of the revolution, and their fate remains unknown. Today there are more Golitsyns in North America than in Russia.[17]

It was not just the scale of the killing either. When Napoleon, himself a ci-devant, seized power in 1799, he began to bring back the old nobility and to merge it with a new titled elite of his own making. Repressive legislation was abolished, and nobles of the ancien régime slowly began to return to positions of authority. With the final defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbons in 1814, the process of revival was complete.[18] But in Russia there would be no restoration, neither of the monarchy nor of the nobility. Stalin, unlike Napoleon, was no ci-devant; far from retreating from the revolution's early extremes, he would reinvigorate them and unleash a new, final war against the state's class enemies.

By the 1940s, the nobility had been annihilated. For those persons who had somehow survived, there was little left to remind them of life before 1917. They had lost their homes and sold off their belongings over the years at outdoor markets or commission stores for a pittance; their letters and photographs had been destroyed or hidden away. Families had been decimated and separated one from another by exile and imprisonment. Most former nobles hid as best they could in the shadows. One's past was poison, and the stories told of the ancestors were purposely forgotten or spoken of in a whisper. Some changed their names to avoid notice; some lied or gave evasive answers to questions about their past and family history. Survival typically required self-imposed amnesia, the repression of memory. Those who refused to do this often suffered the harshest punishment.[19] Yet, paradoxically,

through its unceasing repression of former people the state made it impossible for them to forget who they were and where they came from.[20]

The children of the old nobility born in the 1930s and 1940s had no personal knowledge of life before the revolution, nor were they exposed to the horrors of the civil war. Still, they too learned of the need for silence. Learning to keep quiet about one's private life was part of every Soviet person's experience, but it was even more so for former people and their children.[21] They grew up in a world that acted as if there had been no life before 1917. Yelena Shuvalov, born in 1930 into an old family of Russian counts whose ancestors had included prominent courtiers, diplomats, and generals, recalled how as a child she soon understood that self-preservation necessitated silence:

> We did not take any interest in the past. That just wasn't done. It wasn't even a consideration. I remember from my early childhood, when I'd ask something, I was told, and it always amazed me, "The less you know, the better." I heard this either from my uncle or from mama or papa. I was grade-school age, it was the end of the 1930s, and that was the way back then, no one said anything.[22]

It was only after the Second World War, and particularly with the death of Stalin in 1953 followed by Khrushchev's Thaw, that the silence began to fade. A few former nobles began to talk and write openly about their forefathers, and then in the 1960s some began to return, surreptitiously, to the places where their ancestral country homes had once stood. In the 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev's new policies of glasnost and perestroika, local historians, teachers, and folklorists began to seek out the children and grandchildren of provincial nobles for information on the life and culture of these small corners of Russia. After seventy years, a few thin bonds between the locals and the heirs of the old landlords were reestablished.[23] The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of interest in reclaiming Russia's lost history, and this process has extended to the fate of Russia's noble families. No longer afraid to speak, noble descendants are publishing their family archives, organizing conferences, studying their genealogies, and trying to recover a sense of connection to their families and their past.[24]

Olga Sheremetev was in her apartment across the courtyard from the Corner House that November night the Cheka came. She and the rest of her family cowered while the men ransacked the house. No one could sleep, and they sneaked glances out their windows to see what was happening. Throughout the night and early morning cars came and went. Men could be seen in the darkness going in and out and hauling things to the cars. Peters and his men did not leave until seven in the morning. Olga's husband, Boris, himself only recently freed from a Bolshevik prison, went next door as soon as they had left. He found Count Sergei utterly crushed. The men had taken his personal correspondence, his diaries, and gold and silver worth around ten million rubles. Maria Gudovich, the count's younger daughter, was forced to watch as the Cheka agents stuffed their pockets with her jewelry. One Chekist took Countess Yekaterina Sheremetev's pincushion in his hand, and as he plucked from it every last jewel-headed pin, he told her, "This is how we take everything."[25] But worst of all, they had arrested nine men. Six of them were family members: the Sheremetevs' sons Pavel, Boris, and Sergei, their sons-in-law Gudovich and Saburov, and their grandson Boris Saburov. Anna Saburov, the elder Sheremetev daughter, was beside herself with worry over her husband and son and kept trying to calm herself by repeating words about the inescapability of fate and God's will. Everyone was anxious the Cheka would return. No one had any idea what had become of the men. "We're completely in the dark," confided Olga to her diary.[26] Both Gudovich and Saburov père would be shot in prison the following year.

Four days later Count Sergei turned seventy-four. He was in a dreadful state that morning, drifting in and out of consciousness, but as the day wore on, he revived. He spent his birthday in the company of his wife and a few family members. At one point his old friend Vladimir Dzhunkovsky, an adjutant to Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich and governor-general of Moscow, stopped by to pay his respects. His visit unleashed a flood of memories for the count of his days at the court of Alexander III. Count Sergei lived a few more weeks, dying in his bed on December 17. His body was laid out on a table and dressed in a black suit. They buried him two days later at a new cemetery across from the Novospassky Monastery. He could not be buried there in the family

crypt, where Sheremetevs had lain for centuries, since the Bolsheviks had run off all the monks and turned it into a prison.

The revolution and everything it wrought almost destroyed Count Sergei, a man committed to tsarism and all it represented. In letters to friends he wrote of the tragedy that had descended upon their homeland; they were living through "a modern-day Mongol yoke" and under "the sword of Damocles." "I have the feeling," he wrote, "that I'm riding on a train that has just left the tracks." Still, he tried to keep faith in Russia and its future. He busied himself reading histories of the French Revolution and Napoleon and sought comfort in the thought that Russia too would emerge from the dark night of anarchy into the light of a better future with order and peace restored. He continued to profess his faith in God and quoted the words of Alexander Pushkin: "I gaze forward without fear."[27]

PART I

Before the Deluge

Were we all, the whole upper crust of Russian society, so totally insensitive, so horribly obtuse, as not to feel that the charmed life we were leading was in itself an injustice and hence could not possibly last?

—Nicolas Nabokov,
Bagázh: Memoirs of a Russian Cosmopolitan

1

RUSSIA, 1900

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Russia was hurtling into the modern age. In the two decades before the First World War, the country experienced exceptional rates of industrial growth, outpacing those of the United States, Germany, and Great Britain. Under Minister of Finance Sergei Witte massive domestic and foreign investment was made in Russian industry, mining, and railroads. Between 1850 and 1905, Russia went from 850 miles of railroads to nearly 40,000. The oil industry grew to match that of the United States, and Russia surpassed France in steel production. In the early 1880s, St. Petersburg and Moscow were connected by the longest telephone line in the world. The first cinemas appeared in Russia in 1903, the same year the number of electric streetlights in St. Petersburg reached three thousand. By 1914, Russia had become the fifth-largest industrial power in the world.[1] The pace and future promise of economic growth and power made the other powers view Russia with a combination of wonder, envy, and fear.[2]

Yet despite rapid industrialization, the explosive growth of Russia's urban centers, and unprecedented foreign investment, Russia in 1900 was still a feudal society. Its social makeup resembled a pyramid with a large base extending gradually to a narrow tip. At the bottom was the great mass of peasants, 80 percent of the entire population. At the top was the emperor, the autocratic ruler of a vast, multiethnic empire of almost 130 million people in 1897. In between lay several social groups

defined by laws and customs that went back hundreds of years: the clergy, the townsmen, the so-called distinguished or honored citizens, the merchants, and the nobility.[3] Unlike Western Europe or the United States, there was no large urban middle class or bourgeoisie. In the late 1890s, just over 13 percent of the population lived in cities, compared with 72 percent in England, 47 in Germany, and 38 in the United States. Russia's cities were home to the vast majority of the country's small educated elite, while in the rural areas less than a quarter of the population was literate.[4]

Not only was Russia still a traditional peasant society, but it remained politically mired in the past. Russia was ruled not by laws or institutions but by one man, the emperor. According to the Fundamental Laws of 1832, "The Russian Empire is ruled on the firm basis of positive laws and statutes which emanate from the Autocratic Power." The Russian emperor's power was understood as unlimited; imperial decrees, as well as verbal instructions and commands, had the force of law. This is not to say there were no laws or no sense of legality, rather, that the emperor had the freedom and power to decide whether he cared to recognize them.[5]

By the latter decades of the nineteenth century Russia's educated classes were growing increasingly concerned by the dichotomy of a modernizing society and an old-fashioned and rigid political system. While the country was moving into the modern era, the state seemed impervious to change. Tsar Alexander II had of course taken steps to modernize Russia during the era of the Great Reforms. In 1861, the serfs were freed, ending a horrific system of human bondage stretching back hundreds of years that, by the eighteenth century, had descended to a level of inhumanity akin to American slavery.[6] In 1864, the legal system was reformed to create an independent judiciary in which all Russians, except peasants, the vast majority of the population, were to be equal before the law. The same year local society was granted greater authority over managing its affairs, chiefly in the areas of public education, health, and roadways, with the creation of zemstvos, elected institutions of local self-government separate from the central government. The "tsar-liberator" had approved a plan to consult with a small number of representatives of society to consider further reforms (the so-called Loris-Melikov Constitution) when he was blown up by a bomb thrown by members of the terrorist organization The People's Will on March 1, 1881.

Upon coming to the throne, Alexander III tore up the Loris-Melikov Constitution and issued an imperial manifesto reasserting undiluted and absolute autocratic power. Minister of the Interior Count Dmitry Tolstoy baldly stated the new program of the government with a single word, "Order."[7] Counterreforms were instituted to undo or limit the reforms of the 1860s. In the summer of 1881, the government issued new Temporary Regulations intended to keep the peace and protect public order. The regulations invested the government with ever-greater power to monitor, arrest, and exile its subjects without recourse. Houses could be searched; businesses and schools closed; any sort of gathering, whether public or private, prohibited. The regulations even gave the government power to deny town councils and zemstvos the right to meet and to dismiss from such bodies anyone considered politically unreliable. Intended to last only three years, the Temporary Regulations were repeatedly renewed by Alexander III and later by Nicholas II, creating a state of near-martial law.[8]

Alexander III brought renewed repression, but little else. If some could see in Alexander the revived spirit of Peter the Great with his cudgel, others just saw the cudgel.[9] He had no need of society, even its most conservative, pro-autocratic members. In March 1881, a group of aristocratic conservatives founded the Holy Company to safeguard the life of the new tsar and take the fight to the revolutionaries. When its members, who included Count Sergei Sheremetev, dared suggest that repressive measures alone might not be enough to defeat the regime's enemies and some sort of changes to the government ought to be considered, the emperor's ministers denounced the Holy Company and forced it to disband. According to Minister Dmitry Tolstoy, the Holy Company was infected with "noxious liberalism."[10]

Alexander III's son and heir Nicholas was at Livadia, in the Crimea, when, in October 1894, he got the news that his father was dead. According to Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, his brother-in-law, a stunned Nicholas took him by the arm and said, "What am I going to do, what is going to happen to me, to you, [. . .] to mother, to all of Russia? I am not prepared to be a Czar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling." The grand duke, and history, would confirm the truth of Nicholas's words. Alexander Mikhailovich wrote that Nicholas's personal qualities, while "praiseworthy in a simple citizen," were "fatal in a Czar."[11] Weak, indecisive, overwhelmed by the

responsibilities of rule, and mindlessly beholden to "fate," Nicholas did prove to be fatal to himself, fatal to his family, and fatal to Russia.

From the start of his reign, Nicholas pledged to continue to rule in the spirit of his late father. Nicholas maintained tight censorship of the press, furthered the policy of limiting the power of the zemstvos, restricted the autonomy of Russia's universities, and renewed the Temporary Regulations. When, in January 1895, a delegation of zemstvo representatives wished him a long and successful reign and dared mention their desire to play a role in communicating to the government the wishes of the people, Nicholas stopped them by calling their desire a "senseless dream." "Let all know," he told them, "that in devoting all my strength to the people's well-being, I shall safeguard the principles of autocracy as firmly and as unswervingly as did my late, unforgettable father."[12]

But he could not, and he did not. Where the father had known what he wanted, the son was never sure; where the father had been resolute, the son had trouble making and sticking to a decision. Intent on showing that his hand was firmly on the rudder of state, Nicholas insisted on overseeing nearly every decision that attended administering a great empire. It did not take long for the ill-equipped emperor to become overwhelmed and then paralyzed by indecision. When confronted with difficult problems, Nicholas was apt to go pale, light a cigarette, and fall silent.[13] Society wits quipped that "Russia did not need a constitution to limit the monarchy since she already had a limited monarch." Confusion, incoherence, stasis, and a sense of aimless drift began to emanate from the office of the emperor and infect the government.[14]

Nonetheless, there was one aspect of Russian political culture that survived the reign of Alexander III. The Russians call it *proizvól*, a word that lacks any clear English equivalent but is most often translated as "arbitrary rule." Proizvol was evident in the workings of the Okhrana, the secret police, an organization that was charged with combating terrorists but that seemed to suspect everyone, even the emperor's loyal subjects, of subversion. Proizvol was evident in the sweeping authority of the provincial governors, who often ruled over vast regions of the empire as venal satraps. The educated classes, particularly the men in the zemstvos whose work the governors obstructed and whose authority they tried to thwart, resented their power the most. The state's interference in the zemstvos proved to have far-reaching consequences: by 1900, the zemst-

vos were dominated by the nobility, and in cracking down on them, the government turned its most important ally into an opponent.[15]

At the end of the nineteenth century, the nobility comprised almost 1.9 million people, about 1.5 percent of the entire population of the Russian Empire. The nobility was a diverse group, divided by nationality (Russians, Poles, Georgians, Baltic Germans), religion (Russian Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Lutheranism), education and wealth (from a great deal of both to little of either), and political outlook (from reactionaries to revolutionaries). There were hereditary nobles, whose privileged status passed to their offspring, and personal nobles, whose did not. So great was the diversity among the empire's nobility that historians continue to debate whether it even deserves to be considered a distinct social class.[16] If there was one thing that defined a noble, it was, as a commentator wrote in "The Tasks of the Nobility" in 1895, a certain quality "of being among the chosen, of being privileged, of not being the same as all other people."[17] The Russian nobility was never, however, a class of idle rich. Rather, it had always been a service class that initially derived its privileges and then increasingly its own identity from serving the grand princes of Muscovy and later the tsars of imperial Russia whether at court, in the military, or in the administration.

At the top of the nobility was the aristocratic elite, roughly a hundred or so families with great landed wealth dating back to at least the eighteenth century. These nobles often held high positions at court or in the government.[18] The aristocracy was typically old, titled, and rich. It intermarried and had a sense of itself as a self-defined group. Aristocrats belonged to the same clubs and salons, and the young men served in the elite imperial guards regiments like the Chevaliers Gardes, the Horse Guard, and the Emperor's Life Guard Hussars. Part of the aristocracy (including the Golitsyns, Gagarins, Dolgorukys, and Volkonskys) descended from the ancient princely dynasties of Riurik and Gedymin; others came from nontitled boyar families of the Muscovite court, most notably the Naryshkins and the Sheremetevs, a branch of which acquired the title of count under Peter the Great; or from other old noble families that had served in the cavalry units, such as the Shuvalovs, Vorontsovs, and Orlovs.[19]

Princess Sophy Dolgoruky, born into the aristocracy in the final

decade of the tsarist empire, recalled how "[i]n the old days any lesser mortal who had not been born into the privileged caste was considered not 'born.' '*Elle n'est pas née*' was a phrase to which my youthful ears were quite accustomed, if my grandmother referred to one who had married into the select club of European aristocracy, but was unable to claim a title in her own right." (Nevertheless, as Sophy points out in her memoir, Grandmother chose to remain silent about the fact that her great-grandmother had been bought at a slave market in Constantinople by an Austrian prince and then handed over to the Polish count Potocki as the winnings in a card game.) While the members of this tiny elite held different interests and attitudes, they all, according to Sophy, prized education, possessed unimaginable wealth (though this was never mentioned, for to do so showed an utter lack of breeding), and lived in "a luxury that was a natural part of existence."

> So, for instance, sheets and pillow-cases were changed daily. All were of very fine cool linen with the personal initial and crown (to indicate the title) embroidered on every item. Underclothes naturally would never be worn twice and towels were changed immediately after use. The tablecloths covering the long tables and the napkins intricately folded at each place would have the family coat of arms actually woven into the centre. Obviously each big house had its own laundry on the premises, together with a plethora of servants who, with their families, lived, feudal fashion, in two sides of the house round the courtyard, above the stables and garages. Thinking back to the Dolgorouky household it [*sic*] seems incredible that such a number of people were needed to care for the physical comfort of one family.
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> In the large marble-floored front hall sat the *svetzar* whose only duty was to open the door and lay down the strip of red carpet to car or carriage, so that the shoes of those arriving or departing should not be sullied by contact with the pavement. To keep him company in the hall were the couple of liveried footmen on duty that day—or when my uncle was in residence—a couple of Cossacks in full uniform.[20]

Below the aristocracy lay the great mass of nobles who filled the ranks of the officer corps and the civil administration or had gone into the so-called free professions as lawyers, doctors, teachers, or scientists. About half of all urban nobles were either in state service or in these profes-

sions around the turn of the century; the next largest category was rentiers.[21] The nobility had traditionally been the landowning class, and this remained true right up to 1917. Until the emancipation in 1861, the nobility had for centuries lived off the labor of millions of serfs, labor that made some nobles fabulously rich. If there is one image of the prerevolutionary landed nobility that has stuck in the popular imagination, it is that of the Ranevskys in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Impecunious, trapped by tradition, doomed to oblivion by the forces of modernity, Lyubov Ranevskaya cannot bring herself to cut down the orchard and rent out the land for summer vacationers ("Summer cottages, summer residents—I'm sorry, it's all too vulgar," she says with a sigh) and loses her estate and everything she holds dear.[22]

It is tempting to take Chekhov's play for sociology and to see in the story of the Ranevskys the plight of the entire Russian nobility, an ancient class inescapably shuffling toward extinction. But the reality was never quite so bleak. The lower rungs of the rural nobility were indeed becoming more impoverished, and many were forced to sell their lands; between 1861 and 1905, the rural nobility lost an average of 1 percent of its land a year through either sale or foreclosure. Nonetheless, as late as 1915, the nobility still owned more land than any other group.[23] Moreover, for wealthier nobles selling land was not a necessity but a smart economic move; nobles across Europe were then taking advantage of the steep rise in land values to sell off land at a great profit and invest in stocks and bonds. Indeed, by 1910, nearly one-half of the nobles in St. Petersburg were living on income from such investments. Count Sergei Sheremetev and his half brother Alexander owned more than forty-six commercial properties in St. Petersburg and Moscow from which they earned solid returns. Count Alexander also sold land to invest in banks and stock corporations that proved quite profitable. In 1914, Count Sergei Sheremetev built one of St. Petersburg's first shopping centers, the so-called Sheremetev Passage. And in 1910, in contrast with Chekhov's Madame Ranevskaya, Count Sergei saw nothing vulgar at all in leasing a good deal of the land at his ancestral home of Kuskovo to Muscovites looking for summer dacha plots.[24]

For hundreds of years the Russian tsars had relied on the nobility to maintain order over the countryside. Even after the emancipation of

the serfs in 1861, the nobility continued to serve as the de facto rulers of rural Russia until 1917 as a result of the dearth of state administrators at the local level.[25] The thirty thousand or so noble families that remained on their estates in the early years of the twentieth century represented small, isolated islands of privilege and authority amid a vast peasant sea of poverty and resentment, for even forty years after emancipation, the legacy of serfdom remained profound.[26] The peasants were still angry that upon receiving their freedom they had not been given land, which they had traditionally considered theirs since they were the ones who worked it; rather, to compensate the nobility, the peasants had been forced to purchase land through redemption payments to the state. Landownership had become an increasing source of anger as the rural population exploded, creating a serious land shortage. Peasants were forced to rent noble lands, often at high rates, leaving them with little to show for their hard work at the end of the season. The peasantry sank deeper into poverty and eyed the local nobleman's lands with ever-greater hunger. Most peasants in the black-soil Russian provinces subsisted on bread, pickled cabbage, and onion. So hard was life in the countryside that more than three-quarters of peasant army recruits called up in 1891 were declared unfit for service because of poor health.[27]

Even after winning their freedom, Russia's peasants had been kept in a servile status and lived in a separate world from that of their former masters and other privileged segments of society. Peasants alone lived according to the customary law of the village; they were not entitled to freely sell their land as individuals; they paid proportionally higher taxes than the nobles; and until 1889, just to leave their villages, they were required to obtain passports, which were granted only if they had paid all their redemption payments, taxes, and debts to the commune.[28] Nobles and peasants were divided not just by an economic barrier but by an even more important cultural barrier. The nobles, by and large, were Europeanized; they were children of the reforms of Peter the Great. The peasants were not; they lived in a different cultural and psychological world of tradition, habit, and religion that had changed little since the days of early Muscovy and one in which the nobles were viewed wearily as fallen Christians and, at times, forces of evil.[29]

Nobles and peasants continued to behave as masters and subjects well after 1861. As late as 1910, when Princess Barbara Dolgoruky rode

out among the peasant women near her family estate, the peasants would drop to their knees in respect. The princess found the age-old habit distasteful and so strictly forbade them from doing it in the future. Henceforth, they remained standing, for the peasants were used to doing as their masters instructed, at least when they were present.[30] Alexander Davydoff, born into a prominent noble family in 1881, was stunned by what he saw after leaving the city to return to run the family estate of Sably in 1905. Both the landowners and peasants seemed to be content to play hypocritical, dishonest roles with each other. The former typically adopted an aloof, superior, and sententious attitude (or, what he found even worse, one of treacly sentimentality), while the latter adopted a pose of false ignorance and "voluntary humiliation" and then tried to cheat the master behind his back. "It is evident that each side tried to cheat the other," he wrote, "but whereas the peasants guessed perfectly well the thoughts of the landowners, the latter were incapable of piercing the stone wall of the dissembling character of the peasant." This legacy of serfdom, in Davydoff's estimation, pervaded all such relations. The peasants excelled at "trickery," what he called "the usual weapon of the weak against the strong."[31]

Land hunger and the rise of industrialization forced many peasants to leave the countryside to seek work in the new factories, and by 1900, the working class numbered roughly 1.7 million, about 200,000 fewer than the number of Russia's nobles. Working conditions in the factories were horrible, and workers had almost no way of protesting their condition. Not only were workers denied the right to organize, but they were even prohibited from assembling merely to discuss common problems.[32] One female worker recalled later: "My family was technically free, but the spirit of serfdom and slavery still lived on." Men, women, and children worked long days, sometimes as much as eighteen hours, and their small pay could rarely keep up with the rise in the price of goods. Many went hungry for long stretches; life was brutish and crushing and without hope.[33] The influx of peasants to the cities created terrible housing shortages. Workers were housed in barracks, tenements, and dank cellars; some workers slept in the factories under their machines. There was massive overcrowding, filth, and disease. Typhus, cholera, and tuberculosis were rampant. By the 1870s, St. Petersburg had the highest mortality rate of any major city in Europe. There were no protective labor laws, but few dared complain out of fear of being fired.

For as bad as being a worker was, it was better than the existence of the urban poor and unemployed. The slums that sprang up in Russia's major cities were dark, hostile places rife with banditry, prostitution, murder, and lawlessness. Some slums were so bad the police did not dare enter. Girls and boys as young as ten sold themselves on the streets for a few kopecks. The people of this shadow world survived by theft or begging or they died of starvation.[34]

Recalling the early years of his life in Russia, Vladimir Nabokov wrote: "The old and the new, the liberal touch and the patriarchal one, fatal poverty and fatalistic wealth got fantastically interwoven in that strange first decade of our century."[35]

Nabokov was born in the last year of the nineteenth century into a wealthy noble family. His grandfather Dmitry Nabokov had served as minister of justice under Alexander II and III, and his father, also Vladimir Dmitrievich, was a prominent liberal Westernizer and, after the Revolution of 1905, a leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party (the Kadets). Vladimir Dmitrievich's political views confounded his mother, and she simply could not understand her son's liberal notions and his commitment to fundamental change. How was it, Nabokov writes in *Speak, Memory*, that "my father, who, she knew, thoroughly appreciated all the pleasures of great wealth, could jeopardize its enjoyment by becoming a liberal, thus helping to bring a revolution that would in the long run, as she correctly foresaw, leave him a pauper."[36]

The Nabokovs' great wealth included a fine home in St. Petersburg, the estate of Vyra, and a domestic staff of fifty-five. At Vyra the peasants looked to Nabokov's father as the *bárin*, the master, and would come to the manor house for help settling their local disagreements or for special favors and subsidies. Inclined to be generous, Nabokov père typically acquiesced to their requests, at which point they would raise him up and toss him in the sky three times, higher and higher with each throw. The custom made the Nabokovs' old governess uneasy. "One day they'll let him fall," she observed prophetically.[37]

It is one of history's tragic ironies that the origins of the revolution that would destroy the Russian nobility were in fact laid by the nobility itself. Throughout the late 1780s and early 1790s, as the revolution raged in France, Russia's polite society followed with nervous agitation in the

pages of the Moscow and St. Petersburg *Gazette* the news of the burning and looting of the châteaus and the executions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.[38] The tales of violence coming out of France brought to mind the attack on the nobility that had swept over Russia in the 1770s, when a Don Cossack army deserter named Yemelian Pugachev led a mass rebellion of the poor and dispossessed against the established order. Proclaiming the end of serfdom, taxation, and military service, Pugachev set out to exterminate all landlords and tsarist officials and unleashed a paroxysm of bloodshed and terror across an enormous swath of territory. By the time the *Pugachyóvshchina* was put down, tens of thousands of Russians had been killed and raped, and their homes looted and burned. There had been other peasant revolts before, but nothing of such magnitude, and the name of Pugachev seared itself into the memory of noble Russia, never to be forgotten.[39] Alexander Pushkin immortalized the Pugachyovshchina in his novel *The Captain's Daughter*, famous for its oft-quoted line "God save us from a Russian revolt, senseless and merciless."

The specter of another Pugachyovshchina forced Russia to consider reform from above or face revolt from below. In 1790, Alexander Radishchev published *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, a burning indictment of serfdom and the oppression of Russia's poor at the hands of the rich and a thinly disguised call to overthrow the monarchy. Catherine the Great ordered all copies of the book confiscated and destroyed (it remained banned until 1868) and its author sentenced to death (she commuted the sentence to Siberian exile). A noble, Radishchev as a young man had studied in Europe, where he had fallen under the influence of the French philosophes and the ideas of the Enlightenment that instilled in him a profound hatred of tyranny. Radishchev is often considered the founding father of the Russian intelligentsia from whom descends a long line of men and women committed to reforming, or even destroying, the Russian political and social order.[40]

That the first critic of Russian autocracy was a nobleman is not surprising considering that for most of the eighteenth and early years of the nineteenth century, the nobility formed the core of the small educated elite. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Peter the Great set out to modernize Russia, and to do so, he forced his noblemen to adopt the ways of their Western European peers. An unintended consequence of Peter's embrace of Europe was that the nobility learned not

only the latest technology and forms of polite behavior (shipbuilding from the Dutch, manners from the French) but also to think for themselves and to compare life at home with the more advanced and open societies of Western Europe. State service was obligatory for Russian noblemen until 1762. By then the ethos of service had become deeply ingrained in the nobleman's self-identity, so much so that even after the emancipation from state service, most noblemen continued to serve. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the nobleman's understanding of service had begun to change, and increasingly the object of service shifted from that of the state to the Russian people or nation.[41]

If by the time of Radishchev at least one nobleman dared call for radical change, thirty-five years later some even dared act. On December 14, 1825, a group of officers and members of the guards regiments, many of them from high aristocratic families, rebelled on St. Petersburg's Senate Square. The Decembrists, as the rebels came to be called, advocated the end of serfdom, a constitution, and basic liberties. Their revolt was quickly put down and its leaders were executed or exiled to Siberia by order of Tsar Nicholas I. These noble sons became martyrs to future revolutionaries, who, though forced underground, nurtured their dream of radical change. "Our sorrowful task will not be for nothing," the poet Prince Alexander Odoevsky averred following the revolt. "The spark will kindle a flame."[42]

The middle years of the nineteenth century produced a new generation of noble revolutionaries, such as radical populists Alexander Herzen, the "father of Russian socialism," and Mikhail Bakunin, the anarchist and theorist of peasant revolution. This new generation of Russian revolutionaries went abroad to escape tsarist censorship and prisons. In London, Paris, and Geneva, Bakunin mingled with revolutionaries and communists and wrote on the Russian peasants' propensity for violence as a tool for revolution and the overthrow of the tsarist state and the noble landlords. Bakunin's ideas influenced the other great Russian anarchist, Prince Pyotr Kropotkin.[43] Radical nobles did more than just theorize revolution. Nikolai Sablin was born into a hereditary noble family in the Vologda province in 1849. A poet, populist, and member of The People's Will, he committed suicide just as police were about to arrest him in 1881 in connection with the assassination of Alexander II. Before putting the gun to his own head, he fired off three shots to warn his comrades.[44]

By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the revolutionary intelligentsia had become a much more socially diverse group and had largely shed its noble origins. Still, it should perhaps not be too surprising that Russia's greatest revolutionary was himself a nobleman. Vladimir Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, was the son of a hereditary nobleman and actual state counselor, whose title brought with it the right to be addressed as "Your Excellency." After his father's death, Vladimir lived with his mother and siblings at their mother's family estate near Kazan. Just like other young noble boys, he loved to hunt, swim, and sail. His mother's family money allowed Lenin to spend his time reading and studying Marx; later the family money helped subsidize Lenin after he devoted himself full time to the revolution. Lenin was neither the family's only nor its first revolutionary. In 1887, his older brother Alexander was arrested and hanged for taking part in a plot to kill Alexander III.

Exiled to Siberia in 1897 for his political activity, Lenin claimed noble status in order to soften the harshness of his punishment. During his many years in Western Europe before the revolution, Lenin and his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, hired domestics to help with the cooking and cleaning. When it suited him, Lenin had no qualms about admitting his noble background. In 1904, in Geneva, he registered at a private library as "W. Oulianoff, gentilhomme russe."[45] Lenin never fully shed his noble origins. When Nicolas Nabokov, a cousin of the writer, went with his tutor in the spring of 1917 to hear Lenin speak from the balcony of the Kschessinska mansion, what he noticed first was that he spoke in "the manner of upper-class salon snobs." How odd, young Nicolas found it, for someone whose manner of speech reflected Nicolas's own class to stand up there and say such hateful, unpatriotic things about Russia.[46]