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Seeds of Rebellion, Sown Over Centuries

"There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen." For over three centuries, the Romanov dynasty maintained an iron-clad grip on an empire spanning countless ethnicities, religions, and vast territories. Yet, like many nations before it, Russia's rebirth rose from the ashes of its old order. The collapse of one of history's most expansive empires was not the culmination of a single action or individual. Instead, one made of inter-generational tensions and failed incremental policy changes. A last-ditch attempt to salvage what was left of the bloodline's hand over an empire ended in exile and execution in the basement of a merchant's home. The Great Reforms of the 1860s, the Revolution of 1915, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 each played an integral role in paving the path for the rise of Bolshevik rule and the formation of the Soviet state. This forever changed the political, social, and economic landscape within Russian society. The bitter battle between reform and revolution, autocracy and modernization, did not fall with the Romanovs– it merely evolved, reshaping Russia's future in ways that would redefine ideology, governance, and power for generations to come.

The tsarist rule in the centuries leading up to The Great Reforms laid the foundation for the social unrest that would coincide. An embedded dependence on serf labor was created through the binding of peasants to the land granted to servitors of the crown. This not only bound the peasants to the land but also the will of their lords as peasants were prohibited from leaving at any time as the state gradually abolished their freedom to move to another lordship during a yearly Fortnite known as St. George's Day (Thompson 83). This erosion of the peasants' freedoms did not just stop at lateral movements but the complete exiting of the system entirely.

Traditionally, if a serf fled and was not recaptured within a specified time frame, they gained their freedom. However, the state intervened, extending the period for recapturing runaway serfs first to three years, then five, and eventually indefinitely (Thompson 83). These were measures meant to strengthen the workforce, but with them, sowed seeds of resentment and disillusionment in the peasantry. This system, though harsh, was justified by the belief that serfdom was essential for Russia's survival. As Thompson explains, "Serfdom is the price paid by Russians for the sake of survival" (Thompson 84). Russia, an economically struggling empire surrounded by powerful adversaries, relied on the forced labor of its peasantry to sustain its agrarian economy and military strength. The state viewed serfdom as a necessity, ensuring that the entire population contributed to the stability of the empire, even at the cost of individual freedoms. Centuries of growth in the inequality created and the very population feeling it, nearly 20 million more peasants working smaller divisions of roughly the same land to go around gave special nurture to the true seeds found in those fields (Thompson 161). The tsars were not oblivious to their plight though as a well-prepared prospective reformer known as Alexander II pleaded to the Moscow nobility in 1856: *"It is better to begin to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until it begins to abolish itself from below. I ask you, gentlemen, to think over how all this can be carried out."* (Thompson 162). The great debate over just exactly how this should be carried out took place with the peasants' stance being well known through their proverb: *"O lord, we are yours but the land is ours."* (Thompson 163). Finally in 1861 terms of a reform plan were written in stone and were as follows; the lord kept most of his land and, in principle, gave the liberated peasants what they had traditionally farmed. In central Russia, where land was most valuable, the peasants received some 10 to 25 percent less land than they had previously tilled. The government compensated the lord for the lost services of his serfs and collected this amount

from the peasants in redemption dues spread over forty-nine years (Thompson 163). While the emancipation of serfs was by far the most impactful of Alexander II's Great Reforms, it was only one of a few steps in reshaping Russian society. In an attempt to modernize governance and address the aging feudal system, judicial reforms followed in 1864. Alexander, a fan of Western schools of thought, replaced the judicial system with one modeled after the Western European courts, introducing independent judges, trials by jury, and public proceedings (Thompson 175). These courts while still imperfect and subject to the same failings plaguing an autocratic rule provided important foundations for future judicial reforms and finally checked the wild and unruled power of lower nobility in local matters. At the same time, the military underwent significant reform altering its conscription system closer to ones still seen today in many countries. Previously peasants were forced into service for twenty-five years- a near-certain death sentence. Under new conscription laws, all classes were included rather than just the lower classes in much reduced six-year active duty, with an additional singular year in the reserves (Thompson 182). This reform not only created a more modernized and efficient military but also produced a better-prepared and disciplined citizenry, influencing Russia's broader societal structure. Class relations became less disjointed as military service introduced a more shared experience across different social classes, bringing with it a growing sense of national identity. This national identity, like much of Russian history and culture, is deeply shaped by its past. The reforms enacted over a century earlier by Alexander's great-great-grandfather in law, Peter the Great, reshaped the tsarist role within the state, leaving a lasting imprint on both Soviet and modern Russian political structures. While still maintaining absolute control over the Russian state, Peter sought to depersonalize and remold the role of the tsar into one that centralized service to the state as a whole- a concept that remains ingrained in all Russian ideology to this

day (Thompson 108). Following in the footsteps of his house, Alexander sought to complete his sweeping reforms by extending this policy through the establishment of local governance systems at the уезд (uyezd) and губерния (guberniya) levels. These institutions created in 1870 and 1864 respectively, known as the zemstvo (земство) system, allowed for limited self-governance within Russia's vast empire. Each level had elected assemblies composed of representatives from the nobility, townspeople, and peasantry (Thompson 164). While the nobility retained significant control, these councils were tasked with managing local matters such as education, public health, infrastructure, and welfare. Although their powers were ultimately restricted under an autocratic government, their existence would provide the training grounds for future reformers and administrators. This new layer of governance, while seemingly small, was a critical step toward the decentralization of power away from the crown, the zemstvo introduced the notion of self-governance, subtly undermining the autocratic system and fostering an appetite for broader political participation—an idea that would later be radicalized by revolutionaries.

The reforms of both Peter and Alexander, though designed to strengthen the state, ultimately nurtured the seeds of discontent sown throughout the centuries of serfdom—ones that would reach their full realization in the Soviet model, "where the state itself, rather than an individual ruler, became the ultimate authority" (Thompson 220).

Much like the mounting failings of capitalist-based societies of today, the Great Reforms of 1860 partially modernized Russian society, but they also revealed deep contradictions within the still tsarist-based system demanding the inevitability of a grander reform outside the confines of the powers attempting to reform. One of the students of the training grounds found in the zemstvos was a humble beginnings bureaucrat who later found his efforts recognized with the position as the first prime minister of the Russian Empire founded in 1905 by the name of Sergei Witte

(Thompson 169). He, under the late stages of the autocratic regime, headed the efforts to complete this modernization of the Russian industries was carried out quite successfully; Subsidizations, Rapid Urbanization, and a long overdue expansive railway network sprawling the vast empire propelled the industrial capabilities of Russia to standards achieved by western and eastern nations. As Thompson points out, "New factories and workshops drew heavily on peasant labor" (Thompson 169), and "later, they resided permanently in the cities" (Thompson 169). While Witte's efforts laid the foundation for Russia's transformation in the 20th century, he was not the one who would ultimately address the growing unrest and inequality exacerbated by his policies. That responsibility would fall to a man in exile, who, even as Witte carried out his modernization, was crafting revolutionary rhetoric that would later resonate with the masses clamoring for relief from their hardships. As this labor force concentrated into these industrial hubs, workers began organizing and spreading revolutionary thought, giving way to the idea that workers would inevitably overthrow the capitalist system, leading to a socialist revolution (Thompson 174). These ideas found a heavy basis in Marxist theories, as Karl Marx theorized in his own country of Germany, as Russia was still working to modernize and industrialize itself to even confront these issues. The revolutionary pragma was not the work of Marx or the man in exile but the culmination of the struggle of the peasantry lasting for centuries. A growing movement of peasant socialists belonging to the Socialist Revolutionary (SR), believed that Russia could avoid the issues Marx observed by skipping capitalistic embracement and immediately establishing a socialistic governance of and by the peasantry. In contrast to Marxian thought, which saw it as a necessary step, the Socialist Revolutionary believed Russia's agrarian society could avoid the inevitable demise of industrial capitalism, positioning the peasantry as the basis for social change (Thompson 176). These competing ideologies- Marxism and peasant

socialism- would both be equal parts of the recipe for the brew stirring in the cauldron of revolutionary discontent. As Thompson notes, “The Socialist Revolutionaries, though counting heavily on the peasants, also courted workers, establishing cells at factories and workers’ settlements and enjoying considerable success” (Thompson 176). A commonality in revolutionary movements, both parties while differing in modes of change understood that an uprising must occur rather than the trickle-down reforms with at least one key common idea; neither saw the other as an oppressor but rather victims of one.

I am arguing that the first bargaining agreement between the Soviet Union of workers and the Russian State followed what is known as "Красное воскресенье" (Krasnoye voskresenye) or Red [Bloody] Sunday (Thompson 186). Much like a party lacking leverage at the bargaining table, the Russian Empire found itself in a position of weakness following its catastrophic defeats in the Russo-Japanese War. The Russian army endured a string of losses on land in the Far East, culminating in the naval disaster at the Straits of Tsushima, where Japanese warships decimated a major Russian fleet that had sailed from across the world from the Baltic Sea (Thompson 184). In the aftermath of these humiliating military setbacks, the Russian state, much like a weak bargaining party, was forced to address the real threat of action at home. On Bloody Sunday, Father Gapon led a crowd of peaceful working-class petitioners, including men, women, and children carrying icons and pictures of the tsar, to the imperial palace. They marched with the hopeful words: *"If thou wilt not respond to our plea, we shall die here on the square before thy palace."* They were met with deadly responses when soldiers fired into several columns of protesters, killing over a hundred people and wounding many more (Thompson 186). While the tsar himself was absent for this state action, the act of violence from the state exemplifies the power relation between the ruling classes and the remainder; showing that state-sanctioned

enforcers of all kinds, act in line with broader power structures even in the absence of explicit orders. This dynamic is present in all forms of governance, not unique to tsarist Russia, where the implicit role of enforcement is to maintain the existing hierarchy. When state violence is employed, the legitimacy of the regime is put into question. The state was compelled to make concessions to regain some semblance of control over an increasingly disillusioned and organized workforce. This marked the beginning of a bargaining process that would ultimately lead to the October Manifesto, signaling the first tentative agreements between the workers and the state (Before The Revolution Slide 26). This necessitated concessions arbitrated by Sergei Witte and reluctantly signed into law by Tsar Nichols II, the largely representative главный исполнительный царь (C.E.Tsar) of the state at this point. As Thompson notes, "The October Manifesto... promised the people a broadly representative legislative assembly to be called the Duma as well as full civil liberties, that is, freedom of press, assembly, and speech" (Thompson 187). While these measures were the most radical in centuries, they ultimately proved insufficient.

The following decade saw regression rather than progress, with the proletariat growing increasingly disillusioned and dead set on true revolution. Momentum was rapidly building for revolutionary forces, fueled by the failures of reform. Among them was the man in exile, Vladimir Ilych Lenin, using his time in punishment for radical ideas not as a deterrent but as an opportunity to sharpen his ideological weapons. Lenin built upon Marxian critiques of the bourgeois state, developing a revolutionary strategy that would soon take center stage in 1917. As Thompson notes, Lenin and his colleagues fiercely opposed Economism, rejecting the idea of incremental economic improvements for workers insisting it was nothing but deception (Thompson 175). Instead, they insisted that only a political revolution, one that dismantled the

capitalist structure entirely, could bring true liberation to the proletariat (Thompson 175). The evolution of the Duma during this time largely confirmed Lenin's theories. Rather than becoming a truly representative body, the Duma functioned as a de facto state-controlled governing body; "…under the revised franchise, each elector represented 250 landowners, 1,000 large urban property holders, 15,000 small property holders, 60,000 peasants, and 125,000 workers. This weighting of the elections had the desired result, as the Third Duma consisted of 270 conservative deputies, 114 Kadets, 30 leftists, and 17 nonparty deputies, giving the government a comfortable working majority." (Thompson 191). Although Russia experienced economic growth between 1906 and 1914, achieving industrial growth at about 6 percent a year and enough miles of railroads being constructed to make the Russian empire second only to the United States in total trackage (Thompson 192) these gains were heavily counteracted by devastating effects of the war to begin all wars, WW1. Russia found itself fulfilling its international duties and maintaining regional interests in the Balkans at the negligence of its people. The Russian army remained intact, but by the end of the fighting in late 1917, the Russians had mobilized over fifteen million men and lost six to eight million who were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, with perhaps another two million having deserted (Thompson 198). As Thompson observes, "As the real income of both workers and peasants declined, as the breakdown of transportation and distribution systems caused food and fuel shortages in the cities, people's attitudes toward the government and the war-hardened until, finally, they simply refused to tolerate the situation any longer" (Thompson 201).

And with the much-welcomed spring of 1917 finally came the revolution. Nicholas II abdicated the throne without a single protest or proclamation for the autocratic seat (Thompson 205) marking the end of the family's multi-century residence over the Russian throne and

disintegration into the ashes of a once great monarchy. Aside from the initial skirmishes between protestors and, at the time, tsar-controlled state enforcers (Thompson 203) Thompson notes that "tsarist authorities were replaced, usually without bloodshed, by public committees, and soviets soon formed, first in the cities and then more slowly in district towns and villages. Outside Russia, the Central Powers welcomed the revolution, thinking it might lead to an unraveling of Russian society and a collapse of Russia's fighting capacity." (Thompson 205) This was a revolution borne out of inter-generational struggles and a desire planted centuries ago in those servitor's fields. The final spark that eventually engulfed this vast empire was no individual action or actor, sparing no hesitation. Though when the man sentenced to solitude returned to Petrograd in the ashes of the old order a month later, around him rallied the force that would shape Soviet thought for generations; the Bolsheviks.

The fall of the Romanov dynasty and the Bolshevik rise to power is one of the most defining moments in Russian history. What started as a struggle for freedom and basic dignity of the peasantry and working class toppled one of Europe's longest-reigning dynasties. The events of 1917 were centuries in the making and extended far beyond solely the confines of overcoming singular will; they would shape Russia's political, social, and economic landscape forever. The Bolshevik seizing of power in July of the same year (Thompson 210) did not mark the end of this struggle but the amplification of the voices of millions silenced by autocratic rule. Occupying this power vacuum in the transitional stage was a Provisional Government that only lasted 8 short months though establishing integral liberal reforms; equal rights, freedom of speech, unionization, reduced workweeks and the liberation of Poland (The Russian Revolution of 1917 Slide 7). The struggle would only become more complex with a civil war ensuing less than six months of taking power further challenging a single-party rule that the empire had just broken

free from (Thompson 215). A duel of ideals between the Red Army, founded by Leon Trotsky, and the Whites; anti-Bolshevik liberal sympathizers funded by competing foreign interests (Thompson 217). The ensuing socio-economic policy was still applied to the very same Russia, yet it was a Russia fundamentally transformed by revolution. This evolution, marked first by War Communism (1917-1921) and later the New Economic Policy (1921-1928) cemented Bolshevik, Marxist-Leninst, influence in Russian Society. War Communism, implemented during the Civil War, put a focus on control by the state, a process of collectivization and centralization out of necessity of survival (Thompson 220). Grain stocks were seized by the state to nourish the Red Army in its battle against the Whites (Thompson, 220). Private enterprise, along with private trade was banned in its entirety under the command economy contrasting the later New Economic Policies allotment for limited market reforms and private enterprise (Thompson 222; PowerPoint Slide 18). With an understanding that the model was unsustainable for the Soviets in the long term Lenin chose to reintroduce certain free market activities such as limited private enterprise, allowing the peasants to sell grain into the market (The Russian Revolution of 1917 Slide 18). These contradictions– state control under War Communism versus economic liberalization under NEP– illustrate the complexities of early Soviet governance. Liable to the very same critiques it held to the system it replaced this laid the foundation for Soviet Rule, ushering in a new era that would last for generations to come, influencing economic and social policy even today in global dominators such as the United States, China and the former Soviet Union itself.

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