



The End of Tsarist Russia: The March to World War I and Revolution

by Dominic Lieven.

New York: Viking, 2015. Pp. xv, 426. ISBN 978-0-670-02558-9.

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In *The End of Tsarist Russia*, prolific historian Dominic Lieven¹ (Trinity College, Cambridge) has written not a work of military history but a study of late Tsarist government and society as the context for the catastrophe of July 1914 and the war that followed. He asserts that a specifically *Russian* history of the war, “the last frontier” of scholarship on the subject, is now possible thanks to the trove of material available to western historians since the collapse of the USSR. Documents from the Foreign Ministry in Moscow and six other archives have enabled Lieven to gain “a much fuller and sometimes distinctly new understanding of Russian foreign policy and the forces that lay beneath it” (4).

All his works demonstrate Lieven’s intimate familiarity with the Russian Empire’s foreign policy and diplomacy, Russian society, and Tsarist autocracy. He tells the story of a political regime’s failure to develop a consistent foreign policy ever since the 1850s. He argues, further, that World War I spawned the cataclysms suffered by Russia in the twentieth century: revolution, civil war, the Bolshevik terror, international instability, and a still more devastating world war in 1941. Precisely why Tsarist Russia entered a general European war in 1914 is the key question of modern Russian history (15).

The End of Tsarist Russia is really three books in one: the first is an analytical narrative of Russia’s diplomatic descent into war based on fuller documentation than has been customary or possible in the Anglophone world; the second offers a new interpretation of the war from a distinctly Russian perspective; the third concerns the origins of Russia’s revolution seen from an international viewpoint, “which may encourage a number of original insights into Russia’s fate in the twentieth century” (14). The first three chapters (of eight in total) treat systemic factors, starting with “A World of Empires” and narrowing to a discussion of “The Russian Empire” and the “The Decision Makers” of the Tsarist state. Chapters 4–6 shift the focus to international diplomacy, to explain “The Emergence of the Triple Entente, 1904–9,” before discussing the situation in St. Petersburg—“Crisis Follows Crisis, 1909–13”—and the exhaustion of Tsarism’s crisis-management capacity in “1914.” The book’s concluding chapters, “The July Crisis” and “War, Revolution, and Empire,” concentrate on the revolutionary implications of Tsarism’s gamble on a war it could not win.

A recurrent theme is the backwardness of a Russian economy and society ruled by a vast and unwieldy state and bureaucracy. The shock of Russia’s humiliation by Anglo-French forces in the Crimean War (1853–56) had prompted a laudable but inadequate modernization program under Tsar Alexander II. The alienation of Russia’s educated society when exposed to the rigors of war weakened the nation. Cultural and social problems played a part, but the main difficulty was that “the Russian

1. His previous books are *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (NY: St. Martin’s, 1983), *Russia’s Rulers under the Old Regime* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1989), *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815–1914* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1992), *Nicholas II: Twilight of the Empire* (NY: St. Martin’s, 1993), *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2003), and *Russia against Napoleon: The Battle for Europe, 1807 to 1814* (NY: Allen Lane, 2009).

regime denied civil rights and political representation even to its members of the upper and middle classes in a way unparalleled even in Spain or Italy, let alone Europe's core" (61).

Lieven vividly portrays the personalities of late Tsarist decision-makers beginning with Nicholas II himself. Sergei Witte was a pragmatic economic modernizer who understood his country's weaknesses and potential strengths. Petr Stolypin, Nicholas's longest serving premier, believed a too assertive foreign policy would pose a risk to the dynasty. Alexander Izvolsky was the foreign minister (1906–10) whose free-lance diplomacy nearly triggered a European war over the Bosnian crisis in 1908 (91–181).

If communications between upper-echelon government ministers and advisors were less than optimal, their relations with the press and the people were virtually nonexistent. Whereas Western European governments of the time were not necessarily responsive to public opinion, they at least sought to monitor the popular mood. In prewar Russia, by contrast, "public opinion" had never even approximated the sentiments of most Russians, who were illiterate peasants incapable of assessing or even grasping issues of government policy. Lieven observes that, in 1907, "the government, having lost faith in peasant conservatism, greatly narrowed the electoral franchise" (163). Thus, while the strategic thinking of the political elites only circumstantially influenced foreign policy, the Russian populace had never been prepared for the trial of arms that imprudent diplomacy might precipitate.

Russia's defeat on land and at sea in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) exposed the weakness even of a reforming Russia, Nicholas II's foolish insistence (against sound advice) on rebuilding the Russian battle fleet in the Baltic diverted precious financial resources to the construction of dreadnoughts and away from a program to address the Russian army's inferiority to Germany in heavy artillery (103). To the Tsar's obsession with a symbol of power that could have only limited impact in a European war was added a lack of concern over the Russian army's inferiority to the militaries of Japan, Germany, and France.

By universal consent, Russian reservists recalled to the army had performed indifferently in the war; both Russian nationalists and many generals explained this by the absence of an effective system of mass indoctrination and patriotism. Not only Japan but also Germany and France seemed to offer examples of such a system, which would motivate civilian reservists to face the dangers of the modern battlefield. These reservists would no longer be fighting in close-order formations with a corporal behind every third man's back. Instead, they had to be inspired to advance in open order for anything up to a kilometer in the face of the devastating firepower created by the Industrial Revolution. (163–64)

All this should have made Russia the most cautious of the potential belligerents of 1914. Instead, it recklessly endorsed Serbian nationalism precisely when the diplomatic arrangement of the Triple Entente with Britain and France could have made Tsarist foreign policy more effective. But high diplomacy was no longer the exclusive preserve of diplomats:

Civil society, meaning above all the press, often played a big role in stoking international conflict. This might be just a question of pandering to public prejudices and thirst for sensations, but it rattled and bedeviled policy makers nonetheless. More serious were systematic efforts to use foreign policy as a means to generate nationalist support for governments at home, in the process undermining the rational calculations on which diplomatic bargaining was based. No great power, Russia included, was entirely innocent in this respect. (11)

The Tsarist answer to the nationalist and racist ranting of the Pan-Germanism agitating the *Wilhelmine Reich*² was Slavophilism; this "most vibrant and potentially popular variant of conservative

2. Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1886-1914* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

thought in nineteenth-century Russia ... [and its] equivocal attitude to the existing political system” (63, 215) enfeebled Tsarism, even as the Russian press came out in support of brother Slavs in the Bosnian crisis. Ignored were the more sober voices of men like Gen. Aleksei Kuropotkin, the former commander in chief of the Russian army in Manchuria, who questioned

whether Slavophile dreams were worth the devastation to Russia that would result from a war in which even at the start seven million Russians, Germans, Austrians would be fighting each other. These were intelligent views. The pity was that Alexei Kuropotkin had not returned victorious from the battlefields of Manchuria to give them resonance and legitimacy. (216)

Instead, the regime sought popular legitimacy by taking a firm position on the future of the Balkans. St. Petersburg was also motivated by claims in the press that giving in to Austrian and German arguments could turn the Bosnia crisis into a “diplomatic Tsushima” (alluding to Japan’s destruction of the Russian fleet in the Strait of Tsushima in 1905). Lieven warns that it is misguided to think war was triggered in 1914 by aristocratic elites and the atavistic values at the centers of European power. Far more culpable were professionals and intellectuals with self-consciously “modern” views about power and adept at the game of popular politics. He cites Nikolai Hartwig, a foreign ministry hardliner and frequent contributor to *Novoe Vremia* (New Times), as typical of those prone to mortgage national interest to personal ambition (250–60, 289–90).

On the domestic front, Russian society was already at war with itself months before the July Crisis. A wave of strikes rocked Russia’s cities while the middle and upper classes seethed at the government’s failure to implement reforms charted in 1906. Compromise between the political executive and the two chambers of the legislature was stymied by vested interests and the fact that “supreme power in Russia was wielded by an individual generally believed to lack the intellect or strength of character to direct the enormously complex government machine” (293).

The events in Sarajevo in July 1914 forced St. Petersburg to take a position on Austria’s punishment of Serbia and the extent (if any) to which Russia would support the Serbs in a prospective war with Austria. At this point, the machinery of state broke down. Russian mobilization was complicated by the sheer territorial extent of the empire, the number of salients on which fighting could be expected, and the limited capacities of the Russian army. In the Warsaw Military District alone, Russian forces were to deploy to invade Galicia in the south, Silesia in the west, and East Prussia in the north. Partial mobilization against Austria would throw these plans into chaos and undermine any general mobilization against Germany. When it became apparent that only Berlin’s outright refusal to back Vienna against Serbia could avert a European conflict, military and civilian leaders in St. Petersburg debated the relative prudence of partial versus general mobilization and the Tsar, “in extreme agitation,” insisted “I will not become responsible for monstrous slaughter” (332–36). Ultimately, he and others would be held responsible for a slaughter far greater than anyone had imagined; Russia’s loss was so severe primarily for Russian reasons:

World War I required the unprecedented mobilization of society behind the war effort. This depended on a civilian society with tentacles stretching down to every family and on a state closely allied to this society and capable of coordinating and co-opting its efforts. To do this the state needed a high degree of legitimacy, and the many groups and classes in society needed to have common values, confidence, and commitments. The Russian Empire entered the war deficient in all these respects, and this proved a fatal weakness in 1914–17. (345–46)

An especially poignant photograph (336) shows Tsar Nicholas standing alone on the balcony of the Winter Palace after Germany’s declaration of war, a figure dwarfed by the massive edifice behind him. The loneliness of the moment, surely, was crushing.