

Russia on the Eve of the First World War

The year 1913 marked a resurgence for the Russian empire as the Romanov dynasty celebrated its 300th anniversary and the economy boomed. Had it not been for the First World War the country's fortunes might have taken a very different turn, says Charles Emmerson.



Postcard of the St Petersburg stock exchange, c.1913 In May 1913 a prominent French economist, Edmond Théry travelled to Russia to investigate an economic miracle: the unruly transformation of a financially backward empire into a modern agricultural and industrial superpower. The conclusions of his whistle-stop tour were dramatic and far removed from the kind of gloomy prognostications one might have expected. By 1948, Théry wrote, Russia's population would be 343.9 million – three times that of Germany, six times that of Britain and eight times that of France. 'If things continue between 1912 and 1950 as they have between 1900 and 1912', he argued, 'Russia will dominate Europe by the middle of the current century, politically as much as economically and financially.' Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) could now be consigned to history. Though socialists, anarchists and the perpetual schemers of the radical intelligentsia plotted the regime's downfall and unrest sporadically rippled across the country, Russia did not feel to Théry like a country on the brink of full-blown social revolution. The future, it seemed, was bright.

There was no doubt that Russia's greatness was still a work in progress in 1913. The empire's geography presented a daunting challenge to the movement of goods and people. Decent roads were few and far between. Fewer than one tenth of one per cent of Russian villages had local telephones and no public telephone line connected the Russian empire to the outside world. Russia's rail network, in which the French were keen to invest in order to speed their ally's mobilisation against Germany in a time of war, was only a quarter as dense as that of the United States. Poring over Russia's railway timetables, Théry calculated that it would take a minimum of 75 hours and nine minutes for an express passenger to travel from Chelyabinsk, where Europe meets Asia, to the German border.

Yet the drawbacks of Russian geography from a military point of view – except as a vastness into which to retreat – were not entirely immutable. From an economic perspective Russia's size could be viewed in terms of untapped

potential. Over time, large-scale investment and the natural increase in population would turn the subsistence hinterland of the Russian peasant economy into a new agricultural heartland, matching the rise of industry in more built-up areas. Just as settlement of the American West had been key to the economic rise of the US in the 19th century, so Siberia's development would propel Russia forward in the 20th. A strong, heavily-populated Russia would be a mighty ally and a fearsome foe. France counted on it.

Many anticipated that the empire's economic development would be accompanied by steady, technocratic modernisation, rather than by rupture and revolution. Russia's public administration could be quietly reformed through the adoption of new technical standards, new legal arrangements and new ways of working, even while tsar and *duma* remained at loggerheads over larger constitutional questions.

Russia's indigenous technological development suggested a country on the move (though still far behind the ultra-advanced Americans or Germans). In the same summer that Théry visited St Petersburg a young aircraft designer, Igor Sikorsky, gave an interview to the paper *Birzheye Vedemosti* at Korpusnyi airfield. He showed off the 'Desiatka' plane, which had received a prize at a Russian military competition the previous year, the 'Monokok' and the 'Grand', then the largest aircraft in world, with four engines. Too many planes in Russia were still being built according to foreign models, Sikorsky complained. But Russia was now catching up. 'We gain more experience day by day in flying and construction', he crowed. 'We are not behind our teachers, soon we will overtake them.' The tsar visited Sikorsky to demonstrate imperial support for his pioneering work. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, aviators featured in the painting, poetry and plays of the Russian Futurists, just emerging from St Petersburg's subterranean cafés.

The empire was similarly freeing itself from dependence on foreign investment. By 1913 Russians increasingly had the wherewithal to invest in new factories and power plants, new paper mills, railways and mines. Russian entrepreneurs had started 774 joint-stock companies over the previous three years, more than three times as many as were founded in Germany over the previous five, this despite a relatively difficult registration process.

No surprise, then, that the urban middle classes were caught up in a craze of stock market speculation. (Their sons and daughters were more occupied with a roller skating craze.) Even the Orthodox Church was apparently touched by popular excitement in the financial markets. 'The velvet upholstered carriages of archbishops were often observed in the neighbourhood of the Stock Exchange', recalled the tsar's brother-in-law, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, in his memoirs. 'Capitalism has triumphed all over the world', wrote would-be revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin, now holed up in exile in Austro-Hungarian Galicia.

Granted, Marxist theory suggested that socialism would follow capitalism in due course. But when? Most industrial strikes were motivated by economic rather than political demands. Was it likely that these would coalesce into an existential threat to the regime? What spark would light revolutionary conflagration in rural Russia, where harvests were improving and peasant incomes rising? 'War between Austria and Russia would be very useful for the revolution', Lenin wrote to Maxim Gorky in 1913, 'but it's scarcely likely that Franz Joseph [the Austro-Hungarian Emperor] and Nikolasha [Tsar Nicholas II of Russia] would grant us this pleasure.'

The President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Finance, Count Kokovtsov, saw avoiding war as critical to Russia's economic development and social harmony, even as some at court pushed its more active involvement in the Balkans. 'Ten years of sensible government would have seen Russia at the summit of her prosperity', argued Kokovtsov years later, after war and revolution had swept the tsarist regime away for ever. In 1913 the peace camp found an unlikely ally in the holy man Grigory Rasputin. 'Let the Turks and the foreigners devour each other', he told a local newspaper, 'while we, leading a peaceful and harmonious life, will once more rise above all others.'

In 1913, then, Russia basked in the glory of a febrile, yet nonetheless real, economic surge. British newspapers, while criticising the backwardness of Russia's politics and fearing some new outbreak of popular unrest, ran supplements for investors. In St Petersburg a British journalist described Russia 'hurrying up'. Electric trams were replacing the horse-drawn variety. Among the well off a fondness for foreign fashions and foreign travel was allied with a traditional spirit of Russian recklessness. In those days, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich observed, one ordered champagne in no bottle smaller than a magnum.

That summer the grand duke travelled to New York. On his return to St Petersburg in September 1913 the imperial family was regaled with stories of America, the world's other continent-sized power, Russia's transatlantic twin.

Romanov anniversary

For the more traditionally-minded, 1913 presented a special opportunity to celebrate the empire's Lazarus-like return to form: the 300th anniversary of Russia's ruling Romanov dynasty. The first half of 1913 was filled with tercentenary festivities: a lavish religious service at the Kazan Cathedral in St Petersburg, an imperial boat trip down the Volga to Kostroma, where Michael Romanov had first been offered the role of tsar in 1613, and a triumphal entry into Moscow. Court propagandists emphasised the parallel between Michael and his 20th-century successor. (The boat used by Nicholas on his Volga trip bore the name of his illustrious forbear.) The nation's devotion to Tsar Michael had returned Russia from the brink of destruction in 1613. Was not a similar rededication to Tsar Nicholas required in 1913, reaffirming the indissoluble bonds of people and monarch? This central message provided the conclusion to Major-General Andrei Georgievich Elchaninov's biography of Nicholas II, published at the beginning of the year (having first been checked and approved by the tsar).

Publication of the biography of a living tsar was seen by some as a daring novelty. This was, after all, a society that worried that commemorative stamps bearing visages of members of the imperial family were an invitation for grumpy post-office workers to besmirch what amounted to a devotional image. But Elchaninov's book was a hagiography, too, and one with a contemporary political point to make, based on the rhythms of Russian history. 'At the commencement of each century Russia experiences heavy trials and disasters', he wrote: the 17th-century Time of Troubles, the unfortunate start to the Northern War in the 18th century, Napoleon's entry into Moscow in 1812 and Russia's defeat by Japan in 1904-5. 'What is the cause of these disasters?', he asked, 'and how, on the other hand, are we to avoid them?'

The answer, Elchaninov suggested, was to trust in the tsar. Napoleon had been repulsed by acts of popular devotion to the Russian figurehead. Russia's difficulties at the beginning of the 20th century were to be overcome the same way. 'We see how many people were led astray into error and evil [in the 1905 Revolution]', the courtier wrote, 'but as soon as the people answered the tsar's call to unite with him, the sun shone once more on the land of Russia'. This was a selective reading of Russian history, but one that chimed with Nicholas' conception of his role: as national father figure. And it was one that found an audience abroad, translated into French (by a member of the imperial family) and into English by a British army officer, Archibald Wavell, arrested later in 1913 for spying on his Russian hosts.

A chapter in Elchaninov's book, entitled 'The Imperial Worker', described Nicholas' superhuman skills as a national leader – or, more banally, his attributes as super diligent administrator-in-chief. 'He expresses himself simply and concisely', Elchaninov wrote, 'has little need to refer to any document for information, writes quickly and without erasures, and uses plain Russian language, avoiding long sentences and disliking foreign words.' Though the tsar's office was always strewn with documents, 'the work is never behindhand ... the tsar always knows where to find anything'. Marks of Nicholas' greatness included the fact that he sealed up his own envelopes, was able to read even the worst handwriting and knew Russia's regimental histories inside out. A true boy scout tsar, in other words.

Ministers enjoyed working for Nicholas, Elchaninov claimed, thrilling to the prospect of hearing their ideas summed up 'shortly, absolutely, and absolutely definitively' by the Supreme Bureaucrat. 'I like to hear the truth', the tsar was reported to say constantly to his entourage.

Waverings and changes

Ministers themselves recorded a somewhat different reality. Though outwardly polite, the tsar could be infuriatingly evasive. He played clumsy political games behind his ministers' backs. One of Kokovtsov's predecessors as minister of finance wrote a memorandum in 1899 that ended by urging the tsar to ensure that characteristic 'waverings and changes' were not allowed to dull the impact of a proposed policy.

Things did not get any better with the constitutional revolution of 1905-6 and the subsequent creation of an elected legislative body, the *duma*. Ultra-conservatives, including the tsar's wife, saw the *duma* as an unwelcome constraint on the tsar's authority, rather than as a welcome expression of the popular will. At first many conservatives thought it would not last and should serve a consultative not legislative function.

The tsar himself remained as difficult as ever. The reforming Pyotr Stolypin, President of the Council of Ministers from 1906 to 1911, resorted to the threat of resignation to prevent Nicholas from actively obstructing reforms of local government in western Russia. In 1911 Stolypin was assassinated in Kiev, causing the tsar momentarily to consider that he had done wrong in undermining his premier. When Kokovtsov, Stolypin's successor, was ultimately forced out of office in early 1914 he was given no prior warning by the tsar but rather learned of his fate from court gossip.

At the same time there was apprehension about Rasputin's influence on the tsar. There is little evidence that Rasputin determined the specifics of policy. He was no Machiavelli; no super-lobbyist at the heart of imperial government. The danger he posed was different. On the one hand, in playing the Russian holy man to the wise and noble tsar, who he referred to as 'Papa', he encouraged Nicholas to trust in himself rather than seek the advice of others. On the other, Rasputin's scandalous reputation risked tarnishing the imperial family. A police report submitted in February 1913 documented Rasputin's lifestyle:

On leaving the prostitutes Botvinkina and Kozlova (house no. 11, Sviecheny alley) Rasputin went straight to the Golovins' [an aristocratic Russian family] in the company of some others. He left there after two hours and went to the Nevsky prospect where he again picked up a prostitute and went with her to the baths on Koniushennaya street ...

Around the same time, the tsar's diary innocently recorded a visit of Rasputin to the imperial family at Tsarkoe Selo: 'At 4 o'clock we received good old Grigori who stayed with us for an hour and a quarter.'

Against this backdrop the festivities of 1913 were meant to provide evidence of the tsar's personal popularity. Here was an opportunity to prove that the old political formula of tsar, church and people still worked.

To this end, the court crafted a set of national events which, while incorporating all of the vast empire's nationalities, in one way or another (in 1913 books were published in Russia in German, Lithuanian, Estonian, Hebrew, Polish and Armenian among others), nonetheless gave clear primacy to the ethnic and religious Russian core. As a symbol of this, most non-Russians were placed at the back of the Kazan Cathedral during the St Petersburg celebrations, as essentially tributary nations. Some of Nicholas' non-Russian subjects reaffirmed their loyalty outside the official celebrations. In the new St Petersburg mosque, the Emir of Bukhara, the Khan of Khiva and Muslim *duma* members were reminded by a preacher that 'devotion to the throne and love of the motherland are ordered by God himself and by his Prophet Muhammad'.

Inevitably, not everyone was impressed by the tercentenary events. In exile after the revolution Kokovtsov described the 'shallow curiosity' of the crowds greeting the imperial family on the Volga cruise, suggesting a celebration marked by 'lifelessness and emptiness'. Radicals, socialists and anarchists were not likely to be won over to the tsar by a multi-media campaign of commemorative books – four million were printed – or the films that accompanied the set-piece public events.

Yet, despite such killjoys, the festivities were broadly successful, notwithstanding the persistent absences of the tsar's wife from public events, the public shock engendered by the frailty of Nicholas' haemophiliac son and heir (he had to be carried around by a soldier during the Moscow celebrations) and the tsar's own occasional thoughtlessness when dealing with those who had travelled hundreds of miles to pay tribute to him.

Many were struck – and surprised – by the real devotion of ordinary Russians to the person of the tsar. They noted the peasants who waded waist-high into the Volga to catch a glimpse of him. Members of the imperial entourage found their mood lifted, convinced that the vast majority of Russians backed their man over the politicians of the *duma*. Dmitri Smirnov, a Tobolsk priest who attended the St Petersburg celebrations bearing the gift of a copy of the Abalakskaya icon, found his doubts over the strength of Russian values in the wake of the revolution of 1905 alleviated entirely by what he saw and heard in the imperial capital in 1913. 'Has not every Russian's chest burst

with the singing of the national anthem [God Save the Tsar] during these great days?', he asked rhetorically. He remembered sunlight glittering on the domes and cupolas of the St Petersburg skyline (even when other reports suggested the skies were considerably more leaden).

The success of the tercentenary celebrations mattered beyond Russia, too. The foreign diplomatic corps, watching events unfold across the country, took note of what they considered to be Russia's essential political unity, a major factor in assessing Russia's military potential in any future war. The Moscow celebrations in particular seemed warm and genuine. 'The mass emotion this visit engendered was overwhelming', remembered Bruce Lockhart, then serving as a diplomat in the British Consulate. The empire, it seemed, was back on track.

Alternative outcomes

From a discussion of Russia in 1913 it is not hard to reconstruct a plausible alternate trajectory for Russian history over the 20 or 30 years that followed. The Great War that broke out in 1914 was not inevitable. Had it never happened it seems more than likely that Russia would not have experienced the Bolshevik Revolution (though a further constitutional revolution, peaceful or otherwise, might have occurred instead). Without war, the Russian empire would undoubtedly have survived for longer than it did. And Russia would almost certainly have been more populous and more prosperous than it was for many years after 1913.

Théry's 1913 estimate of Russia's population by the mid-20th century – 343.9 million – assumed growth would continue in the future as it had in the past, heading up a gentle upwardly-curved incline as generation followed generation. In fact the Great War, the Civil War, successive famines, purges and the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 ensured that Russia's population see-sawed wildly in the decades after 1913. In 1950 the actual population of the Soviet Union (a somewhat larger territory than the Russian empire of 1913) was a little over half what Théry had predicted.

As with population, so with the national economy. In Soviet statistics 1913 was a benchmark, the last year of the peacetime tsarist economy. It took a long time for the benchmark to be overhauled. Russia's national income on a per capita basis did not surpass the level of 1913 until the 1930s. One can only imagine how much higher Russia's overall national wealth might have been had economic growth and population growth continued over the intervening 20 years, rather than being interrupted by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and its fallout.

Prescient predictions

Despite remarkable examples of heroism and resilience – and several brilliant victories – the war was disastrous for Russia. A few months before it broke out Peter Durnovo, a conservative politician, wrote a memorandum predicting what might happen if war with Germany, which he had argued against on geopolitical and domestic grounds, were to go badly:

A bitter campaign against the Government will begin, followed by revolutionary agitations ... The defeated army, having lost its most dependable men, and carried away by the tide of primitive peasant desire for land, will find itself too demoralised to serve as a bulwark of law and order. The legislative institutions and the intellectual opposition parties, lacking real authority in the eyes of the people, will be powerless to stop the popular tide, aroused by themselves, and Russia will be flung into hopeless anarchy, the issue of which cannot be foreseen ...

Durnovo's analysis proved prescient. Three years into war, Russia was engulfed in revolution. Civil war followed. Communism won.

Another one of Théry's 1913 predictions – that Russia would dominate Europe by the middle of the 20th century – proved correct. Or at least half correct; for by 1950 a Russian-controlled Soviet imperium had indeed taken hold over the nominally sovereign states of Europe's eastern half. The prestige and power of the Soviet Union, purchased at the terrible price of millions more lost lives in the Great Patriotic War, allowed for the extension of Soviet influence far beyond the borders of the USSR. The promise that Moscow-led Communism would launch the world onto a new plane of international brotherhood provided ideological justification for indirect Soviet rule.

The same tools of control that were the hallmarks of Soviet totalitarianism at home – the one-party state, a privileged political cadre, a highly-developed internal security apparatus – worked just as well in eastern Europe. Such an imperium could only be dreamed of in 1913. Indeed, in that year, many in the Russian foreign ministry saw the empire's future in Asia rather than in Europe.

Even now, a hundred years later, the final years of the Russian empire hold a fascination for Russia's people and leaders. The challenges of transforming the country from a commodity-based to a broad-based economy, where innovation can thrive, are unchanged. The Orthodox Church is once more viewed as an essential adjunct to Russian identity – and to the Russian state. President Vladimir Putin is regularly compared with Pyotr Stolypin and himself praises his predecessor's bravery, loyalty, patriotism and vision of reform without revolution (despite the fact, of course, that Stolypin came to a sticky end). Above all, the contemporary Russian state's choreography of power draws increasingly on imperial traditions, as well as upon the familiar Soviet celebrations of Victory Day on May 9th. The tsarist double-headed eagle is now the standard of the Presidency of the Russian Federation.

The year 1913, which was celebrated at the time as an anniversary of Romanov rule, now stands at the end of an era in Russian history. But it echoes throughout the last hundred years as a reminder of a different – and perhaps better – world that might have been.

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