The Russian nobility differed in its origins and in its role from the nobility of the other lands of Europe. Unlike its peers in those lands the nobility of Russia owed its preeminence to the civil and military functions that it performed in the service of the tsar, and not to the ownership of land. Elevation into the nobility did not necessarily include a grant of land; indeed, as time went by an ever larger number of the nobility was landless or nearly so. The Russian nobility was thus not a territorial elite, nor was it the heir of a feudal nobility. Russia had no feudal castles. In days long gone rival princes and their followers had possessed regional power bases. The princes of Moscow, however, in their savage ascent to absolute authority, had destroyed all vestiges of regional autonomy and wiped out most of the men who once possessed it. The continued expansion of the Muscovite hegemony, the tsars’ practice of resettling nobles as their realm grew, and the long absence of nobles on the tsar’s service aborted the growth of new roots into the land and of ancestral claims to the loyalties of the local people. Even the surnames of Russian nobles revealed the absence of local associations. Unlike the nobles of western Europe they did not take their names from places; in Russia, as Maurice Baring remarked, there was no von und zu, no de, no Lord So-and-So of So-and-So.

Until well into the eighteenth century the Russian nobility did not even have a collective name. The one finally settled upon was dvorianstvo. The choice of that word was significant. Dvorianstvo does not mean nobility, a word that comes from the Latin nobilis and means renowned or outstanding. Dvorianstvo means the people of the ruler’s court, his dvor. It was an old term. It had been used centuries before

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for the men who actually lived at court, the ruler’s retinue and his menials. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it had meant those who held land in return for service to the ruler and who ranked between the boiars, the great lords, and the deti boiarskie, the lesser servitors. Now all nobles, great and small, were called the dvorianstvo, the men of the court. It was a fitting name for an elite who owed its status to the services it gave to the ruler.

The Russian nobility differed, too, from its European counterparts in the matter of titles. Very few Russian nobles had hereditary titles. Kniaz, prince, was the sole native hereditary title. Until the eighteenth century only descendants of the princes of medieval Russia could claim it. Later the tsars bestowed the rank and title on favorites, albeit sparingly. Starting in the eighteenth century, too, the tsars gave the title of count or baron to others to whom they wished to show special favor.2

Despite their rarity (or perhaps because of it) titles did not possess the lustre that attached to them in western Europe. Some of the greatest families had no titles and apparently felt no need to get them. Nor did the possession of a title guarantee status and prestige. All children bore the title of their parents even while their parents lived. Moreover, in the course of a few generations partible inheritance, by which property was divided among all male heirs, coupled with the prodigality so common among Russian nobles, reduced branches of many titled families to poverty and obscurity. Long before the fabled 1920s when, if the breathless accounts of tourists and of Hollywood movies are to be believed, nearly every other gigolo, waiter, or cabdriver in Paris was a Russian aristocrat, bearers of splendid titles earned their livings at home and abroad as musicians in cafe orchestras, as cabdrivers and maids, and in other modest pursuits.3

Instead of a territorial base or an ancestral claim, nobility (except for a few families of ancient pedigree) depended upon rank achieved in the service of the tsar. In 1722 Peter I had established a Table of Ranks of fourteen grades (chin) in both the civil and military services. Men of nonnoble origin acquired hereditary nobility when they entered the lowest (fourteenth) grade in the military or when they reached the eighth grade in the civil service. Up to the end of tsarist Russia in 1917 every noble either held an ennobling chin in the Table of Ranks or was a descendant of a man who had done so.

By this institutionalization of elevation into the nobility, Peter established the supremacy of service to the tsar over noble birth. From then on, to be a noble meant to be a servitor of the tsar or a descendant of a servitor. Until 1762 every noble had to serve in the military or the
bureaucracy in order to retain his nobility. Then Peter III abolished compulsory service and allowed each noble to decide for himself whether he wished to serve. The introduction of the Table of Ranks had the effect, too, of making the Russian nobility open-ended by its automatic elevation of men of plebian origin into the nobility when they reached the designated grade. This openness kept the nobility from becoming a self-contained caste that could draw up its own rules for entry. The nobility was rudely reminded of this late in the nineteenth century when it tried to determine admission into its ranks. Alexander III’s powerful minister of internal affairs, Count Dmitrii Tolstoi, pointed out to the tsar that “the Russian dvorianstvo is not of feudal origin and as a service estate it cannot have the right of self-determination without changing its historical significance.”

There were other avenues into the nobility, but these never became principal ones. The tsar at his pleasure could grant a patent of hereditary nobility. The award of certain decorations for valor or distinguished service carried nobility with it. There was also a rank called personal nobility accorded to those who reached the grade in the Table of Ranks immediately beneath the one that gave hereditary nobility. The personal noble enjoyed most of the privileges of the hereditary noble, save that personal nobility extended only to himself and his spouse but not to his heirs.

Peter I had intended that every servitor, no matter how distinguished his origins, should begin his career at the lowest grade and that promotion should depend upon merit and length of service. Those intentions quickly foundered on the realities of influence and connections. Hereditary nobles gained preferential treatment in promotions and in appointment to high office. Men with higher education—and until well into the second half of the nineteenth century higher education was a near-monopoly of the nobility—were exempted from passing through the lower grades. And, of course, the Autocrat of All the Russias could disregard his own law and make direct appointments to any grade.

The names of the grades in the Table of Ranks of the civil service were mainly transliterations or translations of German offices. The highest grade was kantsler, chancellor; next came deistvitel’nyi tainyi sovetnik, the Russian translation of wirkliche Geheimrat; then tainyi sovetnik, or Geheimrat; and so on down the list. These names give little indication of the duties of the grades. Each grade had its own uniform, and the garniture of uniforms increased in direct proportion to increases in rank. Each grade, too, had its prescribed form of address. The men in the lowest grade were addressed as “well born,” those in the next as “high well born,” those in the next as “high born,”
and so on up the ladder of superlatives to "Excellency" and "High Excellency."

Territorial expansion, increase in population, further involvement in European power politics, a huge increase in the military establishment, and the entrance of the state into new sectors of activity provided an always growing need for civil and military servitors. That meant more people in the nobility as men rose in the expanded bureaucracy and the armed forces. Natural increase helped account for the growth, too, since all direct descendants of an hereditary noble were themselves noble. The abolition in 1762 of the service requirement also contributed to the increase in numbers. Many nobles continued to serve, but others did not enter service or else remained in service for a short period and then retired. Moreover, by and large, nobles preferred the more glamorous military to the civil service. These circumstances compelled the government to recruit many of its higher civil officials from other orders of society. Thus some were the sons of "honorary citizens" (a privileged estate created by imperial decree in 1832 and composed of upper bourgeoisie); others were the sons of merchants and the petty bourgeoisie; and still others—a large group—were the sons of priests. Between 1825 and 1845 some 20,000 men of nonnoble origin, and between 1875 and 1896 some 30,000, achieved hereditary nobility through promotion in the Table of Ranks.6

These numbers seem large until they are compared with Russia's total population and with the ratio of nobles to population in some other lands. In 1858 there were 609,973 hereditary nobles of both sexes in the fifty provinces (gubernii) of European Russia. That was about 1 percent of the population. A disproportionate number of nobles, however, lived in the nine Baltic, White Russian, and Lithuanian provinces. If these provinces with their swarms of Polish and German nobles are left out of account the number of nobles in the forty-one provinces of Great Russia and the Ukraine was 232,346. That was about .45 percent of the population. By 1897 the number of nobles in the fifty provinces of European Russia had risen by 45 percent to 885,754. But total population had experienced an even more spectacular rise, so that the ratio of nobles to the total population had fallen to .95 percent. In the forty-one Great Russian and Ukrainian provinces the number of nobles had more than doubled to 477,836. That amounted to slightly more than one-half of 1 percent of the population. The number of personal nobles rose sharply, too. In 1858 there were 276,809 of them in the fifty provinces and 251,205 in the forty-one Great Russian and Ukrainian provinces. In 1897 these numbers had mounted to 486,963 and 432,664 respectively.7

Peter I's creation of the Table of Ranks was part of his plan to
restructure Russian society. He began the process of enrolling each of his subjects into a legally established estate or order (*soslovie*). The four major estates were nobles, clergy, townsmen, and peasants. As time passed these basic estates were subdivided and some of the subdivisions became independent orders. Each order had its own legally defined rights and obligations. There was also a category, called the *inoorodtsy*, that stood outside the hierarchy of orders and had its own special—and inferior—legal status. This order included the native tribesmen of the frontier regions and the Jews. By the second half of the nineteenth century every subject of the tsar belonged to an order, identified himself as a member of his order, and had the privileges and obligations that were peculiar to it.

By creating orders and by making the acquisition of nobility dependent upon service to the throne Peter welded the nobility into a corporate body. In the lands of western Europe a centuries-old struggle against the encroachments of the throne had evoked and sustained a corporate spirit in the nobility. In Russia the corps of the nobility was the creation of the throne: as MacKenzie Wallace put it, the nobility was “crushed into a conglomerate by the weight of the autocratic power.” The transformation into a privileged corporate order was completed when Catherine II issued the Charter of the Nobility in 1785. It codified the privileges the nobility already possessed and gave it new powers in local and provincial government.

An awareness of their special status as a privileged order and of their common interests quickly manifested itself among Russian nobles. Men whose fathers and grandfathers had humbly referred to themselves as servants (*khlopy*) of the tsar, and who until 1762 could be whipped like common peasants when they displeased him, now spoke of themselves as “the corps of the nobility which includes within itself its own prerogatives and invulnerability.” Already in the middle of the eighteenth century spokesmen of the nobility urged that entry into its ranks through promotion in the services be abolished or at least restricted, claiming that new men lacked the qualities of mind and character that hereditary nobles possessed. In response to repeated demands of this sort the sovereigns periodically raised the threshold for admission into the hereditary nobility, until in 1856 it was set at the fourth grade of the civil service and the sixth grade (colonel or naval captain) in the military service. That still did not satisfy the nobility, which persisted in its agitation for still more exclusivity, but without further success.

The phenomenon of corporate solidarity did not diminish the autocratic power and authority of the tsar. The tradition of loyalty
and obedience to the sovereign weakened hardly at all. The nobles of 
Russia did not demand that their ruler share part of his authority with 
them, except during those strange decades after the death of Peter I 
when nobles made and unmade tsars and tsaritsas. They owed their 
status and their privileges and even their existence as a corporate body 
to the sovereign and they saw no reason to oppose his prerogatives. 
Even though the service requirement was abolished in 1762 nobles 
continued to serve, for up to the end of the tsarist regime the road to 
high position and prestige and power still started and ended at the 
steps of the throne. The tsars for their part were so confident of the 
loyalty of the nobility that they ordered revolutionary changes, such 
as Alexander II’s emancipation of the serfs, with little or no considera­
tion for the interests of the nobility. The nobles might protest, but 
they always went along.

This acquiescence of the nobility weakened its corporate solidarity 
and its influence. For example, the Charter of the Nobility of 1785 had 
ordered the hereditary nobility of each county and province to or­
ganize itself into an assembly and had given these assemblies control 
over much of the local administration. The government, however, 
soon made it clear that it intended to maintain firm control over these 
assemblies and that it viewed independent expression or action by an 
assembly as resistance to the will of the tsar. Even more important, the 
governor of the province, appointed by the tsar and answerable only 
to him, had nearly unlimited authority. Small wonder that most nobles 
showed scant interest in these assemblies and that sparse attendance 
marked the required meetings. In 1836 the government tried to lend 
new prestige to the assemblies by raising the property qualifications 
for voting at the meetings, hoping to make the assemblies more exclu­
sive and therefore more attractive. It also ordered fines of 25 to 250 
rubles for missing the meetings. After the emancipation in 1861 the 
government tried the opposite tack and sharply reduced the property 
qualifications, except for nobles who owned urban property. These 
efforts to stimulate interest met with failure. Save for a rare outburst 
of action or protest by an individual assembly, the required triennial 
meetings were little more than social occasions to renew old ac­
quaintances.12

There were times when nobles had briefly abandoned their traditio­
tional subservience. They had overthrown and slain tsars in palace 
revolutions. In the Decembrist revolt of 1825 they sought to end the 
tsar’s absolute power. They participated in and even led movements, 
liberal, radical, and revolutionary, that kept imperial Russia in turmoil 
during the last decades of its existence. Nor was the relationship be-
between crown and nobility strained by nobles alone. The strange and unpredictable Paul III (1796–1801) followed an antinoble policy during his brief reign, cancelling many noble privileges. But Paul could not turn back the clock. He was brutally murdered by disaffected nobles, and his son and successor, Alexander I, as one of the first acts of his reign, restored the privileges that Paul had taken away. These disturbances of the relationship between tsar and nobility were only episodic. Each needed the other too much to risk permanent alienation. The dependence of the nobility upon the throne for status and privilege had its counterweight in the dependence of the throne upon the nobility. Nobles provided the core of the civil and military services, and the tsar depended upon them to maintain and defend the established order in which throne and nobility were the two dominating forces.

The privileges allowed the nobility by the throne extended to all nobles so that legally they were all equally noble and equally privileged. The legal fiction did not conceal the real situation. There were accepted gradations in privilege, power, and social standing. There were registers, called Books of the Nobility, that separated the nobility into six descending social categories. Stratification was more pronounced and meaningful when the ownership of property was used as the standard. Until the emancipation in 1861 real property was measured not in terms of acreage but in terms of adult male serfs, called “souls.” In 1858, 43 percent of the 103,880 serfowners had fewer than 21 souls each. Another 34 percent had 21 to 100 souls, 19 percent had 101 to 500 souls, and 3 percent owned more than 500 souls each. Collectively, the 43 percent who owned fewer than 21 souls owned only 3 percent of the 10½ million serf souls, while the 3 percent who had over 500 souls owned 44 percent of all serf souls. Clearly most serf owners were men of limited or at best modest means. Many had difficulties in making ends meet. In 1858 the marshall of the nobility of the fertile agricultural province of Riazan reported that 1,700 noble families, or one-fourth of all the noble families of that province, were so poor that “together with their peasants they form one family, eat at one table and live in one hut.” Still other nobles owned neither land nor serfs. Mostly bureaucrats and army officers, they depended upon their salaries for their principal or only source of income. These landless nobles first appeared in the eighteenth century and their numbers grew steadily as the decades went by.

The topmost stratum of the nobility, made up of a relatively small group of families, was known collectively as the zнат’, the notables. They clustered in St. Petersburg and in Moscow. Though they in-
cluded families of old pedigree, high official rank and at least a patina of general culture provided the real basis for membership. To insulate themselves against the flood of new nobles and to keep the parvenus and the bumpkins at a distance, the notables used the device of language. Their children were taught from early youth to speak Parisian French without accent and with elegance of vocabulary. That became the language of high society. During the French Revolution émigrés who sought sanctuary in Russia brought with them the fashions and ideas of the ancien régime. They became teachers in schools that restricted their enrollment to sons of the great families and that indoctrinated them in the social graces and the values of old France. Lesser families attempted to ape their betters, so that the supply of qualified teachers soon must have fallen far behind demand. Doubtless many noble households had tutors as inept as the one-time barber and soldier who was hired to teach young Grinev in Pushkin’s tale of The Captain’s Daughter, whose only qualification was that he happened to be a Frenchman.

The greatest families lived for part of the year in their town houses and palaces in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The men who spent their careers in government service lived there too, and in provincial capitals as well. Most of the nobility, however, lived permanently out in the country along with the vast majority of Russia’s people, for Russia remained an overwhelmingly rural land up to the end of the imperial regime.16

The privileges of the nobility included a monopoly on the ownership of serfs, nearly unlimited sway over the person and belongings of their serfs, and broad local civil, police, and judicial authority. In other European lands sovereigns had issued codes to regulate the lord-peasant relationship and thereby had limited the power of the nobles. In Russia the only restriction that the law placed upon the serfowner was that the serf “must not suffer ruin” because of the demands of his master. The serfs for their part were ordered by the law to give “silent obedience” to their masters.17 The serfs became chattels of their owners, subject to their every whim and fancy, bought and sold and gambled away, slaves in everything but name.

In the eighteenth century the nobility had won for itself the exclusive right to the ownership of land. That privilege was eroded in 1801 when Alexander I decreed that any of his subjects, except serfs, could own uninhabited land. In 1848 the law was amended to allow serfs to buy uninhabited land in their own name with the approval of their master.

The nobility also enjoyed exemption from the military draft and
freedom from taxes. In 1812 the government introduced a progressive tax on income from landed property. The rate was low and the tax was levied on the basis of an assessment made by the noble landowner himself. Nonetheless, it aroused much hostility among the nobility, which looked upon it as a serious violation of its privilege, and within a few years the tax was repealed.\textsuperscript{18}

The special favor enjoyed by the nobility extended beyond the borders of its estates. Noblemen recognized that the growth of the bureaucracy and the increased need for trained officials presented new opportunities for successful careers for their children. Even simple country nobles like the parents of Oblomov in the novel that Goncharov published in 1859 “saw that people could not make their way in life—that is, acquire rank, orders of merit, and money except through education. . . . Sinister rumors were about that not only a knowledge of reading and writing but of other unheard of subjects was required.” Enrollment in the secondary schools (gymnasia) of the Ministry of Public Instruction rose from 14,000 boys in 1825 to 17,817 in 1855, and the number of such schools rose from sixty to seventy-seven. In 1853, 80 percent of the students belonged to families of the nobility. University enrollments increased from 975 in 1808 to 3,659 in 1855. Comprehensive data are lacking on the social origins of university students, but information for two universities shows a preponderance of nobles. Thus 238 (89 percent) of the 267 students at the University of Kiev in 1838 and 299 (70 percent) of the 424 students at the University of St. Petersburg in 1853 were noble.\textsuperscript{19}

The government actively encouraged the near-monopolization of higher education by the sons of the nobility. In 1839 tuition fees were introduced at the universities. In 1845 and again in 1848 the fees were increased. Orders from the Ministry of Public Instruction made admission procedures more difficult for commoners, and in 1850 a decree ordained that each university had to reserve 300 places for the sons of the nobility, because, the decree explained, educated persons of lower social origin “generally become restless citizens, discontented with the established order of things, especially when they cannot give vent for their overexcited ambition.”\textsuperscript{20}

The value of education as a key to a successful career in government service, combined with the quasi-monopoly of it by the nobility, naturally made it more difficult for men of plebian origin to rise to the highest posts or even to the rank that gave nobility. A study by Walter Pintner of the service records of 2,952 officials who served between the years 1846 and 1855 showed that 2 percent were the sons of merchants and foreigners, 5 percent came from plebian urban and
rural families, 20 percent were the sons of priests, 30 percent were the sons of military officers or civil servants who had not attained nobility, and 40 percent were men of noble birth. Moreover, the born nobles held 70 to 80 percent of the highest offices. Family connections and great wealth were significant factors in the ascent to the uppermost ranks. Of the men who reached such rank 18 percent belonged to the 3 percent of noble families who owned more than 500 serfs. Moreover, men with at least one year of university, or who had graduated from one of the elite secondary schools, had almost exclusive possession of the highest offices. There must have been much overlap between these men and the scions of great wealth. However, 42 percent of those in the highest posts had no serfs in their families. They belonged to an hereditary career bureaucracy, with few or no ties to the land.21

The success of the nobility in reaching the heights in government service contrasted sharply with its activities in economic life. With rare exceptions, this was a record of stagnation and failure. Instead of using their authority as landowners and serfowners to introduce improvements in their farming operations, nobles contented themselves with doing things the way they had always been done. Some among them did attempt to raise the efficiency and productivity of agriculture. These men were few in number, and even fewer among them met with success. Responsibility for the stagnation of agriculture lay in part with the intractability of the peasants. Departures from traditional routines aroused their suspicion that something was being put over on them, and in any event, like forced and unpaid labor elsewhere in Europe, they were notoriously inefficient. The largest share of the blame, however, fell upon the landowners, who failed to use the power they had to compel their serfs to employ improved methods, and upon the state, which unlike the governments of some other European lands did not provide stimulus and leadership in the adoption of agricultural innovations.

Most nobles who owned land were not market-oriented and did not think in terms of the profitable operations of their estates. They viewed their estates as sources of goods for their own consumption and of money due them by their serfs. Like Oblomov’s father they counted it a “divine blessing” if a good harvest or a rise in prices increased their income over the preceding year. Many of them, particularly those in government service, were absenteees who left the management of their land to stewards, who often lined their pockets at the expense of their employers. Matters were made worse by the universal testamentary practice, mentioned earlier, of dividing property among all sons. That custom could in a couple of generations
splinter a sizable estate into many separate pieces, none of them large enough to support a noble family. Only the existence of vast lands in the colonial regions of the south and east saved all proprietors from this fate. These lands cost little so that many an heir sold his small inheritance to a fellow heir, used the money to buy land on the frontier, and settled there with his serfs. Efforts to introduce impartible inheritance failed; not even Peter I could force the nobility to accept it. A decree of 1845 allowed the establishment of entails, but set the qualifications so high that only the very wealthiest landowners could make use of the legislation.

The improvidence and economic irrationality of the landowners was actually reinforced by actions of the state. As part of its resolve to protect and sustain the nobility, the government established special banks to lend money to landowners. Since the purpose of these loans, which were secured by mortgages on the serf souls of the borrower, was to keep the nobility in its privileged position, the government rarely foreclosed. It allowed delinquents to remain in possession so that loans often amounted to outright gifts. This leniency invited continuous borrowing. In 1820 one-fifth of all serf souls were mortgaged with state lending institutions. By 1859 two-thirds of all serf souls were so mortgaged. In addition, nobles borrowed heavily from private money lenders. Nearly always they used the money they borrowed for consumption or to pay off old debts, rather than for capital improvements. Many of them spent money with breath-taking profligacy, and even men with seemingly incredible incomes somehow managed to spend more than they received.22

Most nobles, encouraged by the government's leniency in advancing them money, showed little concern about the huge indebtedness that rested upon their order. Another policy of the government, however, did awaken their fears and their concern. This was the emancipation of the serfs. The hesitant and half-hearted attempts of Alexander I and Nicholas I to improve the status of the serfs had frightened nobles out of all proportion to their consequences. Then Alexander II, forced by the pressure of events beyond his control, took decisive action and ordered the freeing of the serfs.

Expressions of dismay from the nobility and dire warnings of the dangers of emancipation poured into St. Petersburg, to no avail. Bitter complaints and admonitions proved to be the nobles' only protest. Their dependence upon the throne, their tradition of unquestioning obedience to it, and their lack of experience in corporate action prevented them from doing anything more. With heavy hearts and fears for their own future they followed the orders that they received.
small minority among them supported the emancipation and foretold of benefits that it would bring to landowners. Events soon proved that few prophecies have been more false.

For the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 opened a calamitous last stage in the history of the Russian nobility, during which the pillars upon which its power and privilege had rested crumbled one by one. The first to fall was, of course, its ownership of serfs and its sole right to own inhabited land. In giving up the serfs the nobles lost the goods and services that the serfs had paid. They also had to turn over about half of their land to the now free peasants. They were adequately compensated for these deprivations. But no amount of money could restore to them the world they had lost—a world in which with a minimum of thought and effort they had been housed and clothed and fed and held in respect, and even awe, by the very people who supported them.

Other privileges disappeared, too. In 1874 they lost their exemption from the onerous obligation to supply military recruits. Thereafter noble youths could be drafted into the ranks like any other subject of the tsar for six years of active duty, nine years in the reserve, and five years in the militia. In the mid-1880s nobles lost their exemption from taxation. The gradual abolition of corporal punishment ended another index of rank. In 1762 nobles had gained exemption from such punishment. Twenty years later the exemption had been extended to the order of merchants. Exemption was a measure of privilege and status, for court-ordered whippings were administered not only to punish physically but also to demean. In 1863 townspeople were freed from corporal punishment, and in 1904 so were the peasants. The noble assemblies continued to meet triennially and to elect their marshals and other officials, but imperial legislation reduced still further their already limited area of competence. The continued decline in the authority of the assemblies reduced the small amount of interest that most nobles already had in these bodies. Official data for twenty-six provinces in 1890 showed that out of 276,177 nobles who had the right to attend the provincial assemblies, only 21.3 percent (58,707) appeared.

The division of society into a hierarchy of orders was retained. Men were still legally identified by the order to which they belonged. These forms remained until 1917, but as the years went by and as Russia gradually moved toward civil equality, they were drained of their significance. By the end of the nineteenth century most people seemed no longer interested in knowing the order to which a man belonged, nor did it make any difference whether he was actually
enrolled in an order or was legally classified as a raznochinets, a man of no particular order.

The nobility did not lose all of its privileges. The laws guaranteed nobles preferential treatment in court proceedings, a special role in preserving law and order at the village level, admission of their children to elite schools, the authority to entail property providing it was above a certain size, and freedom from the quartering of troops. They kept their status symbols, too, such as the right to coats of arms and titles. They also had certain economic privileges that included special rights in distilling and in beet sugar manufacture, exclusive access to the Nobles Bank established in 1885, and perhaps most valuable, a tax rate on land that was about half that levied on peasant land. And, of course, they retained the incalculable advantage of knowing the "right people," and so could use influence to gain favors such as higher initial appointments in the civil service or more rapid promotions than men of nonnoble origin.25

In the years immediately following the emancipation some nobles suggested that, as compensation for their relinquishment of serfdom, the political rights of the nobility should be extended without a corresponding expansion of the rights of other orders. Noble assemblies, unhappy about the provisions of the emancipation legislation, petitioned the tsar to summon general convocations to discuss the reworking of the statute. There were requests, too, for the establishment of land mortgage banks modeled after those in Germany and the Austrian Monarchy, to lend money to nobles.26 These demands went unheeded except that nobles were allowed a greater voice than other orders in the zemstvos, the councils of local government, created in 1864 as one of the "Great Reforms" of Alexander II. The new law required the election of zemstvos in each district, and the district zemstvos, in turn, were to choose the members of provincial zemstvos. The statute divided the electors into three categories and arranged things so that the nobles had the predominant influence, particularly at the provincial level. Initially the reform was applied only to nineteen provinces; by 1875 it had been extended to thirty-four provinces; and by 1914 forty-three of the seventy provinces of the empire had zemstvos. In the mid-1880s 42.4 percent of the deputies to the district zemstvos, and 81.6 percent of those to the provincial ones, belonged to the nobility.27

Actually, what happened in the decades after 1861 was not so much a precipitous decline in the status and importance of the nobility, but rather a dilution of its preeminence. Nobles still retained a disproportionate role, in relation to their number, in secondary and higher education, in the bureaucracy, and in the military establishment. A
series of reforms had increased the number of, and widened the access to, universities and secondary schools so that student population rose many times over. By 1914 the universities had 35,695 students, and nearly 39,000 more were enrolled in engineering and other technical institutes and specialized academies, such as agricultural and forestry colleges. As could be expected with such a huge increase, the ratio of noble youths dropped sharply. In 1880 the children of hereditary nobles and officials made up 46.6 percent of the student body of the universities; by 1914 that figure had fallen to 36.1 percent. In 1888 in the Vilna school district the children of hereditary nobles comprised 62.9 percent of the enrollment in the gymnasium and pro-gymnasium and 53.3 percent in the Realschulen. By 1914 these ratios were 37.3 percent and 25.6 percent, respectively. Nobles, then, no longer held the near-monopoly they once had on university and secondary education, but they were still the single largest social contingent in these institutions.

The expansion of secondary and university education, the great new influx of students from the lower orders, and the growing awareness of western European thought was accompanied by the diffusion of liberal, democratic, and revolutionary ideas among faculty and students. The exposure of young and impressionable nobles to these currents aroused concern among their elders. They decided to establish boarding schools open only to children of the hereditary nobility that would instill traditional values in their pupils along with a good education. The government approved; in March 1891 the Minister of Public Instruction, Count Delianov, called the attention of the provincial governors and of the marshals of the nobility to the need to organize such schools, and by the mid-1890s there were seven of them.

The ever-widening scope of activities of the state and the expanding economy intensified the need for trained specialists of all kinds. The nobility was not large enough, and nobles were often not interested enough or able enough, to meet the demand. So Russian society, of necessity, had to make itself far more open to talent. Merit became increasingly more important than social origin, and more and more men of nonnoble birth ascended to the highest ranks of the bureaucracy and the military establishment. The majority of the closest advisers and leading generals of the last tsar, Nicholas II, men such as Plehve, Giers, Kornilov, Pobedonostsev, Kuropatkin, Alekseev, and Denikin, were commoners by birth, though of course they became nobles as they rose in the Table of Ranks. Nonetheless, at the end of the nineteenth century men born into the nobility still held about 30 percent of the posts in the civil service.

Russia's military forces also expanded, and as with the civil bureau-
cracy, the nobility could not provide all the officers needed. The officer corps grew from 19,476 in 1864 to 42,777 in 1897. There was more professionalization and a constantly growing need for technically qualified officers. In the old army the customary pattern had been for nobles to serve on active duty for a few years and then to retire. Even when on active duty they often absented themselves from their regiments for long periods. The average length of service during the reign of Nicholas I had been ten years. By the first decade of the 1900s it had lengthened to eighteen years.\textsuperscript{33} Nonnoble youths were admitted to the military academies that trained officers (though not until 1913 were all the academies opened to them). Such officers reduced the relative proportion of hereditary nobles in the officer corps. Nonetheless, nobles still comprised a large sector of it. In 1895 a survey of 31,350 officers showed that 50.8 percent (15,938) belonged to families of the hereditary nobility. However, these noble officers were distributed unevenly through the army with the Guards as their special preserve. In 1895, 96.3 percent of the cavalry officers, 90.5 percent of the infantry officers, and 88.7 percent of the artillery officers in the Guards regiments were hereditary nobles. In contrast, in line infantry regiments hereditary nobles made up only 39.6 percent of the officers, and there were regiments that had no hereditary nobles among their officers. Sons traditionally followed fathers into the same Guards regiments, and tradition, too, required them to misuse much of their time in high living and excessive gambling. They had to have private means or an allowance from home to live in what was considered the proper style for a Guards officer, for their pay at best covered a third or less of their expenses. As guardsmen they were stationed in the capital, unlike their less favored fellow officers who spent their careers in provincial posts and on the frontiers, where they had to scratch hard to find attractions that would enliven the monotony of garrison life.

Most of the highest ranking officers apparently belonged to a hereditary career officer caste, much as their analogues in the civil service belonged to a hereditary career bureaucracy. They had few or no ties to the land. As of 1 May 1903 the army had 140 full generals, of whom 10 were members of the imperial family. Data for 80 of the remaining 130 showed that 78 had been born into the nobility. Yet of these 80 full generals 47 (58.7 percent) had no land. Information about 266 lieutenant-generals (out of a total number of 410), of whom 255 (96 percent) were hereditary nobles, revealed that 215 (80.7 percent) were landless. Of 185 major-generals for whom information is available, 159 (86 percent) were hereditary nobles; 168, or over 90 percent, of these men owned no land.\textsuperscript{34}
In no sphere was the dilution of noble preeminence so marked and so serious in its consequences to the nobility as it was in agriculture. After emancipation landowners could no longer afford to live without serious regard to income and expenses. Some among them got the message. "Formerly we kept no accounts and drank champagne," one landowner told Mackenzie Wallace a few years after the emancipation, "Now, we keep accounts and content ourselves with beer." But all too few nobles learned that lesson. Instead, the improvidence that had haunted the Russian nobility for so long continued. Nobles also retained the tradition of partible inheritance so that their properties were often reduced in each successive generation.

The emancipation statute had ordered the peasants to compensate the landowners for the land that they relinquished. The state advanced 75 to 80 percent of the cost of the land to the landowners in the form of special government bonds. The peasants were to pay back the state for this advance over a period of forty-nine years. The statute stated that landowners were to be indemnified only for the loss of their land and were to receive nothing for the loss of the person and labor of their erstwhile serfs. However, the state evaded its own legislation by setting the price of the land allotted to the peasant at 20 to 90 percent above its current market price.

It could be expected that the nobles would use the indemnification payments as capital to raise the level of their own agricultural activities. That expectation was never realized. For one thing, the generosity displayed by the government in setting the redemption price of the peasants' allotments was counterbalanced by its deduction from the sums advanced to the nobles of the debts that they owed to state lending institutions. During the first decade after the emancipation that took about 45 percent of the indemnification payments. Secondly, the nobles, always lacking cash, needed it now more than ever to satisfy wants hitherto met by the labor and dues of their serfs. They started selling the redemption bonds and thereby depressed the market for them, so that at times they sold for as little as 70 percent of their par value. Finally, most noble landowners lacked both the knowledge needed to run their estates profitably and the initiative that would have impelled them to gain that knowledge. Their interests lay elsewhere. Those who spent their lives on the land were branded by a contemporary who knew them well as "people not suited for government service, the rejects of the bureaucratic structure." He allowed that rural life sometimes attracted men of talent, but they were "accidents ... and with their deaths their contributions perished." That harsh judgment was shared by others, including Count Sergei Witte, long-time Minister of Finance (1892–1903) and champion of industri-
aliation, who considered noble landowners incapable of efficient management. More and more landowners became absentee proprietors. In 1858 one-third of the nobility lived in the cities. By 1897 that ratio had increased to well over one-half (56.9 percent). Many nobles returned to their estates in summer but spent their time in the genteel recreations and the endless visiting so familiar to readers of the great nineteenth-century novels and stories, rather than checking on the operations of their estates. Others abandoned their country homes and allowed them to fall into ruins, like Chertolino, the manor inherited in 1880 by the father of General A. A. Ignatiev. “Like many another estate of the period,” Ignatiev wrote in his memoirs, “it was in a condition of complete decay. The best preserved building was the distillery and even that we found without roof and without windows. The old manor house was half burned down, and all the furniture had vanished.” Chertolino had 2,500 acres but had only a little more than 100 acres under the plow.

There were some landowners who managed to preserve the patriarchal order and the slow and easy life that they had enjoyed before 1861. They were surrounded by faithful retainers who, knowing no other life, lived out their days serving their old masters. An English traveler in the years before the First World War found that there were many of these “nests of gentlefolk” (so Turgenev called them) out in the countryside. “The house,” he wrote, “stands preferably on a river bank or on a hillside. It is half-hidden amidst a grove of trees. Frequently, especially if the house was built, as a great many of the houses of the country gentry were, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it has a veranda and a balcony supported by massive white columns. Near the house there is sure to be a lime-tree avenue, leading to an orchard of apple, pear, or cherry trees. A flower garden, sometimes with artificial ponds, and a variety of outbuildings complete the number of immediate appurtenances to the manor-house. Indoors, a wide entrance-hall, a big dining room, a drawing room, a kitchen full of busy chattering life, stairs leading to all sorts of quaint nooks and corners, well-stocked store rooms, libraries often containing old and valuable books, pretty, old-fashioned mahogany furniture, family portraits on the wall and generally a snug and soothing sense of leisure, security, and remoteness from the bustle of the world.”

Most nobles who engaged in agricultural production used outmoded techniques. That kept their capital outlay at a minimum, but it also kept productive efficiency and their profits at or near minima. The drop in farm prices that began in the 1880s made it even more difficult
for them to remain solvent. Many of them gave up farming. In 1886–90 owners of land mortgaged with the Bank of the Nobility had tilled 40 percent of their land on their own account. By the period 1896–1900 that figure had fallen to 29 percent. Meanwhile the amount of their land that they rented out rose from 39 percent to 51 percent. After the turn of the century there were some improvements in techniques, but Russian agriculture still lagged far behind that of other European nations. In the period 1911–1914 capital investment per agricultural worker in Russia amounted to 15 rubles, compared to 130 rubles in neighboring Germany, and average yields in Russia for the chief grains and for potatoes were one-third to one-half those in Germany.

The low return from their estates, their lack of interest in agriculture, and their need for cash persuaded an increasing number of noble landowners to lease or sell their land. They found a ready market; in fact, the demand for land was so strong that it pushed up prices even in periods when grain prices fell. In 1861 the price per desiatin (2.7 acres) averaged out at 17 rubles. By 1895 it had gone up to 77 rubles, and by 1912 it was 163 rubles. The demand came from wealthy townsmen and, above all, from peasants. The townsmen bought land on a large scale in the years immediately after the emancipation. By 1877 they owned nearly 12 million desiatins, and it seemed not impossible that they might ultimately supplant the nobility as the chief landowners of the empire. As land prices soared, their purchases took on a speculative character. Now they bought land for quick and profitable turnovers, while the rate of their permanent acquisitions slowed down.

The peasants, on the other hand, held on to the land that they purchased. The emancipation had not satisfied their land hunger, and their need had escalated with the remarkable increase in their number. Between 1863 and 1913 the rural population in the fifty provinces of European Russia swelled by 87 percent from about 55 millions to 103 millions. Peasants rented land and, when they could, they bought it. By 1881 official data showed that peasants rented 35 percent of the land of estate owners in the fertile black-earth provinces and 29 percent in the rest of Russia. They paid their rents in labor, kind, and cash, with money rents gradually supplanting the other two forms as the cash economy grew. Until the 1880s their purchases of land amounted to less than half that of townsmen. Then in 1883 the government established the Peasant Loan Bank to facilitate purchase of land by the villagers. Just through the financing supplied by this bank alone, peasants by 1913 had bought over 16 million desiatins, or about
67,500 square miles, more land than in all of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland combined.\textsuperscript{49}

Official statistics on landholding reveal the proportions of the decline in landownership by nobles. In 1877 they owned 73 million out of the 94 million desiatins of land owned by individuals in European Russia. By 1905 that figure had fallen to 33 million desiatins, a drop of 28 percent, while the area of all individually-owned land had gone up to 101.7 million desiatins. Meanwhile the amount of land acquired by individual peasants through purchase increased from 5.8 million desiatins in 1877 to 13.2 million desiatins by 1905. This individually-owned peasant land was distinct both from the communally-owned allotment land, the nadel'nye zemli, that the peasant communes received through the operations of the emancipation and from additional land purchased by the peasant communes in the years after the emancipation. In 1877 the total amount of land owned by peasants individually and communally amounted to 118.2 million desiatins. By 1905 that figure had risen by over 25 percent to 148.7 million desiatins.\textsuperscript{50} In 1861 approximately 128,500 noble families owned land. By 1905 the number had decreased to 107,200.\textsuperscript{51} Nobles had not only lost the near-monopoly they once had on the ownership of land but now they did not even hold first place among private landowners. That position belonged to the peasantry. In 1905 the allotment lands, plus the land purchased by individual peasants and by peasant communes, made up 63 percent of all the privately-owned land in the fifty provinces of European Russia. Nobles owned only 22 percent and townsmen 7 percent.\textsuperscript{52}

The nobles did manage to hold on to one valuable natural resource. They owned most of the forests that were in private hands, and the emancipation legislation had cancelled most of the rights in these forests that peasants had earlier enjoyed. For many nobles their timber became their most valuable and their most liquid asset, especially when after 1880 domestic and foreign demand pushed up lumber prices. They seized the offers made to them by lumber buyers who roamed the countryside. Often the seller, like Prince Oblonsky in Anna Karenina, sold at a ridiculously low price because he needed cash in a hurry to pay for his extravagances and his dissipations.

As in the days of serfdom there were wide disparities in the amount of land owned by nobles. The following table shows that despite the overall decline in the number of landowning noble families, those whose estates were small (under 100 desiatins) increased absolutely as well as relatively. However, the total amount of land that these small proprietors owned declined, so that the average size of their holdings in 1905 was 27 desiatins, compared to 34 in 1877.\textsuperscript{53}
Not all nobles lost out in the years after 1861. As the table shows, there was a fairly large minority of middle-sized landowners, and there were still great magnates who owned vast stretches of land. In 1905, 629 landowners each owned over 10,000 desiatins. Of this group 155 had over 50,000 desiatins each, for a total of 16.1 million desiatins, or about one-sixth of all the individually-owned land (101.7 million desiatins) in European Russia. Moreover, nobles acquired additional land through imperial favor. The government sold them land in the western provinces, confiscated from Polish nobles after the rising of 1863, at prices well below market price. Between 1871 and 1881 the government sold nearly half a million desiatins in the frontier provinces of Ufa and Orenburg at an average price of 1.88 rubles per desiatin. Soon thereafter the new owners were selling this land at 60 rubles per desiatin. Other distributions of land brought the total made available to nobles up to about 2 million desiatins by 1890. Some of the great nobles also owned large industrial establishments that included mining and metallurgical enterprises in the Urals and beet sugar factories in the Ukraine. Others, large and small, were active as grain traders. Some nobles owned large tracts of urban property that brought mounting returns as cities grew; and some bought shares in Russian industries and banks—the wealthiest among these had millions invested by 1914.\textsuperscript{54}

The continued prosperity of the fortunate few could not conceal the general decline in wealth and status of the nobility. The decline became a matter of concern to the autocracy. To reverse it became a central policy of the government of Alexander III, whose accession in 1881 ushered in an era of militant and ruthless reaction. The concern
about the nobility did not spring from a fatherly solicitude of the tsar. The throne had always relied upon the nobility to carry out its policies, and the nobility had never failed it. Now, more than ever before, the throne needed its loyal nobility to help it meet the challenge to autocratic rule that issued from economic advances and from new and disturbing social and political ideas. The new tsar, a narrow-minded and poorly educated bigot, surrounded himself with advisers who shared his conviction that the forces of change had to be shackled. The restoration of the nobility to its former preeminence was an essential part of their strategy.

Alexander III in his coronation speech in 1883, and especially in his rescript issued on the one hundredth anniversary of the Charter of the Nobility in 1885, set the tone for his new policy. He spoke of the natural superiority of the nobility (the belief that nobles were more honorable and more virtuous than ordinary mortals was part of the mythology of every society of orders), promised to protect the nobility’s economic position, and expressed his hope that, as in the past, nobles would maintain “their role of leaders in war, in matters of local government and justice, in unselfish concern for the needs of the people, and by their example [would] spread the precepts of religion, of loyalty, and the sound principles of popular education.”

The establishment of the Land Bank for the Nobility in 1885 turned out to be the most successful of the efforts on behalf of the nobility undertaken by Alexander’s government. Nobles had complained since 1861 of their need for cheap credit and had urged the establishment by the government of an institution that would provide this. The new bank answered their demands. It made generous loans at an interest rate (4½ percent, later reduced to 4 percent) that was well below that charged by other lenders. Nobles, large and small, hastened to borrow against their properties, and when the increase in land prices increased the value of their properties they came back for second and third mortgages. Most of them applied their loans to unproductive uses, and soon arrears piled up. In the period 1906–1908 the delinquency rate on annual payments stood at 60.7 percent; in 1913 it was 40.6 percent. The bank’s purpose, like that of its predecessor in the days of serfdom, was to save nobles from losing their land. So foreclosures were rare. Between 1906 and 1913 only 400 properties out of 28,000 mortgaged with the bank were sold to satisfy loans. Nobles also borrowed heavily from private banks, and those who found themselves especially hard-pressed turned to usurers who charged them high rates.

The creation in 1889 of the office of land captain (zemskii nachal’nik) proved to be a less successful innovation. This reform was
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intended to restore to the nobility its authority in the countryside. The law ordered the division of each county (uezd) into districts, usually four or five, each of which was to have a land captain. The captain was nominated by the local noble assembly, preferably from among the local nobility, and was appointed by the Ministry of the Interior under whose supervision he held his office. The law gave the land captains extensive powers over the peasants—powers that were reminiscent of the days of serfdom. Events quickly demonstrated that the new office was ill-suited for the task assigned to it, and soon new laws took away some of the more arbitrary powers of the land captain. Personnel problems proved troublesome, too. Often a noble suitable for the post could not be found in the district, sometimes because all the capable men had moved to the cities and sometimes because the salary was too low to attract competence. In such cases the government had to appoint a nonnoble or assign one of its bureaucrats to the post. Finally, in 1906, as part of the legislation that swept away many of the legal disabilities of the peasantry, the land captains were stripped of most of their authority.

Encouraged by the pronoble attitude of the government, representatives of the landed nobility pressed for further favorable legislation. In this they had little success. To be sure, special commissions on noble affairs were established. In 1891 Alexander appointed one of them, but nothing came of its lengthy discussions that lasted through most of 1892. A few years later Alexander's son and successor, Nicholas II, ordered the convening of a Special Conference for the Affairs of the Nobility. At one of its first sessions in 1897 the conference, whose members included provincial marshals of the nobility, expressed its opposition to the participation in the assemblies of the nobility of men who had "lost all ties with the land and who live in the world of money and bureaucratic interests, far distant from the real needs of our provincial life." Nothing came of that resolution, nor, apparently, of anything else discussed by the conference in the five years of its existence.

One of Alexander's reactionary policies concerned the zemstvos. Apparently, his government felt that the already preponderant influence of the nobility in these councils needed strengthening. In 1890 new legislation increased noble representation, so that nobles came to make up 55.2 percent and 89.5 percent, respectively, of the district and provincial zemstvos. As things turned out, however, these changes had the opposite effect to that desired. From 1866 the government, concerned by the threat to its autocratic rule of zemstvo autonomy, steadily reduced the authority of these bodies. This weakening dis-
couraged many nobles, already skeptical of the value of the zemstvos, from participating in them. This apathy allowed a liberal minority (a Soviet historian called them "bourgeoisified" nobles) to gain much influence. It also allowed greater freedom for the professional employees of the zemstvos, the doctors, teachers, lawyers, agronomists, statisticians, and so on, who often had liberal or leftist political convictions. So instead of becoming supporters of the reaction, the zemstvos provided the organizational base for noble discontent and even opposition to the autocracy.60 After the turn of the century zemstvo leaders defied governmental displeasure and held conferences that became the chief organs of liberal noble opinion. In November 1904 a conference of a hundred leaders from thirty-three provinces, by an overwhelming majority, adopted an eleven-point resolution that included demands for civil liberties, equality before the law, and the summoning of a representative legislative assembly.

Among the liberal nobles were professional men, scholars, littérateurs, bureaucrats, and even some landowners who belonged to that peculiarly Russian phenomenon, the intelligentsia. These men and women were more likely to identify with their fellow intelligents than with their fellow nobles. And, of course, there was the small number of nobles, most of them young and university-educated, who were completely alienated from their society and belonged to radical groups dedicated to the overthrow of the regime. These youthful radicals reminded Leroy-Beaulieu in the 1880s of the French nobles of the ancien régime who were drawn to the radical ideologies of that day. "As long as revolutionary ideas retain something speculative about them," he wrote, "as long as they are not able to be put into practice, they easily find partisans among the very classes who are destined to become their victims."61

The discontent of liberal nobles with the autocracy, like the revolutionary zeal of the radicals, was external evidence of the changes that were transforming Russia. Industrialization, railroads, the growth of cities, expanded education, and the increased knowledge and envy of Western liberal and democratic institutions undermined the traditional order. These subversive forces, reinforced by governmental ineptitude and military defeat, brought on the revolutionary storm of 1905. Frightened by the turn of events, Tsar Nicholas by his manifesto of October 17 transformed autocratic Russia into a constitutional monarchy. But the revolutionary tide soon ebbed, and by late 1906 the throne had regained much that it had yielded only a year before, though it could not wholly return to the way things had been. Too many irreversible changes had taken place.
One change, however, did prove reversible. Nobles who in the zemstvos, and then during the revolutionary fever of 1905 in provincial assemblies, had demanded representative government and universal and equal suffrage made a complete about-face. They abandoned their brief flirtation with revolution and took up their traditional role as the chief prop of the throne and the supporter of its reactionary policies. The explanation for the turnabout is easy to find: the threat of land reform and land expropriation. The long-simmering discontent of the peasantry had erupted in 1905, and again in 1906, into open defiance and violence. That badly frightened the landowning nobility. Then the elections to the First and Second Dumas in 1906 and 1907 returned many peasant delegates who were committed to the compulsory alienation (with compensation) of the landowners' property, to satisfy the land hunger of their constituents. They had the support of the delegates of the liberal Constitutional Democrats, the Cadets, many of whom were of landowning families but who were intimidated by the spectre of mass peasant risings.

To stave off the threat of expropriation and to preserve domestic order, nobles turned to political activism. They associated themselves with the new political parties and the pressure groups that appeared with the establishment of constitutional government in Russia. Many of them favored the conservative Octobrist party. Others supported the extreme right, and notably the Union of the Russian People. That sinister and obscene mass movement drew its membership from all levels of society. Dedicated to the restoration of the autocracy and favored by the regime, it openly engaged in criminal activities included assassinations and pogroms without fear of punishment. Tsar Nicholas hailed the organization as “the mainstay of the throne” and “the standard bearer of legality and order.” Nobles also formed their own organization, the Council of the United Nobility, in 1906 as a vehicle through which they could exert political pressure on the government in matters that affected their interests. The United Nobility seized upon every opportunity to check the advances of constitutional government and of civil rights, as threats to the privileges and property of the nobility. It urged the forceful suppression of revolutionary activity and backed the government's use of field-courts-martial to crush radicalism. It was influential in bringing about the revision of the electoral laws that was ordered by the imperial decree of 3 June 1907. That decree enabled the nobility, who formed less than 1 percent of the population, to hold more than half the seats in the Third and Fourth Dumas. It gave strong support to the so-called Stolypin reforms that allowed enterprising peasants to leave the village
community and establish themselves as private proprietors. Once nobles had looked upon the commune as a guarantee against the emergence of a landless proletariat. Now they saw it as a launching pad for socialism and so they favored its dissolution.

The zemstvos, too, only shortly ago leaders in the demands for civil rights and constitutional government, became instruments of noble reaction. In the first zemstvo elections held after the Revolution of 1905 the liberals who had dominated these councils suffered crushing defeats. Most of the zemstvos came under the control of conservative and reactionary nobles. These men used their position to block reform at the local level and to discharge many zemstvo employees because they often were partisans of leftist and revolutionary movements.63

Thus the nobility, in league with the throne, beat off the attacks on its land and its status. Its victory, however, was short lived, snuffed out by war and revolution. But even if Russia and the world had been spared those twin catastrophes it seems unlikely that the nobility would have been able to sustain its conquest of its enemies. Despite its political success after 1905 it continued its downward glide. Contemporaries, including nobles, recognized this. Some members of the United Nobility described themselves as aurochs, representatives of a dying species. The epithet caught on with press and public, for it aptly expressed the general attitude toward the nobility.64 In 1914 Maurice Baring, who knew old Russia well, wrote that the nobility there “is being slowly and gradually oozed out of existence; it is being subjected to a slow process of expropriation in favor of the peasants, the merchants, and the new capitalists; and in the course of time . . . the nobility as a caste of landowners will disappear altogether.”65 Years later V. A. Maklakov, himself a nobleman and moderate member of the Cadet party, in reminiscing about the expropriation bills introduced in the First Duma, asked “Why was it necessary to destroy the class of private landowners by an accelerated method, by political action, instead of letting it die a natural death?”66

But why was it going to die a natural death? Why was it slowly being oozed out of existence? Why with the advantages given it by its preferments and privileges was it unable to adjust and survive? A number of answers to these questions suggest themselves. Some are historical stereotypes such as the victory of the capitalistic mode of production over “feudal” society, or, to put it another way, the “bourgeoisification” of the nobility. Those who eschew the rhetoric of the dialectic refer to the disintegration of old Russia brought on by the advances of industry and transportation, by urbanization, by education, and by the penetration of Western ideas about society and government. At another level the decline of the nobility can be ex-
plained as the consequence of the transition from a society of orders to the modern class society. In the society of orders a person’s status, rights, and duties depended upon the order into which he was born or into which he ascended or descended. In the modern class society a person’s status depends upon his economic role. As Sombart pointed out, in the traditional society the possession of wealth had been the consequence of the possession of power and privilege. In the modern society the possession of power and privilege becomes the consequence of the possession of wealth.

Each of these answers has much to recommend it. Worrisome difficulties appear, however, when the Russian experience is compared with that of other European lands. They, too, experienced the trauma of modernization, and to a greater degree than did Russia. Yet in those lands the nobility not only survived but maintained its preeminence far more successfully than did the nobles of Russia. A more satisfactory answer has to include circumstances that were peculiar to the Russian nobility.

As earlier pages have noted, the Russian nobility, unlike its peers in other lands, had no territorial base from which it could draw authority and resolution and a sense of independence. Instead, the Russian nobility was subservient to and dependent upon the throne. The final decisions lay always with the throne; the nobles had no ultimate responsibility. To compensate them for their loyal dependence and to assure for them a comfortable way of life with a minimum of effort, the autocracy gave them great power over their peasants. If they still had difficulties in making ends meet, the autocracy lent them large sums of money without insisting upon repayment.

I suggest that this parasitic dependence of the nobility upon the throne bred men who lacked initiative and drive, or channeled the initiative and creativity that they did possess into directions other than the preservation of their estates. For many of them irresponsibility and prodigality became a way of life. When in 1861 they lost their serfs and half their lands, they felt themselves lost. Suddenly they found themselves shut out of the life they had known for so long and in which they had been so content. One stroke of the tsar’s pen had wiped out their role in the rural world, and they seemed incapable of adjusting. The long decades of dependence during which the tsars had pampered and protected them had sapped them of the instinct for survival. Their loss of peasants and land was not unique. That had happened to the nobles of Germany and of the Austrian Monarchy only a few years earlier. What was unique was the inability of the Russian nobles to recover from the blow, unlike the elite of central Europe, of whom many had actually welcomed the abolition of the
old lord-peasant relationship. Instead of reaching out for the opportunities presented by the changing society in which they lived, the Russian nobility tried to hold on to their obsolete values while their land, their wealth, and their power steadily slipped away from them.

It is impossible to document an indictment of an entire social order. Fortunately, there are sources which provide much supporting evidence: the great Russian novels and plays and short stories of the nineteenth century. "The central category and criterion of realist literature," wrote George Lukács, "is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type a type is not its average quality, nor its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present at their highest level of development." The geniuses of Russian literature, nearly all of them born into the hereditary nobility, presented their characters as individuals and at the same time gave them the dimensions of general types having historical validity. "The Hero of our Time," wrote Lermontov in 1840 in the preface to the second edition of his novel, "is certainly a portrait, but not of a single person. It is a portrait of the vices of our whole generation in its ultimate development."

To the historian of the nobility the most striking of these types is that of the "superfluous man," to use Turgenev's famed epithet. Time and again the reader meets landowners who, seemingly attired always in dressing gown, pass their days in useless activities or simply in wasting time, like Onegin's uncle who spent forty years berating his housekeeper and squashing flies, and whose only book was an 1808 almanac without a binding. Some, like Onegin himself, lived in the midst of high society and great wealth. Others, like Goncharov's Oblomov or Turgenev's Rudin or the superfluous man who is the diarist in Turgenev's story, lived out their lives in obscurity. Some, like Onegin or Lermontov's Pechorin, engaged in futile activity in the never realized hope of escaping the terrible boredom that clouded their lives. Others, like Oblomov or Gogol's Tentetnikov, spent their days in apathy and indolence, dreaming of a perfect life in which their every want would be satisfied with absolutely no effort on their part, or meditating about a great scholarly treatise, but never writing a word. The Oblomovs and the Tentetnikovs felt no guilt, but more sensitive men like Onegin or Pechorin or Tolstoi's Prince Nekhludov or Konstantin Levin are torn by inner struggles and indecision in their effort to justify to themselves their way of life.

The improvidence, the prodigality, and the ineptitude that brought
disaster to noble families are recounted time and again. Nowhere is it more poignantly and memorably told than in The Cherry Orchard, Chekhov’s last and greatest play. The members of the family lack the will to solve, or even to meet, the problems of their personal lives, much less their common economic problem. They recoil in horror from the suggestion that they sell the orchard. Yet they have no alternative, for they are too irresolute to take any action save to continue their aimless and useless lives, though they know ruin will soon overtake them. The thud of the axe as it fells the trees in the orchard provides the melancholy epitaph for the elite of old Russia.

NOTES

2. A. Romanovich-Slavatinskii, Dvorianstvo v Rossii ot nachala XVIII veka do ormeny krepotnogo prava (St. Petersburg, 1870), pp. 38–41.

In France on the eve of the 1798 revolution nobles made up 1–1½ percent of the population (A. Soboul, La France à la veille de la Révolution [Paris, 1960], I: 40–41); in Poland before the partitions 8–10 percent of the people were noble, and in Spain in 1787 about 5 percent (M. S. Anderson, Europe in the Eighteenth Century [New York, 1961], p. 40); in Hungary in the 1820s nobles made up about 4 percent of the population (G. Barany, Stephen Széchenyi and the Awakening of Hungarian Nationalism, 1791–1841 [Princeton, 1968], p. 149).


Despite the instructions of the Charter of the Nobility, not all hereditary nobles had access to these assemblies. None were organized in sparsely populated provinces where there were few nobles, and the assemblies in nine western provinces were suspended after 1863 because the Polish nobles there had taken part in the Polish rising of that year. In all, thirty-five provinces, containing about 60 per-


16. In 1863, 90 percent of Russia’s population was rural; 84.8 percent still was rural in 1914. A. G. Rashin, Naselenie Rossii za 100 let, 1811–1913 (Moscow, 1956), p. 98. In 1911 in France 55.9 percent, in 1913 in Germany 25.8 percent, and in 1911 in Great Britain only 11.5 percent of the population were rural. B. H. Slicher van Bath, “The Influence of Economic Conditions on the Development of Agricultural Tools and Machines in History,” in J. L. von Meij, ed., Mechanization in Agriculture (Amsterdam, 1960), p. 19; H. See, Histoire économique de la France (Paris, 1939–1951), 2: 328.


24. Cf. the trial scene in bk. 1, chap. 9 of Tolstoi’s Resurrection.


28. Hans, pp. 238–40. The ratio of the children of the lower urban order rose from 12.4 percent in 1880 to 24.3 percent in 1914; that of peasant children from 3.3 percent to 14.5 percent in the same years.


32. Korelin, Rossiiskoe dvorianstvo,” p. 70.


35. Wallace, p. 517.


37. P. I. Liashchenko, Istoriiia narodnogo khoziaistva SSSR (Moscow, 1952), 1:
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41.Ignatiev, p. 25.
43. Pavlovsky, pp. 104, 111, 190-91.
45. Ibid., p. 358.
47. Rashin, p. 98.
49. Anfimov, p. 318.
In 1905 land owned by private individuals (noble or peasant) and land owned collectively by the peasants made up 60.9 percent of all land in the fifty provinces of European Russia. The rest belonged to the state, the church, and other institutions.
55. Quoted in Korelin, “Rossiiskoe dvorianstvo,” p. 76.
60. Zaionchkovskii, *Rossiiskoe samoderzhatie* pp. 410–11, 434; G. Fisher, *Russian Liberalism from Gentry to Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), pp. 11-13. As pointed out in an earlier page, in the mid-1860s nobles had comprised 42.4 percent and 81.8 percent of the district and provincial zemstvos, respectively.
61. Leroy-Beaulieu, 1: 374–75.
64. Williams, p. 371. The aurochs is the extinct European wild ox.
65. Baring, p. 89.