

I Causes of Social Revolutions in France, Russia, and China

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For a revolution to break out it is not enough for the "lower classes to refuse" to live in the old way; it is necessary also that the "upper classes should be unable" to live in the old way.

Lenin

SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS in France, Russia, and China emerged from specifically political crises centered in the structures and situations of the old-regime states. The events of 1787–9 in France, of the first half of 1917 in Russia, and of 1911–16 in China not only undermined autocratic monarchical regimes but also disorganized centrally coordinated administrative and coercive controls over the potentially rebellious lower classes. The revolutionary crises developed when the old-regime states became unable to meet the challenges of evolving international situations. Monarchical authorities were subjected to new threats or to intensified competition from more economically developed powers abroad. And they were constrained or checked in their responses by the institutionalized relationships of the autocratic state organizations to the landed upper classes and the agrarian economies. Caught in cross-pressures between domestic class structures and international exigencies, the autocracies and their centralized administrations and armies broke apart, opening the way for social-revolutionary transformations spearheaded by revolts from below.

To understand the nature and causes of the political crises that launched the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions, we need a sense of the structures of the Old Regimes and of the conflicts to which they were prone in the times before the outbreaks of the Revolutions. We may begin with the fact that prerevolutionary France, Russia, and China were countries held together by autocratic monarchies focused upon tasks of maintaining internal order and of contending with external foes. In all three Old Regimes there were fully established *imperial states* – that is, differentiated, centrally coordinated administrative and military hierarchies functioning under the aegis of the absolute monarchies.¹ These imperial states

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were proto-bureaucratic: *Some* offices, especially at higher levels, were functionally specialized; *some* officials or aspects of official duties were subject to explicit rules and hierarchical supervision; and the separation of state offices and duties from private property and pursuits was *partially* institutionalized (though in different particular ways) in each regime. None of these imperial states, however, was fully bureaucratic.² Concomitantly, none was as fully centralized or powerful within society as a modern national state would be. It is worth emphasizing in particular that the imperial states of old-regime France, Russia, and China were not in a position to control directly, let alone basically reorganize, local agrarian socioeconomic relationships. Rather they were limited to variations or extensions of the functions they had, so to speak, been built up to perform: waging war abroad; supervising society at home to maintain some semblance of general order; and appropriating socioeconomic resources through military recruitment and through taxes on land, population, or trade (but not on anything so difficult to assess as individual income).

The imperial states of Bourbon France, Romanov Russia, and Manchu China stood astride large-scale, predominantly agrarian economies in which land and (nonstate) claims to agricultural products were divided between a mass of peasant families and a landed upper class. In each Old Regime, the most important dominant (i.e., surplus appropriating) class was, fundamentally, a landed upper class. This was true even though that class might be closely tied to, and regularly rejuvenated by, commercial wealth. Market relationships were quite extensively developed in all three prerevolutionary societies,³ and there were urban-based working classes, and classes that controlled commerce and industry. Nevertheless, most trade was locally or regionally (rather than nationally) focused, agriculture remained more economically important than commerce or industry, and capitalist relations of production did not predominate either in agriculture or in nonagricultural pursuits. Commercial and industrial upper classes were symbiotically related to the existing landed upper classes and/or very dependent upon the imperial states. The fundamental politically relevant tensions in all three Old Regimes were *not* between commercial–industrial classes and landed aristocracies. Instead, they were centered in the relationships of producing classes to the dominant classes and states, and in the relationships of the landed dominant classes to the autocratic–imperial states.

As in all agrarian states, the potential for peasant (and urban–popular) revolts was endemic in old-regime France, Russia, and China. Here this ever-present, basic tension in society need only be noted, because it will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 3. At this point, we need to focus on the relationships between imperial states and landed upper classes and on the possible conflicts to which those relationships could give rise.

In one sense, of course, the imperial states and landed upper classes of

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prerevolutionary France, Russia, and China were simply partners in the control and exploitation of the peasantry. Whatever may have been the case historically (especially in preabsolutist France), the sheer existence of centralized administrations and armies was not being deliberately challenged by the landed classes in the times immediately before the Revolutions. The dominant classes could not defend against peasant rebellions entirely on a local basis; they had all come to depend, albeit in varying degrees, upon the centralized monarchical states to back up their class positions and prerogatives. What is more, the dominant classes had become accustomed to having opportunities for private fortune-building through state service. And, indeed, such appropriation of surpluses indirectly through state office-holding had become very important in old-regime France, Russia, and China alike.

But if, in one sense, the imperial states and the landed classes were partners in exploitation, they were also competitors in controlling the manpower of the peasantry and in appropriating surpluses from the agrarian-commercial economies. Monarchs were interested in appropriating increased resources from society and channeling them efficiently into military aggrandizement or state-sponsored and centrally controlled economic development. Thus the economic interests of the landed upper classes were in part obstacles to be overcome; for the landed classes were primarily interested either in preventing increased state appropriations or in using state offices to siphon off revenues in ways that would reinforce the domestic socioeconomic status quo.⁴

Whether, and in what forms, such objectively possible conflicts of interest between monarchs and landed upper classes gave rise to actual political conflicts in old-regime France, Russia, and China depended upon historical circumstances and upon the exact institutional forms of each autocratic-imperial state. None of these states was in any sense a parliamentary regime that afforded to dominant class representatives a routine role in state policy-making. Yet these were not fully bureaucratic states either. In various ways, dominant class members enjoyed privileged access to and use of state offices. This fact alone was certainly not enough to ensure dominant class *control* of imperial state activities. But to the extent that dominant-class members gained a capacity for self-conscious collective organization within the higher levels of the existing imperial state structures, they might be in a position to *obstruct* monarchical undertakings that ran counter to their economic interests. Such obstruction could culminate in deliberate challenges to autocratic political authority—and, at the same time, it could have the quite unintended effect of destroying the administrative and military integrity of the imperial state itself.

Ordinarily, no doubt, we would expect that monarchs of imperial states would never have attempted to pursue policies fundamentally at variance

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with the economic interests of dominant classes possessed of such important leverage. Yet the fact is that, during the historical periods leading into the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions, monarchs were faced with extraordinary dilemmas. As was briefly indicated at the very beginning of this chapter, the contradictions that brought the Old Regimes to their downfall were not due to internal conditions alone. In the periods before the Revolutions, each of these regimes—Bourbon France, Romanov Russia, and Manchu China—found itself in a situation of intensifying military competition with nation-states abroad that possessed relatively much greater and more flexible power based upon economic breakthroughs to capitalist industrialization or agriculture and commerce. Success in meeting this foreign competition depended upon the ability of the monarchy suddenly to mobilize extraordinary resources from the society and to implement in the process reforms requiring structural transformations.

That agrarian states caught up historically in the international expansion of capitalism *could* defend their autonomy and implement reforms from above was not out of the question. Both Prussia and Japan—two cases that will be discussed at the end of this chapter as contrasts to France, Russia, and China—did mobilize to meet foreign competition in the nineteenth century, thus avoiding social-revolutionary transformations. In Prussia and Japan, state elites were not blocked in their efforts to meet external exigencies either by backward agrarian economies or by politically powerful landed upper classes with the interest and capacity to curb state initiatives. Instead, reforms and policies designed to mobilize and deploy increased resources could be implemented by bureaucratic officials operating in the name of traditional legitimations.

But, in late-eighteenth-century France, early-twentieth-century Russia, and mid-nineteenth through early-twentieth-century China alike, the monarchies of the Old Regimes proved unable to implement sufficiently basic reforms or to promote rapid enough economic development to meet and weather the particular intensity of military threats from abroad that each regime had to face. And revolutionary political crises emerged precisely because of the unsuccessful attempts of the Bourbon, Romanov, and Manchu regimes to cope with foreign pressures. Institutional relationships existed between the monarchs and their staffs, on the one hand, and the agrarian economies and the landed upper classes, on the other hand, that made it impossible for the imperial states to cope successfully with competition or intrusions from abroad. As a result, the Old Regimes either were dissolved through the impact of defeat in total war with more developed powers (i.e., Russia) or were deposed at home through the reaction of politically powerful landed upper classes against monarchical attempts to mobilize resources or impose reforms (i.e., France and China). Either way, the upshot was the disintegration of centralized administrative and military

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machineries that had theretofore provided the sole unified bulwark of social and political order. No longer reinforced by the prestige and coercive power of autocratic monarchy, the existing class relations became vulnerable to assaults from below. Social-revolutionary political crises emerged, as Lenin once so aptly put it, when it became “impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule in an unchanged form.” There occurred a “crisis in the policy of the ruling class which cause[d] fissures through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes [could] burst forth.”⁵

To lay bare more exactly the intersecting forces that culminated in social-revolutionary political crises in France, Russia, and China, we must look in more detail at each case and make comparisons among them. In the remainder of this chapter I shall do this, discussing for each Old Regime the characteristics of the state, the economy, and the dominant class. I shall also examine the historically specific processes through which international dynamics interacted with the old-regime sociopolitical structures to produce the revolutionary crises. At the end of this chapter, the arguments set forth for France, Russia, and China will be further specified and validated through a brief discussion of contrasts with the causes and consequences of political crises in Prussia and Japan—two other similar countries that weathered the impacts from more developed countries abroad without undergoing social revolutions. Primarily, though, we shall examine the Old Regimes that did give rise to social-revolutionary crises, beginning with Bourbon France, and moving next to late Imperial, Manchu China (according to an order that is both analytically convenient and chronologically exact, given that the Chinese Old Regime met its demise in 1911). After China, we shall proceed to Russia under the Romanov tsars, as it developed from the mid-1800s to the outbreak of the momentous revolutionary events of 1917.

OLD-REGIME FRANCE: THE CONTRADICTIONS OF BOURBON ABSOLUTISM

Explanations of the French Revolution have long played upon one, or a synthesis, of two basic themes: the rise of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of an Enlightenment critique of arbitrary, traditional authority.⁶ The Revolution has thus been attributed to causes immanent to the evolution of French society and culture. To be sure, the international setting has not been neglected. It has often been evoked precisely to demonstrate that commercial growth and the diffusion of Enlightenment ideals, though phenomena of European and Atlantic scope, were nevertheless peculiarly intense in prerevolutionary France—especially in comparison with other illiberal monarchies of the day.⁷

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What has been done much more rarely, however, is to highlight the pervasive military competition of European states, and to focus from that perspective upon the paradoxical situation of old-regime France.⁸ In a dynamic international setting increasingly dominated by commercializing England, here was a country that devolved—despite a half century of vigorous economic expansion—from near-dominance in Europe to the humiliations of martial defeats and royal bankruptcy. The explanation of why this happened renders comprehensible the specific political crisis that launched the French Revolution. Furthermore, the causal patterns invoked prove comparable to those at work in the launching of the other great Revolutions.

The State

We begin our analysis of old-regime France by locating historically the consolidation of a unified imperial state administration. Absolute monarchy, long in the making in fact and royal fancy, became the dominant reality for France only during the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715).⁹ The Fronde of 1648–53 marked the last time that sections of the territorial nobility took up arms against centralizing royalty. It also constituted “the last attempt before the Revolution to promulgate a charter limiting royal absolutism, and its failure assured the triumph of the doctrine . . . ”¹⁰ France was henceforth governed under the royal administration. Thirty-some removable *intendants* represented the king’s authority in the provinces. Relegating the once all-powerful hereditary noble governors to marginal roles, the *intendants* assumed responsibilities for direct tax collections, royal justice, economic regulation, and the maintenance of internal order. The affairs of the towns were brought under the supervision of the *intendants*, and the leading municipal offices were recurrently held for ransom by the Crown.¹¹ The greatest of the old nobility were drawn into the orbit of the new Court at Versailles—the ultimate symbol of triumphant absolutism—unparalleled in its splendor and replete with sinecures and intrigue.

Absolutism triumphed under Louis XIV, yet the state structure of old-regime France remained extraordinarily complex and, so to speak, multiply layered. Although the authority of the absolutist administration was supreme, its distinctive structures—royal councils and the intendancies—did not actually supplant such decentralized medieval institutions as seigneurial domains and courts, municipal corporations, and the provincial estates (representative assemblies) located in outlying provinces called *pays d’état*. Nor did the absolutist structures completely replace earlier monarchical administrative arrangements such as the *parlements* (judicial corporations, to be described more fully below), previously important offices and jurisdictions, and the practice (called “venality of office”) of

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selling positions within the royal administration to wealthy men who subsequently owned, and could sell or bequeath their offices. For, extraordinary though his accomplishments were, Louis XIV continued a long-established French royal tradition of imposing new controls “over” established arrangements without actually abolishing them. Hence triumphant autocracy tended to freeze, indeed guarantee, the very sociopolitical institutional forms—seigneurial, corporate, provincial—whose original functions it replaced or superseded.



Map 1. Major administrative divisions of old-regime France, 1789. Source: M. J. Sydenham, *The French Revolution* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1966), p. 40.

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Along with the maintenance of unity and order at home, military aggrandizement became the unabashed purpose of Bourbon absolutism. Having traversed over a century of civil wars and fended off Hapsburg imperialism, the French monarchy was geared to bid for supremacy within the European system of states.¹² Success would demand capacity to contend with two sorts of enemies at once: other land-based monarchies on the Continent and the increasingly prosperous commercial–naval powers, the Netherlands and England. Initially the prospects seemed promising enough. France was united, territorially compact, populous, and—once political order was restored—potentially prosperous. Under the Marquis de Louvois France developed the first year-round standing royal army in Europe. And Jean Baptiste Colbert created a navy, instituted mercantilist policies to guide and foster the expansion of industry, trade, and colonization, and reformed royal finances in ways that increased the revenues available for wars.¹³

During the reign of Louis XIV, France's initial military successes—in the War of Devolution (1667–8) and in the Dutch War (1672–8)—stimulated the formation of an alliance of powers pledged to stop its expansion. As a result, the French subsequently suffered serious setbacks in the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14). Between 1715 and 1789, moreover, France proved not only unable to dominate Europe but even unable to hold its own as the unquestionably first-ranked power. Of course, coalitions of enemy states still allied against France. But equally serious difficulties arose from the limitations placed upon royal capacities (though never ambitions!) by the imperfections of the absolutist system completed under Louis XIV and by the nature of the French economy and class structure. Comparisons to England are especially relevant, for it was England that was, in this period, moving to overtake France in the race for European (and, as it turned out, worldwide capitalist) hegemony.

The Economy

In the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, France remained a predominantly agricultural society, her economy encumbered by a complex web of proprietary interests that precluded any rapid breakthrough to capitalist agriculture or to industrialism. On the eve of the Revolution, after over fifty years of economic growth, peasants still accounted for as much as 85 percent of the national population of about twenty-six million¹⁴; and agricultural output constituted at least 60 percent of gross national production.¹⁵ Commerce and some (premechanized) industries were unquestionably expanding in eighteenth-century France (although much of this growth was centered in the hinterlands of Atlantic ports that

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were destined to suffer badly during the Revolution). Yet however much commerce and nascent industries were growing, they remained symbiotically tied to—and limited by—the social and political structures of agrarian-imperial France.¹⁶

At this stage in world history, the progress of industry necessarily rested mainly upon prosperity in agriculture. But French agriculture, though advanced by Continental standards, was “backward” relative both to English agriculture and to French commerce and industry.¹⁷ Whether owned by the peasants or rented out by landlords, the land was divided into small holdings. Much farming was on the three-field strip system, in which individual holdings were splintered and scattered, and one-third of the cultivable lands, as well as certain common lands, were left fallow each year. Due to the size of France and the paucity of cheap internal transport for bulk goods, regional specialization in agriculture was slow to develop. In England and Holland during the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries a revolution in agricultural productivity—which featured cultivation of root and forage crops, building up of livestock herds, and increased fertilization of lands that no longer needed to be left fallow—made great headway. But similar transformations achieved only limited progress in France.

The introduction of the new agricultural techniques depended upon the abolition of many communal customs and seigneurial rights to allow the consolidation and unified management of substantial holdings. But in France there existed a precarious balance of rights between a large small-holding peasantry, which owned outright approximately one-third of the land, and a landed upper class, which also had considerable property in land and possessed surviving seigneurial rights that could be commercially exploited. Thus, neither group was placed in a situation in which revolutionizing agricultural production was simultaneously to its interest and within its capacity. Innovation was also discouraged by the heavy burden and irrational modes of collection of royal taxes, which fell mainly on the peasantry. Finally, there was another, more ironical, reason why structural change in the agrarian economy was impeded. Due to over forty years of good weather, internal order, and population growth, gross agricultural production expanded enormously within largely traditional structural bounds during the mid-eighteenth century (1730–70). This growth, accompanied by rising prices and rents, brought prosperity for landowners large and small and thus probably helped to confine the perceived need for fundamental structural changes to the few governmental officials and progressive landlords who were most acutely aware of the English contrast.

French agriculture, in turn, restrained the development of French industry. Both its structure and the distribution of its benefits retarded the emergence of a steadily expanding mass market for goods. This was especially true of those of middle quality, the ones most amenable to machine

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production. At the end of the sixteenth century, French industry was probably ahead of English. But then from roughly 1630 to 1730, French agriculture, trade, and industry suffered repeated setbacks from wars, plague, and famines. Meanwhile the English economy grew rather steadily, and the first stages of the revolution in agrarian relations of production and technique were consummated. During the eighteenth century *both* English and French economic growth, including the expansion of foreign trade, were rapid and roughly equivalent. But England had been well ahead in per capita terms before the century began, and her agricultural revolution deepened even as production grew during the eighteenth century. Thus the stage was set for the English Industrial Revolution after 1760. General economic expansion was undoubtedly one factor underlying England's breakthrough, but the French economy in the eighteenth century experienced comparable rates of growth. In addition to her greater size and consequent difficulties of internal transportation, what clearly differentiated France was her agrarian economy. Even in prosperity the French agrarian economy provided much less of a potential mass market for industrial goods than the English, because there were proportionately fewer people with middle incomes. Nor could the traditional structure of agrarian production sustain prolonged growth. Unless checked by the ravages of war, population growth inexorably followed increases in productivity and soon outran them, producing skyrocketing prices and famine. Just such a crisis produced an industrial recession after 1770—even as English industry was adopting the new machine technologies. "The agricultural base of the French economy once more revealed, in the 1770s and 1780s, its inability to sustain prolonged growth. In 1600–30, in 1660–90, in 1730–70—time after time bursts of expansion came to an end in slackening demand as purses were emptied on ever-dearer food."¹⁸

The Dominant Class

By the eighteenth century a distinctive dominant class had emerged in France. It was no longer "feudal" in the political or juridical sense. But it was not "capitalist" either—not in the sense of "entrepreneurial" and not in the Marxist sense of a class that appropriates surplus through wage labor and market rents and reinvests to expand capitalist relations of production and industrialization. Yet there was a basically unified dominant class—one that appropriated surplus directly and indirectly primarily from peasant agriculture.¹⁹ This surplus appropriation occurred through a *mélange* of rents and dues enforced in part by landlord-dominated judicial institutions, and through the redistribution of revenues collected under the aegis of the monarchical state. In fact, if the term "feudal" is used in one possible Marxist manner to indicate a particular class relation of surplus

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appropriation (i.e., appropriation by a landed class through coercive institutional means),²⁰ then one may say that the dominant class of prerevolutionary France was to a significant degree feudal. But it is more important to arrive at a clear sense of what were—and were not—the characteristics and institutional bases of this dominant class.

Certainly eighteenth-century France was not a society actually stratified by estate (i.e., church, nobility, Third Estate). As François Furet indicates, social formations and ideals encouraged by the simultaneous (and symbiotic) growth of state administration and commercialization had led to the supersession of the late medieval system of orders:

In truth, the French monarchy had for centuries played an active part in dislocating the society of estates, and it continued to do this more than ever during the eighteenth century. Tied to the development of commercial production, hostile to local powers, promoter of national unity, the state was—along with money, at the same time as money, and even more than money—the decisive source of social mobility. Progressively the state had undermined, encroached upon, and destroyed the vertical solidarity of the estates, especially the nobility. This had occurred both socially and culturally: socially, insofar as the state had constituted, most notably through its offices, another nobility than that of the feudal epoch. By the eighteenth century, the new groups made up the majority of the nobility. Culturally, the state had offered to the ruling groups of the kingdom, assembled henceforth under its aegis, another system of values than that of personal honor: the fatherland and the State. In short, by becoming the pole of attraction for wealth, because it was the distributor of social promotion, the monarchical state, even as it conserved the heritage of the estate society, created a parallel and contradictory social structure: an elite, a governing class.²¹

Wealth and office holding, not simply estate membership, were the keys to success in *ancien régime* France.²² Noble fortunes varied enormously. The poorer nobles were excluded from Parisian high society and comfortable stylish living in the provincial cities, and they had great difficulty in purchasing the most desirable offices in the army or civil administration. On the other hand, commoners who gained great wealth through overseas commerce or royal finance, or who advanced by purchasing successive state offices, could readily gain access both to noble status and privileges, and to high society. In fact, many of the most prominent and prosperous noble families of the eighteenth century seem to have been ennobled only three or four generations previously.

The distinction between the First (ecclesiastical) and Second (noble) Estates, on the one hand, and the Third Estate, on the other, was by the eighteenth century more a fluid zone of transition than a barrier—at least from

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the perspective of the dominant groups. Estate was indeed a true barrier at the middle levels of the social order based largely on wealth and office holding. Yet the social tensions thus engendered—which were to set poor nobles and nonnoble members of the educated Third Estate at once against each other and against the wealthy privileged—were not fully released until during the Revolution. They did not create the Revolutionary crisis.²³

Nor did any class contradiction—based upon a clash of incompatible modes of production cutting through the dominant strata—create the Revolutionary crisis. As the excellent research of George Taylor has demonstrated,²⁴ over 80 percent of the private wealth of the Old Regime was “proprietary” wealth:

There was in the economy of the old regime a distinct configuration of wealth, noncapitalist in function, that may be called “proprietary.” It embodied investments in land, urban property, venal office, and annuities. The returns it yielded were modest, ranging between 1 and 5 percent, but they were fairly constant and varied little from year to year. They were realized not by entrepreneurial effort . . . but by mere ownership and the passage of calendar intervals.²⁵

In the agrarian economy, proprietary wealth took the forms both of (a) land exploited indirectly through rents from tenants who held or used pieces of “domains, farms, *métairies*, meadows, fields, stands of timber,” etc.; and of (b) the “seigneurie, consisting of dues, monopolies, and rights surviving from the [feudal] fief . . . , an order of property superimposed on property in fee simple.”²⁶ Ownership of urban land and buildings was yet another source of rental incomes. And then there were venal offices and *rentes*, whose features are well described by Taylor:

In the proprietary scale of preference, the passion for property in office was nearly as strong as that for property in land. A venal office was a long-term investment. Usually it brought a low but stable return, and, as long as the owner regularly paid the *droit annuel* . . . , he could, under restrictions applicable to each office, sell it to a buyer, bequeath it to an heir, or even rent it out to someone . . . Generally speaking, an investment in office was an investment in standing. What made it desirable was the status, the respectability that it conferred.²⁷

In addition . . . proprietary wealth was invested in *rentes*. In the broadest sense, a *rente* was an annual revenue that one received for having transferred something of value to someone else . . . A *rente perpetuelle* was an annuity of indefinite duration, terminated only when the debtor chose, on his own initiative, to refund the principal and thereby free himself from paying the *rente* . . . Its proper domain was that of accommodations within and between families and investments in annuities sold by municipalities, provincial estates, and the royal treasury.²⁸

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Even the most well-to-do members of the Third Estate based their fortunes upon mixtures of *rentes*, venal offices, real estate, and seigneurial rights. Taylor argues emphatically that "there was, between most of the nobility and the proprietary sector of the middle classes, a continuity of investment forms that made them, economically, a single group. In the relations of production they played a common role."²⁹ Only those (mostly nonnobles) engaged in overseas commerce and those (mostly ennobled) involved in royal high finance possessed more fluid and risky forms of circulating wealth. Yet for these groups, too, proprietary wealth was ultimately more attractive. Most successful merchants or financiers transferred their fortunes to proprietary assets; likewise they typically transferred their efforts, or those of their offspring, to the corresponding socially more appropriate pursuits.

"Proprietary wealth," then, was the property basis of the dominant class. Yet an important thing to notice about proprietary wealth is how dependent it was in its various forms upon the peculiar state structure of old-regime France. Both the absolutist and the archaic aspects of the "multiply layered" state structure provided crucial supports for the socioeconomic position of the dominant class. French peasants still mostly adhered to premarket conceptions of social and economic order and would engage in riot or rebellion if their communal ideals of justice were flagrantly violated.³⁰ Thus, since landlords no longer controlled significant means of coercion at local levels, they depended upon the absolutist administration as their protector of last resort. At the same time, the various seigneurial, corporate, and provincial institutions that were preserved under the umbrella of absolutism also had great socioeconomic significance for the dominant class. In general, these did not set the bourgeoisie (or the upper Third Estate) against the nobility, because wealthy persons of all estates owned seigneurial rights, held venal offices, and belonged to privileged corporations of one sort or another.³¹ Rather these institutions expressed and reinforced the advantages of the richer propertied against the poorer in prerevolutionary France. For, whatever their different particular social or political purposes, one thing that all of these rights and bodies had in common was that they entailed state-enforced tax advantages and opportunities for income. Along with property claims on the land, such exemptions and opportunities were a major basis of the wealth of the dominant class as a whole.

This situation of dependence on the state naturally produced a dominant class with vested interest in both the older institutional forms, such as seigneurial rights and proprietary offices, and the new absolutist functions, mainly those related to the state's capacity to promote the military success and to tax the economic expansion of the country (insofar as the tax revenues came from the nonprivileged). Such a dominant class would rise

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or fall with France as a commercial, but noncapitalist, agrarian-imperial power. The Revolutionary crisis emerged only when this France proved not viable, given developments in the existing international situation and conflicts of interest between the monarchy and the dominant class with its many footholds within the state structure.

Wars and the Fiscal Dilemma

As events of the eighteenth century unfolded, it became more and more apparent that the French monarchy could not fulfill its *raison d'être*. The victories in war necessary for the vindication of French honor on the international scene, not to mention the protection of seaborne commerce, were beyond its grasp. France fought at sea and on land in the two general wars of the mid-eighteenth century—the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8), and the Seven Years' War (1756–63). In each conflict, the country's resources were strained to the utmost and its vital colonial trade was disrupted by the British navy. In return, no gains were made; instead, France lost to Britain large chunks of its empire in North America and India.³²

A major difficulty for France was strategic. As a commercial power located on an island, England could concentrate virtually all of its resources on naval power—which, in turn, could be employed to protect and expand the colonial trade from whence came tax revenues for military ventures. No large standing army at home was necessary, and limited financial subsidies could be used to aid or incite allies on the Continent against France. France, however, suffered the penalties of “amphibious geography.” France was, or aimed to be, “at once the greatest land power and a great maritime power . . . Partly continental, partly maritime, she could not like Great Britain [or Prussia and Austria], throw all her energies in one direction or the other; willy-nilly she had to attempt to do both.”³³ France could only hope to defeat what was increasingly its main enemy, Britain, if it remained out of any simultaneous general war on the Continent and concentrated its resources on naval warfare. “This was, however, an interest which the French could not pursue except by abandoning their claims, if not to dominate, at least to exercise a determining voice in Europe . . . [But] the great achievements of Louis XIV in his early days set the standard for future generations.”³⁴

An even more fundamental difficulty for France was the inadequacy of the state's financial resources. Partly because of the lower level of per capita national wealth in France compared to England, and partly because the system of taxation was riddled with the exemptions or deductions of countless privileged elites—including officers, tax farmers, trading and industrial

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groups, as well as churchmen and the nobility³⁵ – the French Crown found it difficult to raise revenues sufficient to sustain protracted and repeated general warfare, especially against enemy coalitions that included England. Rather than give up its martial ambitions, the Bourbon monarchy simply borrowed at high rates of interest from private financiers – and even more regularly from the monarchy's own office holders. Like the *rentes perpétuelles* that the state sold to private buyers, venal offices were a form of long-term finance in which the principal need “never” be repaid.³⁶ In addition, the Crown continuously took short-term loans at interest from its countless financial agents (for there was no unified treasury), simply by ordering them to make payments in advance or in excess of the tax revenues they collected by virtue of their venal offices.³⁷

In contrast to the French monarchy, the English government could raise loans in an emergency quickly and at low rates of interest. For the English government could work through the Bank of England – a public institution whose existence and operations depended upon England's unique degree of commercial prosperity and upon the confidence created in upper-class minds by the Parliament's careful controls over and guarantees of governmental debts. In consequence, C.B.A. Behrens tells us “though it would seem . . . that the British government's [tax] revenues in peace, even towards the end of the eighteenth century, cannot have been more than about half those of France, British expenditure, in the last stages of the two greatest wars of the century seems likely to have exceeded that of the French.”³⁸

As repeated wars and defeats worsened the French monarchy's financial plight, a succession of ministers of finance attempted to reform the tax system by abolishing most exemptions of privileged groups and equalizing the burden across provinces and localities. Since direct income taxes were beyond the administrative capacities of all eighteenth-century governments, existing direct taxes on agriculture and indirect taxes on articles of consumption would necessarily have continued in force, probably at higher rates for all, because the Crown needed, in the final analysis, more revenues.³⁹ Naturally all social groups resisted such reforms. Yet the resistance that mattered most came from those wealthy, privileged groups that were simultaneously socially prominent and strategically ensconced within the state machinery.

The most avid resisters of the Crown's attempts to squeeze out more revenues were unquestionably the *parlements*. Nominally simply part of the royal administration, these judicial corporations, situated in Paris and in leading provincial cities, were primarily courts of appeal for all civil and criminal cases. In addition, however, they had several characteristics that combined to make them the key locus of upper-class leverage against royal

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power. For one thing, the magistrates owned their offices and therefore could not readily be removed. Moreover, as corporate bodies, the *parlements* controlled access to their own ranks. Second, the magistrates were invariably wealthy, mostly in forms associated with tax exemptions. According to Franklin Ford, "their fortunes included not only their offices, in themselves representing large investments, but also a formidable accumulation of securities, urban property, and rural seigneuries."⁴⁰ Besides, the magistrates played a key role in protecting seigneurial property in particular. For as courts of appeal for disputes about seigneurial rights, the *parlements* defended this "bizarre form of property" held by noble and bourgeois alike. "Indeed," writes Alfred Cobban, "without the juridical backing of the parlements the whole system of seigneurial rights might have collapsed, for the royal officials had no interest in the maintenance of a system which removed income from those who were taxable [i.e., peasants] into the hands of those who could not be taxed."⁴¹

Third, by virtue of their varied fortunes, styles of life, and residence in major urban centers (including the important regional centers), the magistrates were remarkably "well connected." They intermarried and interacted with old-line ("sword") nobles and with those who lived off seigneurial properties, as well as with families newly rich (and recently ennobled) through commerce and finance.⁴² Equally, they "kept up contact with other officeholders who had not graduated to the nobility . . . [and] maintained ties with a socially less prestigious group, namely the lawyers."⁴³

Finally, the *parlements* possessed, by tradition, the right to "remonstrate against" royal edicts that they considered in violation of the customary practices of the realm. In practical terms, this meant that they could delay the implementation of royal policies they disliked, in the process arousing public (mostly upper class) debate about them. The effect was often to cause the king to lose confidence in the ministers responsible for the attempted implementation of the objectionable policies.⁴⁴

Repeatedly during the eighteenth century, the *parlements* opposed ministerial attempts at tax reform. Resistance was a generally popular cause and, besides, proposed reforms would end the privileges of wealthy proprietary groups like themselves and the seigneurs, rentiers, and other office holders to whom they were connected. Around mid-century, the *parlements* even began to assert the right to give quasi-legislative approval to royal policies as representatives of the French people against the Crown. Finally in 1787–8, the *parlements* "opened the door to revolution" by rallying upper-class and popular support once again against ministerial proposals for reforms, and by voicing the demand for the convening of the Estates-General.⁴⁵

Ironically, the beginning of the revolutionary political crisis came in the

wake of the one eighteenth-century war in which France was unequivocally victorious. Having avoided entanglements on the Continent, France stymied the British Navy in the War for American Independence. Still, "the price to be paid for American Independence was a French revolution."⁴⁶ For to finance the war to deprive England of its American colonies, royal treasurers (between roughly 1774 and 1788) finally exhausted their capacity to raise new loans, even as they sharply increased royal expenditures and indebtedness to astronomical heights. Expenditures jumped over two and one-half times between 1770 and 1788,⁴⁷ while by the latter year "debt service charges alone consum[ed] over 50 percent of annual expenditures."⁴⁸ The burden of financing the American War came before treasurers had managed to control the indebtedness from the previous (Seven Years') general war. Taxes "were surcharged for the last time in 1780 and 1781; within the terms of the existing system of privilege-corroded fiscality, the economy could bear no more."⁴⁹ Then, too, as we have already noted, after 1770 France slid into a cyclical general economic recession—a circumstance that reduced tax receipts and investment funds and spurred bankruptcies among the state's financial agents.⁵⁰

Still, as J. F. Bosher wisely reminds us: "Most Bourbon kings had survived debt and bankruptcy; the financial difficulties in the later years of Louis XIII, Louis XIV and Louis XV were probably as bad as those on the eve of the French revolution."⁵¹ "Why," he asks, "did the financial troubles of Louis XVI develop into a major crisis?" Why did they launch a revolution? Bosher replies that developments in eighteenth-century French society had closed off an old escape mechanism:

Every other financial crisis in the Bourbon monarchy had culminated in a Chamber of Justice [an extraordinary judicial proceeding], directing public attention towards the accountants, tax farmers, and other financiers [all venal officers of the monarchy from whom it habitually borrowed in anticipation of tax revenues] . . . as profiteers and therefore responsible for the trouble . . . Chambers of Justice had provided a convenient legal means for cancelling debts to the financiers and forcibly recovering large sums from them. On the occasion of these Chambers the Crown had taken advantage of the financiers' momentary weakness to make reforms in the financial institutions . . .

But during the eighteenth century the Farmers General, Receivers General, Treasurers General, Payers of the rentes and other high accountants had become noble in such large numbers, and merged with the ruling classes to such an extent, that the Crown was in no position to establish a Chamber of Justice against them. The long series of Chambers of Justice came to an end in 1717 . . . Those Finance Ministers who attempted anything in the nature of an attack on the financiers,

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especially Terray, Turgot and Necker, suffered political defeat and were obliged to retire. It was in these circumstances that the financial trouble ripened into a major crisis.⁵²

In short, when its unquenchable penchant for war carried the eighteenth-century Bourbon monarchy into an acute financial crisis, it faced a socially consolidated dominant class. This class was dependent upon the absolutist state and implicated in its international mission. Yet it was also economically interested in minimizing royal taxation of its wealth and capable of exerting political leverage against the absolutist monarchy through its institutional footholds within the state apparatus.

The Revolutionary Political Crisis

In 1787, news of the monarchy's financial peril precipitated a general crisis of confidence within the dominant class.⁵³ In an attempt to preempt the *parlements*, Finance Minister Charles Alexandre de Calonne summoned an Assembly of Notables (representatives of the dominant class from all three orders) and laid before them an analysis of the financial predicaments and sweeping proposals for legal and tax reforms. Key proposals called for a new tax on all lands regardless of ownership by nobles or nonnobles and for the establishment of district assemblies representing all landowners regardless of status. Not surprisingly, the Notables rejected these ideas; Calonne fell and was replaced by Loménie de Brienne, who sent edicts embodying a modified version of the same ideas to the *parlements*. The *Parlement* of Paris refused to register Brienne's decrees, and, with widespread support, demanded the summoning of the long-defunct Estates-General. No longer confident that absolutism could solve the problems of state, and fearful for its privileges, the dominant class wanted a representative body to advise the king and give consent to any new taxes.

At first the king refused and proceeded to override the *parlements*. But resistance spread, especially in the provinces. Provincial *parlements*, provincial estates in the outlying *pays d'état*, and extraordinary bodies created by nobles and/or the upper Third Estate raised a hue and cry against "despotism" and for the Estates-General. Popular demonstrations, especially by the retainers of the *parlements*, championed the *privilègiés* against the Crown. And not all *intendants*, military governors, and army officers could be counted upon to suppress resistance.⁵⁴

The reluctance of many army officers to suppress resistance with any vigor was a spur along with the continuing financial crisis to the ultimate royal capitulation in summoning the Estates-General. And the reluctance of the officers helped to trigger spreading administrative chaos and military breakdown. Recruited from various privileged social backgrounds—rich noble, rich nonnoble, and poor country noble—the officers had a

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variety of long-standing grievances. Some were directed against other officers, and others, significantly, were shared against the Crown, which could never satisfy all groups.⁵⁵ But it is likely that the decisive explanation for the behavior of the officers lies in the fact that virtually all of them were privileged, socially and/or economically. Hence many identified during 1787–8 with the *parlements*. In her classic book, *Armies and the Art of Revolution*, Katherine Chorley concludes from comparative historical studies that, in preindustrial societies, army officers generally identify with and act to protect the interests of the privileged strata from which they are recruited.⁵⁶ During its opening phases until, and even after, the king had capitulated and agreed to convene the Estates-General, the French Revolution pitted all strata, led by the wealthy privileged, against the Crown. The army officers' predictable reluctance to repress resistance during that period exacerbated the crisis of governmental authority, which in turn unleashed political and social divisions that finally made a subsequent resort to simple repression impossible either for the king or for the conservative factions of the dominant class.

For, as everyone knows, the summoning of the Estates-General served not to solve the royal financial crisis but to launch the Revolution. The facts of this launching are surely not in doubt, but there remain questions of interpretation. Many historians of the French Revolution argue that the calling of the Estates-General led to Revolution because it propelled the capitalist bourgeoisie, or else the upper Third Estate, onto the national political stage.⁵⁷ This happened as quarrels broke out over whether to operate the Estates in the traditional way, with voting by order, or in a more unified manner with voting by head. Certainly this quarrel was of decisive importance. Yet there is much to suggest that its significance was not that it pitted one class or estate against another. It was rather that the quarrel deepened the paralysis and led to the dissolution of the administrative system of the Old Regime – and thus left the dominant class vulnerable to the truly social-revolutionary implications of revolts from below.

In 1788 and early 1789, the French dominant class was virtually united in wanting a less absolutist, more representative national government. But not at all agreed about what principles should determine exactly who was represented and with what institutionalized power.⁵⁸ The summoning of the Estates-General inevitably brought to the fore those questions over which the dominant class was potentially most divided. For the Estates-General was not an established representative institution already functioning to mediate diverse interests within the dominant class. Rather the Estates had to be constituted from scratch, drawing representatives from the welter of communities, groups, and corporate bodies that comprised French society in 1789. With the “customary” guidelines having last been applied in 1614, the very process of constituting the Estates-General un-

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leashed countless conflicts of interest and principles. This was especially true among the wealthy, privileged strata who were complexly divided by estate memberships, degrees of nobility, types of property, regional ties, affiliations to towns or to country, occupational interests, and so forth.

Moreover, insofar as broad groupings took sides in early 1789 in the quarrel over voting by order versus voting by head, those who opposed the traditional constitution and favored a unified National Assembly (which would have individually voting representatives from all three orders) included not only the representatives of the Third Estate but also a hefty minority of the nobility—with a disproportionate number of nobles who were acclimated by birth and/or regular residence to urban life and culture.⁵⁹ In fact, some of the key leaders of the “revolutionary bourgeoisie/Third Estate” were aristocrats.⁶⁰ This should not seem surprising. For what was actually at stake in the earliest phase of the Revolution was not the class or social-estate structure—only popular revolts would put these in jeopardy—but the structure of government. And a representative system that would stress wealth, education, and broad public prestige undoubtedly made most sense of all precisely to *noblemen* with urban backgrounds and cosmopolitan connections. Thus they were understandably more divided from the parochial, rural nobles determined to revive a feudal political constitution than from Third Estate representatives who were almost invariably from cities and towns.

But, then, it did not require class contradictions or divisions purely along estate lines to launch the Revolution; the multifaceted political quarrels within the ruling class were quite enough. For these conflicts at first paralyzed and then dismantled the old-regime administrative system—which, after all, had never been based upon anything more than the routine performance of diverse corporate governing bodies and venal officers under the coordination of king, ministers, and *intendants*. With these groups and individuals squabbling among themselves in 1788 and 1789 about how representative bodies should be constituted, and what grievances should be voiced to the king, the doors were swung open for the expression of popular discontents. Leaders from the dominant class actually encouraged increasing popular participation by appealing to urban popular groups for support in their struggles for “liberty,” variously defined. First the *parlements* and then the supporters of the National Assembly played this game.

By the summer of 1789, the result was the “Municipal Revolution,” a nation-wide wave of political revolutions in cities and towns throughout France, including of course the celebrated “fall of the Bastille in Paris.”⁶¹ In the context of the simultaneous political and economic crises of 1788–9,⁶² crowds of artisans, shopkeepers, journeymen, and laborers roamed the cities searching for arms and grain and demanding both bread and lib-

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erty.⁶³ Alert leaders of the liberal revolution, supporters of the National Assembly, formed new municipal governments, displacing officials appointed by or loyal to the royal administration, and recruited the more respectable popular protesters into urban militias. In turn, the militias both served as a counterweight to the royal army and helped to guard urban order and property. Thus, by the early summer of 1789, the quarrels within the dominant class over forms of representation culminated in a victory for the Parisian National Assembly and its various liberal, urban supporters throughout France. And a concomitant of this victory was the sudden devolution of control over the means of administration and coercion from the normally centralized royal administration into the decentralized possession of the various cities and towns, mostly controlled by the supporters of the National Assembly.

Of course the Municipal Revolution proved to be just the beginning of a revolutionary process in France that would soon deepen from antiabsolutist constitutional reforms into more fundamental social and political transformations. For the struggles of the lower classes—and above all those of the peasants, whom no one within the dominant class invited into the fray—would prove to have dynamics and logics all of their own. And without the royal administration, the rural nobility, especially, would have no defenses against revolts from below. But these are matters to be explored in the chapters to come; for now, we shall leave France and move on to analyze the emergence of a revolutionary political crisis in late Imperial China.

MANCHU CHINA: FROM THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE TO THE FALL OF THE IMPERIAL SYSTEM

From the clash and clamor of the European states system, to which Bourbon France was long acclimated before it met its revolutionary nemesis, we move to an alternative, distant, self-contained world with a single hegemonic center. China, before the nineteenth century, was the focus of a rich civilization that stretched back more than two millennia—a civilization embodied in a sociopolitical structure with an over six-hundred-year history of nearly continuous cohesion. The problems of external defense for this imperial state sitting astride a vast agrarian country had been mainly those of warding off or mastering competing peoples on the Asian land frontiers, while intrusions by sea were either ignored or brushed aside by force. The rulers of traditional China became increasingly successful at these endeavors over the centuries. Alien groups might seize the command posts of dynastic rule, but the Chinese Imperial system continued to operate.⁶⁴ Indeed, the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1911) of the alien Manchus, a sinicized tribal people from southern Manchuria, witnessed the apogee, as well as the ultimate collapse, of that remarkable system.

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By the end of the Ch'ien-lung Emperor's reign (1736–96), the boundaries of the Chinese empire extended farther than ever before or since: west to the Ili region and the boundaries of Russian Turkestan, southwest to the Himalayas and the border states of India. Tibet was pacified and controlled; Annam was in vassalage, and the rest of Southeast Asia was sending royal tribute; and Korea was once again part of the Chinese sphere of influence.⁶⁵

For the celestial Empire, peace and order, economic expansion, and cultural elaboration prevailed—until the nineteenth century. Then an aggressive, expanding, industrializing Europe forced China out of her splendid autonomy into a world of competing nation-states and imperialist intrusions. But before we discuss the why and the wherefore of the revolutionary consequences that ensued, let us examine the logic of the Old Regime in its own right. For, just as in the case of Bourbon France, it was a combination of unusual external pressures with particular internal structures and developments that brought the Chinese Old Regime into revolutionary political crisis.

The sociopolitical structure of late Imperial China can best be comprehended as the interpenetration of two “worlds”: (1) an agrarian economy and society of villages involved in locally focused marketing networks; and (2) an Imperial state administration that recruited and deployed educated individuals certified by an elaborate examination system. Each of these spheres can be introduced separately for analytic purposes, although it is important to keep in mind from the outset that neither operated in isolation from the other. Indeed their interpenetration created and maintained a remarkable dominant class—the Chinese gentry.

The Agrarian Economy and Society

In late Imperial times Chinese agriculture was in no sense “feudal”—for there were no seigneurs with juridical rights to dues or to serf labor as in precapitalist Europe. Nor did Chinese agriculture feature large, owner-cultivated estates. Instead, land was owned, rented, and bought and sold almost invariably in small units. The vast majority of Chinese, at least 80 percent, were peasant agriculturalists, living in villages of several hundred families, each of which farmed plots of land that the family owned, or rented, or both.⁶⁶

To be sure, economic inequality in China was to a significant degree expressed in the differential ownership of land.⁶⁷ Countrywide, approximately 40 percent of the farmland was rented out by landlords. About 30 percent of farm families were pure tenants, and another 20 percent rented part of their land, leaving 50 percent as owners of plots of widely varying sizes. But regional variations were considerable: In most of the central and

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southern parts of China, tenancy rates were higher, while in most of the north and northwest, they were much lower. There were also intraregional variations among localities. In general, the renting out of land could be profitable only in regions where transport, mostly by water, allowed the marketing of grain outside of the exact local areas where it was grown. In North China (where the main crops were wheat and millet) transportation was in general more difficult, not to mention the fact that productivity was much lower than in the rice-growing heartlands of South and Central China.

Agrarian China was, in fact, significantly commercialized, even though the country as a whole was not basically integrated by market relations. Difficulties of transportation meant that trade was bottom heavy and fragmented into thousands of local markets, with most sales of agricultural products contained within "limited region[s] a few tens of miles in diameter."⁶⁸ "Long-distance trade mainly carried luxury goods to China's gentry class or necessities to China's cities."⁶⁹ Only 7 to 8 percent of all agricultural output entered into it. But local and intraregional commerce was quite important. For, while peasants raised most of their own food, they still depended upon the periodic markets of what William Skinner has labeled the "standard market town" to sell between one-fifth and two-fifths of their produce for money to pay taxes, or to purchase handicraft products and entertainment and religious services. "Insofar as the Chinese peasant can be said to live in a self-contained world, that world is not the village but the standard marketing community,"⁷⁰ including twelve to eighteen villages. Similarly, wealthy families often resided in market towns,⁷¹ the operations of which supplied them with luxury commodities and provided opportunities for very profitable investments in handicraft enterprises or, above all, in pawnbroking and usurious moneylending. Such investments provided crucial supplements to the lower returns that wealthy families got from land rentals alone; and they represented an important mechanism of surplus appropriation in late Imperial China.⁷²

The State

Wealthy families typically aspired to participate, through state service, in a cosmopolitan and universal realm of Chinese life not experienced by the peasant masses. Given the localized and fragmented character of China's enormous agrarian economy, only the Imperial state—which was focused upon a succession of native or foreign dynasties able to win and hold their position through military prowess—united China into one society. The dynasty was the kingpin of a centralized, autocratic, and semibureaucratic administrative structure staffed (under the Ch'ing) by approximately forty thousand officials:⁷³

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The Emperor ruled, an absolute and legally unlimited monarch, with various of the Imperial clan clustered around him. Directly below him in the administrative hierarchy came the Grand Council and the Grand Secretariat, and below these came six (eventually increased to twelve) departments or boards roughly comparable to ministries. Under the central government came the provincial administrations headed in each case by a Governor-General (Viceroy), and/or a Governor. In addition to these officials, the Ch'ing dynasty established in eleven provinces the post of Tartar-General, who ranked "with, but before," the Viceroy.

Each province was divided into smaller units designated as *tao* or circuits over which an intendant presided. Each *tao* was made up of *fu* (overseen by a prefect), and the *fu*, in turn, were subdivided into departments (under departmental magistrates) and *hsien* (under magistrates). These officials secured their appointments from above, all commissions being issued by the Emperor.⁷⁴

Officials were appointed from the ranks of literati degree-holders, who together with their families comprised less than 2 percent of the total population. Most literati passed government-sponsored examinations on the Confucian classics, although a minority purchased degrees and positions.⁷⁵ Aspirants to official positions could come from virtually any social background in Imperial China, and indeed persons from poor families did occasionally gain even the highest positions.⁷⁶ Yet all had to attain through their own resources, or those of sponsors, the security and leisure to cultivate the scholarly "status-manner" and to devote themselves to (the often literally lifelong) "examination life" of the Confucian literati.⁷⁷ And connection to family fortunes that included landed wealth was the only sure and appropriate way to ensure the requisite security and leisure.

Imperial officials were appointed from the exclusive ranks of upper literati—those (approximately 14 percent of all literati) who had passed the provincial or metropolitan (national) examinations, or who had purchased official titles in addition to degrees.⁷⁸ Upper literati were either officials, retired officials, or potential officials. Through their examination experiences most had gained extralocal contacts and orientations. Once appointed to offices, upper literati were subject to a set of rules designed—even at the expense of administrative rationality—both to attenuate their strong ties to home and family and to forge them into an elite corps that would take the Imperial state's point of view toward local communities. To be sure, the Chinese state never tried to remove officials permanently from their home localities; regular periods of retirement at home were built into official careers, and ties to families left behind and to local

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wealth and social position remained important for even the most successful officials. But the Imperial state did attempt to enforce the loyalty of active officials. In accordance with a "rule of avoidance," literati appointed as governors, magistrates, and so forth, had to supervise provinces other than those in which they were born and raised. They were not allowed to employ family members or marry local women without official permission. In order to prevent the development of permanent cliques within their ranks, or fixed alliances between them and the local elites of the areas they administered, officials were frequently transferred and scrambled in different mixes. Finally, duplicate jurisdictions and functions were deliberately built into the provincial administrative structures, so that the Court might have overlapping lines of surveillance and command.⁷⁹

The lower literati—those who had passed only the basic-level (prefectural) examinations (or who had purchased the basic-level degree)—were not normally appointed to the relatively scarce Imperial offices. Yet, along with wealthy men who adopted the Confucian manner, they typically possessed important prestige and power in their local communities.⁸⁰ For the Imperial administration never reached as far as the individual village or standard market town. The basic-level official, the county (*hsien*) magistrate, was responsible for an area containing up to 200,000 persons.⁸¹ Needless to say, he could administer such an area only through cooperation with local people.⁸² One device used by all magistrates was to employ many low-status clerks and assistants, who were remunerated partly by payments from the magistrate himself and partly by bribes squeezed from the local people. In addition, resident literati and wealthy Confucian landlords typically collaborated with the magistrate, whom they could approach as a status equal. In return for lighter rates for themselves and their friends, these local dominants might help the magistrate collect the land tax. Even more important, the magistrate typically encouraged or allowed local literati and wealthy men to organize community services—such as irrigation projects, religious or clan affairs, educational efforts, or local militias—in return for fees in payment collected from the local peasantry. Such fees constituted an important source of income especially for the lower literati. And, of course, the Imperial administration also backed the rights of landlords and creditors to collect rents and payments.

The Gentry

Thus, not unlike the dominant class in prerevolutionary France, the dominant gentry class of Imperial China was simultaneously based upon office holding and the ownership of surplus land and liquid wealth. Wealth, lent or rented with state backing to working peasants, supported the cultiva-

tion of the Confucian status-manner. The Imperial state sanctioned Confucian learning through the examination system and took a minority of its devotees as its officials. Official incomes, as well as fees collected for organizing and managing local community affairs, provided greater returns than those attainable through mere land ownership.⁸³ Ultimately the wealth thus garnered was partially reinvested in landlordism and usury, thus completing the cycle of interdependence between the Imperial state and the agrarian society based upon fragmented and stratified private ownership and localized commerce.

Much controversy has surrounded the question of who “the gentry” really were in prerevolutionary China. Some argue that they were those *individuals* who held official positions and/or Confucian degrees, thus identifying the gentry strictly with what I have labeled the literati.⁸⁴ Others argue that the gentry were basically *wealthy families*, especially landlords.⁸⁵ Insofar as more than a purely semantic controversy is involved here, scholars are differing, at least implicitly, in their conceptions of the essential structure of the Old Regime. Was it fundamentally an Imperial state with a unique Confucian culture and educational system? Or was it fundamentally a class-stratified agrarian society? My view is that old-regime China was an inextricable amalgam of both of these. The dominant agrarian class depended upon the administrative/military backing of, and employment opportunities within, the Imperial state. And ruling dynasties depended upon local class dominants to extend controls over and appropriate resources from the huge, unwieldy agrarian expanse that was China. From this perspective it makes sense to argue that the core of the gentry were landlord families with degree holding official members presently in their ranks. Others who lacked all of this constellation of gentry attributes—such as wealthy families without degree-holder members, or poor literati or officials—should also be considered as marginal members of the dominant class. For they shared the distinctive Confucian culture or the sources of wealth of the core gentry, and thus partook of aspects of its power.⁸⁶ The gentry’s existence and survival as the dominant class depended upon the aspirations and ability of such “marginal” members to attain whatever of the entire constellation of core class attributes they lacked. Indeed, for hundreds of years before the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese agrarian economy flourished, thus allowing families to attain the wealth to sustain aspirants for degrees and official positions. And the Imperial state structure survived the coming and going of dynasties, thus providing backing for local dominant classes and extraordinary income opportunities for officials. During all of this time, the Chinese gentry, despite the rise and fall of individuals and families, flourished as a class based at the intersections of the Imperial state and the agrarian economy.

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Foreign Intrusions and Domestic Rebellions

Yet the Chinese Empire did decline and collapse, opening the way to the revolutionary destruction of the gentry, and we must discover how and why this occurred. Essentially, China came under extraordinary pressures from imperialist industrial nations abroad. This happened even as long-gestating internal developments were unbalancing the system from within precisely in ways that made it unlikely that Imperial authorities would, or could, respond effectively to the foreign threat.

During the nineteenth century China was subjected to intensifying foreign pressures of an unprecedented kind.⁸⁷ Before the middle of the eighteenth century, European traders had been treated as bearers of tribute comparable to other actual or symbolic vassals of China. Then, between the mid-1700s and the mid-1800s, a limited two-way trade between Chinese and foreign merchants had been rigorously regulated, supervised, and taxed by Imperial authorities through what was known as the "Canton system." But beginning in the early nineteenth century, Britain could back the aspirations of its citizens for expanded "free trade" in all of China with the military organization and technology born of industrialization. After inflicting decisive naval defeats on Chinese forces in the Opium War of 1839–42, Britain achieved expanded trading rights. Other Western nations soon joined in the quest to "open" China. Free-trade concessions, limitations on tariffs, extraterritorial jurisdiction in proliferating treaty ports, legal immunities for Christian missionaries in the interior—all were forced step by step, in treaties following repeated foreign invasions, upon a country profoundly reluctant to bother with the West and its ways. Toward the end of the century, imperialist intrusions took an even uglier turn as the worldwide quest of competing industrial nations for colonies supplanted Britain's "imperialism of free trade." Initially, former tributary areas of the Chinese empire—including Indochina, areas of Inner Asia, and Korea—were taken over by France, Russia, and Japan. And ultimately the competing powers proceeded to carve out large "spheres of influence," using "loans, railways, leased areas, reduced land tariffs, and rights of local jurisdiction, of police power, and of mining exploitation."⁸⁸ China's sheer existence as a sovereign country was profoundly threatened.

Only the central authorities of the Imperial state could have launched economic and military projects that might have allowed China to deflect the ever-deepening incursions on her sovereignty.⁸⁹ However, in late traditional China the realities of the state's situation militated against the success of any central initiatives. Already by the late eighteenth century, the Ch'ing dynasty was beginning to be undermined—ironically, by the effects of the peace, prosperity, and political equilibrium that had prevailed when the dynasty was at its height.

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For one thing, population growth was running up against the limitations of the agrarian economy. Within an unchanging institutional framework, the traditional Chinese economy expanded more or less steadily for over five-hundred years from the fourteenth century—above all during periods of peace and political stability.⁹⁰ Due to the opening up of new lands to cultivation and the more labor-intensive application of traditional technical inputs, per capita grain production was able to keep up with population growth, which averaged 0.4 percent per year, as the numbers of Chinese expanded from sixty-five to eighty million in 1400 to around four hundred million by the mid-nineteenth century. Commerce and handicraft industries also kept pace, and may even have experienced some real growth. These were spectacular achievements. As long as there were new lands to open up, China's traditional methods were able to prevent reduced per capita food consumption (on the average). Yet by the nineteenth century, available new lands were running out. The traditional economy was reaching the limits of its possible expansion without creating the conditions for any spontaneous emergence of industrialism.⁹¹ As a consequence, rural disorder became more likely, especially in areas where production or trade was disrupted for any reason.

Then, too, the Imperial authorities were becoming weaker financially and administratively. Financially, the problem was with the land tax. Ever since 1712, provincial quotas for the land tax (the most important source of Imperial revenue until the late nineteenth century) had been fixed "in perpetuity."⁹² Originally, under the high Ch'ing, this nourished the equilibrium of a nominally centralized empire that survived through the delicate interplay and counterbalance of local and regional vested interest. But, over time, Peking was deprived of the fruits of increases in productivity in the agrarian economy. "The statutory receipts recorded by the Peking government did not change significantly between 1712 and the third quarter of the nineteenth century."⁹³ Meanwhile local and provincial revenues increased disproportionately, as informal collections and fees were increased to take up the slack left by Peking's static demands.

Closely related to Peking's financial stasis was the weakening grip of the civil administration over the country. For, as the economy and the population grew, the Imperial bureaucracy did not keep pace, leaving the basic-level district magistrates in charge of supervising ever-larger local populations.⁹⁴ As a result, the magistrates had to lean more and more heavily on local agents and informal leaders. And these extracted their rewards in the form of burgeoning unofficial fees and cuts from the tax revenues, all squeezed from an ever more overburdened and land-hungry peasantry.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Ch'ing was confronted from the end of the eighteenth century with peasant-based rebellions.⁹⁵ First, there was the White Lotus Rebellion of 1795–1804. Then, after a few decades of sim-

mering internal disorders, there came three massive and well-organized revolts: the Taiping Rebellion of 1850–64, the Nien Rebellion of 1853–68, and Moslem separatist revolts in the northwest from the 1850s to the 1870s. Rebellions such as these had broken out periodically in Chinese history. Often, they indicated the decline of one dynasty and the advent of its replacement—due to such cyclical phenomena as official corruption, military inefficiency, and growing agrarian inequalities. Such traditional causes were also at work undermining the Ch'ing after 1800, but this time they were aggravated and complicated by the effects of the long-term economic and population trends discussed above. Moreover, rebellion was spurred by the side effects of the Western imperialist intrusions. Thus, the greatest and most avowedly revolutionary of the mid-nineteenth-century revolts was the Taiping, a rebellion that originated in the midst of southeastern economic disorders seriously exacerbated by the aftermath of the Opium War. Its anti-Confucian ideology was inspired in part by Christian missionary propaganda.⁹⁶

Of course the nineteenth-century rebellions had an enormous impact upon the Chinese Imperial state. Peking's resources were drained in combatting the rebellions, and tax receipts declined because of the terrible economic and population losses caused by the massive civil warfare. Moreover, the overt challenges to its sovereignty distracted the Ch'ing's full attention from the growing external threats. The Ch'ing dynasty nevertheless weathered the rebellions and emerged apparently "restored" to full health.⁹⁷ However, the Manchu rulers survived only at the cost of internal institutional modifications and power redistributions that left them more unable than ever to cope adequately with the challenges from abroad. And these institutional and power shifts ultimately made the dynasty and the Imperial system susceptible to overthrow from within by the dominant gentry class.

Indeed, for the purpose of explaining the downfall of the Old Regime, the most important legacy of the rebellions was the manner in which they were put down. The Ch'ing dynasty was unable to contain or put down the rebellions with its own Imperial standing armies. These had grown corrupt and inefficient after many decades of peace in the eighteenth century; moreover, they were hampered by the weaknesses of the Imperial finances and administration. As the Imperial armies proved inadequate, the task of dealing with the rebellions fell instead to local gentry-led self-defense associations, and then to regional armies led by native gentry cliques with access to village resources and recruits over wide areas.⁹⁸ By simultaneously cutting the rebels off from potential peasant recruits and defeating their armies in pitched battles, the gentry-led armies finally restored order for the Ch'ing. Yet, because of the gentry's role in putting down rebellion, the dynasty had to grant formal approval to governmental

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practices that ran counter to long-established policies for controlling officials and maintaining the position of the Imperial administration vis-à-vis the local gentry. Rights to collect new taxes, to retain larger portions of established taxes, and to maintain order devolved upon provincial and local officials who were often exempted from the "avoidance" rules of residence and rotation. Even after the rebellions were vanquished, the regional gentry cliques that had triumphed over them retained most of the administrative and military control of their own home areas.⁹⁹

One decisive result of this tilting of the balance of power toward provincial and local gentry was an exacerbated financial weakness for Peking. After the middle of the nineteenth century, new indirect taxes rendered the traditional land tax less significant; but the Imperial authorities did not benefit on balance. An Imperial Maritime Customs establishment was created and run by foreign interests in order to regularize the collection of duties on foreign trade. The duties themselves were unfairly fixed by treaties imposed on China, yet the revenues collected were mostly channeled to Peking. Another tax, the *likin* impost on the production, transit, and/or sale of commodities, produced much greater revenue. But of this only about 20 percent was remitted to Peking. The rest remained with the local and provincial authorities, who collected the taxes and retained most of them. During the final years of the Ch'ing, total government revenues in China, according to scholarly estimates, tapped only about 7.5 percent of the gross national product. And the Peking government was receiving only about 40 percent of that amount, or roughly 3 percent of the GNP.¹⁰⁰ Simultaneously, whatever revenues Peking collected became increasingly committed to paying the indemnities imposed by the victors of the Sino-Japanese and Boxer Wars, and to servicing foreign loans (originally contracted to pay for war costs, indemnities, and limited railroad construction).

Greater resources were controlled by provincial and local authorities, and by the dominant class generally. But "from the point of view of possible economic development as opposed to maintenance of an ongoing economic equilibrium these . . . resources were almost completely neutralized."¹⁰¹ Much local and provincial revenue went directly into the pockets of tax collectors and officials; the rest was distributed in ways that also reinforced the gentry-dominated order. Within that order, enterprises were created only for short-term windfall profits, and military power was suspect if it threatened to get out of control of gentry interests.

Precious little revenue, then, was available to the late Imperial Chinese authorities either to invest in modern transport and industrialization or to finance social and political reforms in ways that might strengthen central controls. Along with the novelty of the external threat and the pressing nature of internal problems in the mid-nineteenth century, this lack of real opportunity for Peking to take the initiative probably accounts for the fact

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that Imperial officials were slow even to admit the need for fundamental changes. Indeed, the first to experiment with modern industrial and military technologies were officials affiliated with regional power groupings.¹⁰² But these experiments were too limited in scope and too uncoordinated to succeed in preparing China to fend off the foreign powers.¹⁰³ That task could have been undertaken with any prospect of success only under strong central direction.

Reforms and the "Revolution of 1911"

The seriousness of China's predicament was at last driven home by China's humiliating defeat in the 1895 war with Japan—another Oriental society, which had, since the 1860s, rapidly synthesized certain of her own traditional forms with Western industrial and military achievements. Even though certain Chinese provincial leaders had experimented with Western-style weapons and arsenals, the Sino-Japanese War was lost to a state that Imperial China had always, more or less successfully, treated as her vassal! The defeat jolted many Chinese to the conclusion that only major structural reforms introduced by central authorities could save China from permanent international humiliation, or even colonial domination. The general imperialist scramble for spheres of influence after 1895 further reinforced this conclusion. An initial attempt by mandarin reformers to have the Imperial authorities initiate changes was defeated after "the one hundred days" of 1898 by the conservative coup d'état led by the empress dowager. But within a few years after the Boxer debacle of 1899–1901, the Manchus were at last unequivocally set on the reforming course. And the upper classes in general were becoming nationalistic supporters of reforms.¹⁰⁴

Between 1901 and 1911, a variety of reforms was decreed at a dazzling pace: The Confucian examination system was modified, and then abolished in 1905; modern schools purveying specialized Western-style learning for a new governmental elite were established in the localities and provinces and in Peking. University students were granted scholarships to study abroad (at first mostly in Japan). Military academies were established to train a modern officer corps. Specialized ministries for internal affairs, war, education, foreign affairs, and commerce were established in Peking, ostensibly to supervise and coordinate the programs of provincial bureaus. A true national budgeting system was instituted. Finally, the Ch'ing government undertook from 1908 to create representative assemblies, through which it hoped to mobilize the gentry in an advisory role to support the Imperial government. Local assemblies were established immediately in 1908, elections for provincial assemblies were scheduled for 1909, and a national assembly was to be elected in 1910 to plan for a parliament to be established in 1917.¹⁰⁵

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But "reform destroyed the reforming government."¹⁰⁶ For the new measures further undermined the already tenuous central power and exacerbated tensions between the gentry and the Manchu autocracy. Undertaken against the background of the developments during and after the rebellions, the reform measures only served to strengthen regional forces against the center. Modern-educated students and military officers developed radical nationalist views that synthesized provincial loyalties with hostility to the "alien" Manchu dynasty.¹⁰⁷ New Army officers and weaponry were absorbed into the framework of the regionally based armies surviving from the time of the rebellions; moreover, professionally trained officers had only the most tenuous loyalties to the Manchus and to the Imperial system.¹⁰⁸ Attempts to create new administrative structures in the provinces to counterbalance the powers of the entrenched governors were aborted as the new officials and functions were absorbed into the preexisting native cliques.¹⁰⁹ And most fateful of all, the newly established representative assemblies were rapidly transformed by groups of local and provincial gentry and merchants into formal platforms from which to advocate a "Constitutionalist" program of liberal, politically decentralizing reforms.¹¹⁰

As E. P. Young has pointed out, "the politicization of the gentry is perhaps the outstanding feature of [Chinese history in] the early twentieth century."¹¹¹ Unlike European nobilities, the Chinese gentry had never possessed corporate organization to represent its class interests within the state. Only individual participation had been allowed, and the protection of group interests had depended upon interpersonal connections reaching into the Imperial bureaucracy. But all of this changed after 1900. As the national crisis deepened, gentry-organized local study groups began publicly to petition the central authorities. Then the gentry gained formal class representation through the newly created local and provincial representative assemblies, which were elected on a very limited franchise that favored literati and the wealthy. Aroused to imperialist threats and impatient with the Manchu response, the gentry became nationalist in sentiment. Even more portentous, "Constitutionalism," apparently associated with the power of foreign nations, came to be seen by the gentry as an ideal program for combining their provincially and locally focused class interests with national independence and progress. Although the Ch'ing intended that the representative assemblies should remain advisory, their dominant-class members and constituents envisaged the creation of a constitutional, parliamentary monarchy, with considerable autonomy for local and provincial government controlled by the gentry. By 1910 many organized gentry groups were prepared ideologically and organizationally to assert their decentralizing program against the Manchus. When elected national assemblymen met that year in Peking—ostensibly to plan for gradual, future changes—they instead demanded the immediate creation of parlia-

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mentary government. Predictably, the Manchu authorities refused, and the frustrated gentry representatives returned to their native provinces, where many were soon to play key roles in overthrowing the dynasty.

What directly precipitated the "Revolution of 1911" was still another attempt at reform by the central government—one that, significantly enough, directly threatened the financial interests of provincial gentry groupings. In order to guarantee coordinated planning and control over a slowly developing national railroad system, Peking decided in 1911 to buy out all railroad projects from provincial groups that had invested in them. In response

a "railway protection" movement sprang up, particularly in Szechwan [a Western province], with mass meetings and anguished petitions to Peking, all in vain. The Szechwan movement intensified. Shops and schools were closed. Tax payments were stopped. Peasant support was mobilized. In September the government moved troops, shot down demonstrators, and seized the gentry leaders. Typically, these men were degree-holders of means, with landlord-merchant backgrounds, who had studied in Japan, were now prominent in the provincial assembly, and had invested heavily in railway projects. Their antiforeign slogan, "Szechwan for the Szechwanese," represented the interest of the provincial ruling class, which had now become violently antidynastic.¹¹²

"The Szechwan uprising . . . sparked widespread disturbances that often had no connection with the railway issue."¹¹³ To quell the disturbances in Szechwan, troops were brought in from the outside, including some from the Wuhan area where the next act of the drama occurred on October 10. When an anti-Manchu plot by certain military officers was discovered on October 9, some New Army units in Wuchang revolted to save the officers from retribution. The Manchu governor took fright and fled, and a brigade commander was coopted to lead the local revolution.¹¹⁴ The Wu-chang Rising proved a contagious example. Within the next few weeks, "the lead in declaring the independence of one province after another was taken by two principal elements: the military governors who commanded the New Army forces and the gentry-official-merchant leaders of the provincial assemblies."¹¹⁵

In the wake of the 1911 uprisings, Constitutionalist gentry and merchants, former officials, New Army officers, and youthful radicals affiliated with Sun Yat-sen's (small and generally ineffective) Revolutionary Alliance all jockeyed among themselves to define a new national political system and to replace the Manchu rulers. For, although many favored political decentralization, everyone ostensibly wanted to strengthen, not weaken, Chinese national unity. At first, a republic was declared; then the military general Yuan Shih-kai attempted to restore the Imperial system with himself as emperor. But within five years it became apparent that the

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real accomplishment of “the Revolution of 1911” had been simply to deliver the coup de grace to the Imperial administrative and political institutions that had already been eroded from within by the usurpations of provincial officials, military officers, and nonofficial gentry. It also became apparent that no alternative national political system could immediately emerge to replace the shattered Imperial system.¹¹⁶ For the dominant-class groups that had temporarily coalesced to overthrow the Manchus were inherently divided in their loyalties and were not politically agreed about what form of institutions should replace absolute monarchy. The one persistent tendency during and after 1911 was for provincial and local gentry to assert civilian control, allying themselves with military governors. Within a few years, however, power came to rest primarily in the regionally based “modernized” military machines; and “warlord” rivalries ensued as the armies and their commanders competed for territories and material resources. Until 1949, these conditions would never be more than imperfectly and temporarily overcome. They condemned China to incessant turmoil. Yet, as we shall see in the chapters to come, they likewise provided openings for efforts to consolidate revolutionary–national power on the basis of lower-class support and mobilization.

Similarities between France and China

At this point it is worth pausing to reflect upon the striking parallels we have seen in the genesis of the revolutionary crises in Bourbon France and late Imperial China. Despite the fact that these two countries were far apart culturally and geopolitically, and although the collapse of their Old Regimes occurred in very different particular times and circumstances, still there were similar structural patterns in the Old Regimes and similar causal processes at work in their downfall.

In both *ancien régime* France and late Imperial China, relatively prosperous landed–commercial upper classes gained collective political leverage within and against the administrative machineries of monarchical autocracies. In eighteenth-century France, an increasingly socially solidary proprietary upper class, its wealth swollen by inflating rents and appropriations backed by the monarchical state, could express its political aspirations through the *parlements* and other corporate bodies entwined with the autocratic royal administration. In late-traditional China, the gentry augmented and guaranteed its rentier prosperity by achieving, in the wake of the mid-nineteenth-century rebellions, de facto control over large sectors of the Imperial administration. It then attained collective representation in the assemblies established in 1908–10 by the reforming Manchus.

Likewise, the revolutionary crises emerged in both France and China

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because the Old Regimes came under unwonted pressures from more developed nations abroad, and because those pressures led to internal political conflicts between the autocratic authorities and the dominant classes. Escalating international competition and humiliations particularly symbolized by unexpected defeats in wars (such as the Seven Years' War and the Sino-Japanese War) inspired autocratic authorities to attempt reforms that they believed would facilitate the mobilization and coordination of national resources to meet the external exigencies. However, landed-commercial upper classes stood to lose wealth and power if central authorities succeeded in their rationalizing reforms. And not incidentally, the French *privilègiés* and the Chinese gentry were attracted by the association between parliamentarism and national power in more modern foreign competitors; they hoped to preserve their own class interests and further national wellbeing at the same time.

In the end, autocratic attempts at modernizing reforms from above in France and China—specifically, tax reform in France and railroad reorganization in China—triggered the concerted political resistance of well-organized dominant class forces. In turn, because these forces possessed leverage within the formally centralized machineries of the monarchical states, their resistance disorganized those machineries. Autocratic authority was abolished. And as dominant class groups based in various institutional and geographical locations (e.g., *parlements*, provinces, representative bodies, and municipalities in France; and provinces, armies, and assemblies in China) competed in endeavors to define new political arrangements, the monarchical administrations and armies were broken irretrievably apart. Hence the successful opposition of the dominant classes to autocratic reforms inadvertently opened the door to deepening revolutions in France and China alike.

IMPERIAL RUSSIA: AN UNDERDEVELOPED GREAT POWER

In Bourbon France and Manchu China revolutionary crises occurred during times of formal peace as autocratic attempts at reforms and resource-mobilization were resisted by politically powerful dominant classes. By contrast, in Tsarist Russia revolutionary crises developed only under the direct impact of defeats in war. Before meeting its demise, the Russian Imperial state weathered intensified competition from more-developed nations in the European state system and, indeed, instituted a series of far-reaching modernizing reforms. Thus the analysis of prerevolutionary Russia must take account of specific differences from, as well as overall similarities to, the patterns we have noted for old-regime France and China.

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The Imperial State and the Serf Economy

Once an Oriental despotism competing for survival and suzerainty on the vast Eurasian plain, Russia was by the nineteenth century one of the dominant powers of the European states system. It was known and feared as the “Gendarme of Europe,” nemesis of revolutionary hopes in central Europe. Certainly Imperial Russia was a more militarized and bureaucratized autocracy than either Bourbon France or late Imperial China.¹¹⁷ Imperial Russia was born during the remarkable reign of Peter the Great (1682–1725). Exploiting the rudiments of the personal autocracy consolidated in medieval Muscovy by Ivan the Terrible, Peter suddenly imposed upon his people the latest European techniques of land and naval warfare and of “rational” administrative domination. Ironically, these methods could quickly produce more efficient state power in Russia than anywhere in the West, for Muscovy was free of the sociopolitical encumbrances of Western-style feudal legacies. Peter “mated methods borrowed from the West with . . . the tradition of a despotic Eastern regime. The explosive mixture thus created . . . sent the power of Russia soaring upward.”¹¹⁸ Above all, huge new standing armies were created. These were staffed by serfs and nobles forcibly recruited to lifelong service, armed with weapons supplied by state-initiated mines and manufactories, and financed by heavy direct and indirect taxes, including bread taxes on every adult male peasant. The taxes, in turn, were collected by an emergent civil service staffed by full-time officials. Once the new Russian armies triumphed over the formidable forces of Sweden in the Great Northern War of 1700–21, Russia was established as a multi-ethnic empire and as a Great Power in the European states system. No matter that her agrarian economy was and remained relatively backward overall; Peter’s reforms and the practices of his successors created and used bureaucratic state power to counterbalance the deficit. Besides, Russia’s massive military machine was technologically modern, and so it remained until the military repercussions of the nineteenth-century industrialization of Western Europe were realized.¹¹⁹

As for the socioeconomic basis upon which the Imperial state was built and maintained, throughout her tenure as a dominant power in Europe Russia remained a serf-based agrarian society. By the middle of the nineteenth century only about 8 to 10 percent of the Empire’s population of about sixty million was living in cities.¹²⁰ In the vast countryside, millions of serf-peasants, tied to their own villages and to estates belonging to nobles or to the state, labored mainly to grow grain crops. Two systems of landlord/serf relations prevailed, often combined in one estate or intermixed in one locale, but also to a certain extent regionally differentiated. In the fertile black-soil provinces, serfs performed *barshchina*, or labor services on the lord’s *demesne* for one-half or more of each week. In the

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less fertile provinces, *obrok* quit-rents were more common, as they allowed the lords to share in the serfs' nonagricultural incomes from handicrafts or industrial labor.¹²¹

If part of the soil was infertile, the climate was invariably rigorous and unpredictable, and production organization and techniques were primitive. Agricultural technique was based upon the three-field system, scattered strip fields, communal tillage, few and scrawny work animals, and light tools. "Low yields and frequent crop failures were the not unexpected results of these many shortcomings."¹²² In fact, "estimates . . . for the first half of the nineteenth century show that yields were just about the same as they had been in the preceding century, and indeed as far back as the sixteenth century and probably even earlier."¹²³

Nevertheless, this was not a stagnant economy. True, techniques and yields-per-unit of land remained largely unchanged—except in certain newly settled areas in the south and southwest, where capitalist agriculture developed on estates employing wage laborers. Yet agricultural production kept pace through extensive growth as Russia's population nearly quadrupled between 1719 and 1858 (growing from roughly sixteen to sixty million).¹²⁴ Although over two-million square miles were annexed to the Empire, most of the population growth came from natural increase in the older areas of the realm. Plowlands were expanded in the black-earth provinces, and peasants in the non-black-earth areas supplemented their incomes through handicrafts production or employment in trade and industry.¹²⁵ Thus, while agriculture experienced extensive growth, handicraft and workshop industries proliferated throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. And commercial development occurred at both local and interregional levels.¹²⁶ Despite all of this, however, before the building of a rail network in the last third of the nineteenth century, transportation difficulties remained an insurmountable obstacle to any fundamental breakthrough to industrialization in a country so vast.¹²⁷

The Crimean Debacle and Reforms from Above

But industrialization *was* transforming the economies of Western Europe during the early nineteenth century, and its effects soon put Imperial Russia on the defensive in the vital international arenas of war and diplomacy. Given her geopolitical situation, a basic Russian interest was control of access to the Black Sea.¹²⁸ Not surprisingly, therefore, the chain of events that carried Imperial Russia from dominance in Europe after the revolutions of 1848 to disintegration and revolution in 1917 began with the Empire's ignominious defeat in the limited Crimean War of 1854–5. In this conflict over naval control of the Black Sea and influence in the waning Ottoman Empire, Russia faced France and England without the

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support of its former Austrian ally. Ultimately the war became focused on a siege of the Russian fort at Sevastopol in the Crimea. The Russian Black Sea fleet, consisting of “sailing vessels that were no match for the steam-driven warships of the powerful allied squadrons”¹²⁹ had to be scuttled at the entrance to the Bay of Sevastopol. Then, after months of a dogged defense by the forces on the spot, Sevastopol itself fell to the Anglo-France-Ottoman expeditionary force of seventy thousand. The peace settlement rolled back Russian influence in the Near East and deprived the country of its naval presence in the Black Sea:

Russia’s position in Europe was changed . . . In 1815 Russia appeared the strongest single power on the Continent . . . After 1848 she seemed far to have outdistanced the other land Powers: Russian primacy had turned into Russia domination. The Crimean War reduced Russia to one among several Great Powers . . . As long as a Tsar ruled in St. Petersburg, Russia never regained the eminence of 1815.¹³⁰

Yet defeat for Russia in the Crimean War had even more important effects upon internal politics, for it highlighted the inadequacies of the Imperial system resting on serf-based, preindustrial society. In the words of Alexander Gerschenkron:

The Crimean War imparted a severe blow to the serene image of Russia’s strength. It revealed Russian inferiority in many crucial respects. The Russian men-of-war were no match for the English and French navies, and their conversion into submarine reefs was the only use to which they could be effectively put; the primitive Russian rifle was primarily accountable for the loss of the crucial battle of Alma; the supplies of men and ammunition to the besieged Sebastopol were hindered by the poverty of the transportation system. In the minds of the emperor and the higher bureaucracy, the course of the war and its outcome left the feeling that once more the country had been allowed to lag too far behind the advanced nations of the West. Some degree of modernization . . . was indispensable for regaining a strong military position.¹³¹

As before in Russian history, the sense of military backwardness spurred a series of reforms spearheaded from above by Imperial officials backed by the tsar. The conscious aim was to reshape—“liberalize”—Russian society just enough so that it might better support the Great Power mission of the state, yet not so much as to cause any politically dangerous instability. The first round of reforms, formulated and implemented during the generation after the Crimean War, included the establishment of a modern judicial system, the introduction of universal military service and the extension of professional officer training, and the creation of *zemstvo* representative assemblies and municipal *dumas* with very carefully circumscribed powers of local self-government.¹³² But the most important reform of all was the

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Emancipation of millions of Russian serfs, a process initiated, according to the first in a series of tsarist decrees, in 1861.

As with the other reforms enacted by Alexander II in the immediate wake of the Crimean debacle, the intent of the Emancipation was more to liberate social energies in a manner consistent with the stability and military effectiveness of the Imperial state rather than directly to promote economic development.¹³³ For one thing, juridical equality for the peasantry was prerequisite for the establishment of a modern army of "citizen" conscripts. Moreover, there was a very real fear of serf revolts, whose incidence had increased during and after the Crimean War. Tsar Alexander declared that it was "better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until it will begin to abolish itself from below."¹³⁴ Thus he overrode the clear opposition of the majority of noble estate owners and required them to accept the legal emancipation of the serfs. The landowners were also required to assign to the peasants the legal ownership of substantial portions of the agricultural land that most nobles tended to regard as completely their own property.

Here let us pause to place these Russian events of the 1850s and 1860s in comparative perspective. From such a perspective it seems thoroughly unsurprising that the humiliating effects of military defeat at the hands of more economically developed nations precipitated a crisis for the Russian Imperial state and prodded it to institute modernizing reforms. What does seem surprising, however, is that these reforms—including especially the Emancipation, which directly violated the established economic interests of the landed nobility—were *successfully implemented* by the Imperial authorities. To be sure, opposition was voiced by dominant-class interests, both to the content of the post-Crimean reforms and to the autocratic and bureaucratic modes of their formulation and implementation.¹³⁵ But, whereas dominant class opposition to monarchical reform efforts actually succeeded in deposing autocracy and dissolving the Imperial state systems in France in 1787–9 and China in 1911, no such thing happened in mid-nineteenth-century Russia. To understand why not, we must look at the situation of the Russian landed nobility.

The Weakness of the Landed Nobility

Sandwiched between the mildly commercialized serf economy and the Imperial state was the Russian landed nobility. Like the French proprietary upper class and the Chinese gentry, this Russian dominant class appropriated surpluses both directly from the peasantry and indirectly through remuneration for services to the state. But in sharp contrast to the French and Chinese dominant classes, the Russian landed nobility was economically weak and politically dependent vis-à-vis Imperial authorities.

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Even before Peter the Great, the status of the Russian nobility and the intergenerational continuity of the wealth of individual families had been virtually completely dependent upon service to the tsars.¹³⁶ Serfdom in Russia was consolidated not by commercializing landlords (as in much of Eastern Europe after 1400) but rather under the impetus of centralizing tsars determined to extract from the people sufficient resources to support military forces for defense and expansion in threatening geopolitical environments.¹³⁷ Traditionally footloose Russian peasants had to be tied to the land if they were to be kept at work producing taxable surpluses; concomitantly, the tsars needed military officers and officials to man the state organizations required for external warfare and internal social control. Over a period of centuries the lands of independent nobles and princes were expropriated and passed out as rewards for official careers to a new class of service nobles. As this happened, the tsars took pains to ensure that no new groupings of independent landed aristocrats could arise. Service nobles were given rights to serf "souls" and to landed estates. Yet typically, their possessions were not concentrated in one locality or even one province, but were scattered over different regions of the empire. Under these conditions, local and regional solidarity among nobles could hardly develop.

Peter the Great carried this state of affairs to its logical extreme: He made lifelong military or civil service careers mandatory for every adult male noble. Compelled to permanent service, shunted about at central commands from assignment to assignment and from region to region, the nobles became an aggregate completely dependent upon the state. Solidarity ties to provinces and home estates were further weakened. "Consciously or vicariously, they assimilated the militaristic, bureaucratic, and global point of view that dominated Russian public life."¹³⁸ Service became "the basic normative framework for individual and social relationships, and . . . service rank became the only recognized form of noble status."¹³⁹

During the eighteenth century Russian nobles were finally released from lifelong state service, and their private-property rights were fully and officially confirmed. The new freedom to retire from service posts led to some regeneration of social and cultural life in the provinces. Nevertheless, the situation of the nobles did not change much.¹⁴⁰ Now increasingly oriented to Western European upper-class life styles, the Russian nobles still gravitated toward state employments as the one sure site of opportunities to reside in the cities and to earn salaries and rewards to supplement the very meager incomes that most obtained from the serf estates, which were subdivided in each generation. Even if the nobles had been culturally prepared to plunge into agricultural management, the Russian agrarian economy provided (throughout most of the country) little incentive for such an alternative way of life. What is more, Russian serf-owners had little to

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invest in agriculture (or any other economic ventures), because they were quite poor by European standards. Approximately four-fifths of them (83 percent in 1777; 84 percent in 1834; 78 percent in 1858) owned fewer than one-hundred (adult male serf) "souls"—the minimum deemed necessary to support a cultivated life-style.¹⁴¹ And in the struggle to maintain a suitable standard of living, the serf owners had not only flocked into state employments but had also sunk themselves into ever-worsening indebtedness—partly to private financiers, but mainly to the state. Thus, by 1860, 66 percent of all serfs were "mortgaged" by their noble owners to special state credit institutions.¹⁴²

Ironically, though, as the serf-owning nobility continued to depend upon the Imperial state, the autocracy became less dependent upon the landed nobility. Peter the Great had opened a clear path of upward mobility into noble statuses for literate commoners who served the civil bureaucracy.¹⁴³ Inexorably, the recruitment of nonnobles from ecclesiastical and urban families produced a stratum of service nobles divorced from the land, even while burgeoning numbers of families of educated nonnoble government workers supplied ever more bureaucratic aspirants. In consequence, a recent quantitative study concludes that

by the end of the eighteenth century the civil bureaucracy in the central agencies, and by the 1850s in the provinces also, was an essentially self-perpetuating group. Recruits came from a nobility that was in large measure divorced from the land, and from among the sons of nonnoble government workers (military, civil, and ecclesiastical).¹⁴⁴

University education and willingness to commit oneself to a lifelong career were the keys to success in state service. Landed wealth seems to have mattered only insofar as it facilitated these, and it was by no means the only way.

Lack of serfs was not a barrier to bureaucratic success in the mid-nineteenth century. Of the total noble group [of officials studied] nearly 50 percent had no serfs at all in their families . . . It is particularly important that the serfless nobles were by no means confined to the lower ranks. Even at the top over 40 percent of the nobles serving had no serfs at all in their family.¹⁴⁵

The upshot of the foregoing conditions taken together was that Russian nobles had little independent class- or estate-based political power. Nobles in the provinces were, if they stayed there long, poor, restless, and deferential to state officials. Their corporate institutions performed only social and cultural functions. Meanwhile, in the state service, old-line nobles competed for vital career advancement with the ennobled and the aspirants to service nobility. Promotions came through royal approval or rigid adherence to commands and routines. Collective policy initiatives or protests were neither encouraged nor facilitated. In contrast to *ancien régime* France,

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there were no well-established representative bodies, quasi-political corporations, or venal offices to afford leverage to the dominant class within the Imperial state structure. In this respect Russia was more like Imperial China (before 1908). Yet even when the Chinese Imperial system was at its height, the gentry had enjoyed much more political power and independence at local levels than did the Russian nobility. And nothing comparable to the growth in China after 1840 of local and provincial gentry power occurred at any point in old-regime Russia. Whether landlords, or officials, or both (and this overlapping category was shrinking), nobles in Imperial Russia enjoyed little autonomous, collective political power. They depended instead upon their individual relations with the centralized machinery of the state, and upon the generalized commitment of the autocracy to the stability of the existing status order.

Against this background we can complete our analysis of the Emancipation of the serfs. Clearly, the weakness of the Russian landed nobility explains why this class was unable to prevent the Emancipation, much less to bring down the autocratic-imperial political system in the name of an aristocratic or liberal "constitutionalist" program. Had the Russian landed nobility possessed economic strength and political-administrative leverage vis-à-vis the Imperial state at all comparable to the strength and leverage of the French and Chinese dominant classes, then quite possibly a revolutionary political crisis might have emerged in Russia in the 1860s. Instead, the tsarist autocracy actually succeeded in pushing through the reforms that it undertook in the aftermath of the humiliating Crimean defeat—including the reforms that ran significantly counter to the economic interests and social prerogatives of the serf-owning nobility.¹⁴⁶

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that, because the Russian landed nobility could not effectively take the political offensive against reforming autocracy, it therefore had no effect upon the contours of the Emancipation settlement. Actually the landed nobility did end up exerting considerable influence, specifically in the process of policy implementation. This happened because of the landed nobility's sheer existence as the serf-owning dominant class, and because of the inherent limitations placed upon the effective power of the Imperial state, given its existing institutional relationship to the rural class structure.

As we have already noted, the autocracy's prime goal in liberating the serfs was to stabilize Imperial rule. Consequently, the tsar and his officials decided not only to grant personal, legal "freedom" to the peasants but also to assign them the ownership of considerable amounts of the lands they worked.¹⁴⁷ To leave the ex-serfs without property, it was felt, would guarantee rebellions and the equally abhorred disorders of sudden and massive proletarianization. But who would decide how much (and which) lands to give to the ex-serfs? Policy-implementation mechanisms had to be

arrived at for apportioning properties between nobles and peasants locality by locality and estate by estate. Because, historically, Imperial jurisdiction stopped just outside the doors of the noble-owned serf estates—with the nobles or their agents left responsible for maintaining order and collecting taxes—only the nobles and their agents possessed the detailed knowledge of the structure and workings of the serf economy that was essential for the implementation of the Emancipation in many localities. Inevitably, therefore, committees of nobles were entrusted by the Imperial authorities with working out the exact apportionment of lands to their ex-serfs.¹⁴⁸ Naturally, this arrangement ensured that the nobles would be able to maximize their own interests within the bounds of the overall Emancipation decrees. And this they did. In fertile regions, the peasants were left with minimal lands, whereas in the less fertile zones they were forced to pay redemption on maximal holdings. Moreover, everywhere the peasants tended to be cut off from access to crucial resources such as water or grazing lands or woods, which they subsequently had to rent from their former masters.

Implemented thus within the confines of the existing agrarian class relations, the Emancipation reforms could not—and did not—clear the way for the sudden modernization of Russian agriculture.¹⁴⁹ For the peasants were left with insufficient lands subject to crushing redemption payments, which had to be paid to the government over many decades. And the nobles were hardly spurred to invest in the modernization of agriculture, because they were left with legal possession of about 40 percent of the land and with access to cheap labor, whereas most of their financial-redemption windfall (paid to the nobles by the state) went to pay off previously accumulated indebtedness (mostly to the state itself). What the Emancipation unquestionably did accomplish was to give the Imperial state a more direct and exclusive role in controlling the peasantry and appropriating revenues from agriculture. The landed nobility was shoved aside by the tsarist regime. But, although significantly weakened by the Emancipation and its aftereffects, the landlords were left in place as the dominant class in a largely stagnant agrarian economy. Consequently, that economy could serve as a drag on subsequent Imperial efforts to promote economic development. And the landed nobles remained as a potential target for peasant revolts.

Finally, it should be noted that the Russian nonofficial nobility, including those who still were landlords, remained quite politically impotent vis-à-vis the autocracy after the 1860s. This was true despite the formation, as part of the reforms of the decade, of *zemstvos*—local and provincial representative bodies to which nobles enjoyed disproportionate electoral access. At best the *zemstvos* established a foothold in local social and cultural affairs through the provision on a very restricted fiscal basis of

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educational, welfare, and advisory–economic services. But this service sector controlled by elected governing bodies grew up alongside, not within, the hierarchy of societal political power. For the Imperial authorities retained a monopoly of administration and coercion and continued to tax away most of the agricultural surplus; and the *zemstvos* were tolerated by the Imperial bureaucracy only to the extent that they did not challenge central controls and policy-making prerogatives.¹⁵⁰

The contrast to what happened when upper-class–dominated representative assemblies were established in China (1908–10) is interesting and enlightening. There the gentry already had great *de facto* administrative and military influence, whereas the Imperial authorities were financially weak and lacked effective central controls. Thus the new assemblies served to give collective political expression to the power already enjoyed by the dominant class in China. But in old-regime Russia, the autocracy was in such a strong position that it could effectively create the thoroughly circumscribed representative organs that the Manchus had intended, but failed, to establish in China. The Russian *zemstvos* (and municipal *dumas*) did not become politically threatening to the autocracy until 1905, when the state temporarily faltered during a losing war. Until then (and again after 1906), the Imperial state retained the power and initiative to squeeze and significantly remake Russian society, even to the further detriment of the interests of the nobility.

State-Guided Industrialization

After the post-Crimean modernizing reforms, the next major initiative of the Russian state was a remarkable effort to spur industrialization from above—but this did not come until after some initial experiments with *laissez-faire* capitalist policies. During the 1860s and 1870s, Russia was opened wide to foreign trade and investments on the theory that it could acquire modern industrial and transportation materials and techniques from abroad in exchange for stepped-up agricultural exports.¹⁵¹ Railroad mileage was steadily, if slowly, expanded, largely through the efforts of private entrepreneurs, foreign and domestic. But the steel used was made with imported materials, so that “Russian mining and metallurgy got little encouragement.”¹⁵² Meanwhile agricultural productivity stagnated, while international prices for grain dropped, and Russia’s foreign indebtedness and needs for imports grew. War (i.e., the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–8) and military preparations (i.e., the Bulgarian Crisis of 1886) continued to gobble up government revenues. At the same time, the peasant taxpayers’ ability to pay was strained to the utmost, leading to widespread famines in 1891.¹⁵³ Clearly, the glory of the Russian state required yet another strategy.

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That came in the 1890s under a minister of finance, Sergei Witte, who firmly believed that “the political strength of the great powers which are called to fulfill great historical tasks in the world” rested directly upon relative industrial power. “International competition does not wait,” Witte warned Tsar Nicholas II in 1900:

If we do not take energetic and decisive measures so that in the course of the next decades our industry will be able to satisfy the needs of Russia and of the Asiatic countries which are—or should be—under our influence, then . . . it is possible that the slow growth of our industries will endanger the fulfillment of the great political tasks of the monarchy. Our economic backwardness may lead to political and cultural backwardness as well.¹⁵⁴

Witte proposed a crash governmental program to promote national industrialization. His “System” of policies, implemented fully during his tenure as minister of finance from 1892 to 1903, involved heavy government expenditures for railroad building and operation; subsidies and supporting services for private industrialists; high protective tariffs for Russian industries (especially for the heavy industries and mines whose products were purchased for railroad building and military modernization); increased exports; stable currency; and encouragement of foreign investments. Government expenditures to spur industrialization were paid for with stepped-up regressive indirect taxes on articles of mass consumption, and by foreign loans (which had to be dependably repaid).¹⁵⁵

In absolute terms, this venture in rapid state-guided capitalist development was brilliantly successful.¹⁵⁶ During the 1890s Russian industrial growth averaged 8 percent per year. Railroad mileage grew from a very substantial base by 40 percent between 1892 and 1902; the interior communications of European Russia were greatly intensified and the link to Siberia completed. Stimulated in turn, Russian heavy industries—mining, iron and steel, and petroleum—mushroomed, built with huge plants and the latest European technology. Light industries also expanded, though less spectacularly, for of course industrialization was not based upon mass-market demand. Concurrently, Witte managed to more than double government tax receipts and to stabilize the currency by introducing the gold standard. Agricultural “surpluses” were squeezed from the peasants and marketed abroad to finance purchases of foreign technology and to maintain the balance of payments. All of this, finally, set the stage for continued rapid industrial growth (averaging 6 percent per year) between 1906 and 1913, when, in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, the state was in a weaker position for taking the investment initiative.

Nevertheless, by virtue of both its achievements and its limitations, rapid industrialization in turn-of-the-century Russia set the stage for two revolutions—one ultimately a failure in 1905, the other a success in 1917.

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Partly it did this by creating new classes and exacerbating social tensions. The overall picture is well sketched by Arthur Mendel:

Besides dangerously concentrating a proletariat, a professional class, and a rebellious student body in the centers of political power, industrialization infuriated both these new forces and the traditional rural classes. It radically displaced the intensely status-conscious gentry and oppressed the peasantry through forced exports, monopoly prices, and regressive taxation that ultimately paid the bill of modernization. It furthered in all segments of society the painful collapse of old roles, values, motivations, and expectations . . . It left no money to ameliorate the deplorable urban conditions into which the already distressed and disoriented peasantry flocked in quickly disillusioned hope of something better.¹⁵⁷

Specifically, as future events would demonstrate, the most important domestic change during the last decades of the Old Regime was the rapid formation of an industrial proletariat.¹⁵⁸ Numerically small within the total Russian population, this class was nevertheless disproportionately concentrated both in large-scale industrial enterprises and in major industrial centers, including, fatefully enough, the capital cities of European Russia—St. Petersburg and Moscow. The new proletarians were suddenly, recently, and often incompletely separated from the peasant villages. At the very first, perhaps, the newness of their exposure to the urban-industrial environment made it difficult for recent recruits to protest—though the ex-peasants may also have carried native-village traditions of collective solidarity and resistance into the factories. In any event, before long, cohorts of industrial workers gained experience and a sense of identity in the industrial world. And the conditions they faced—economic privation, lack of social services, and (nearly continuous) tsarist prohibitions against legal labor unions—certainly provided reasons enough for the industrial workers to become, as they did after 1890, increasingly prone to strike and receptive to the antiautocratic and anticapitalist ideas of radical political parties. Rapid industrialization thus created a formidable popular force capable of opposing both the Imperial state and the capitalist captains of industry whose activities the state so fervently encouraged.

Equally if not even more important, however, were the international implications of Russian industrialization. For one thing, the processes of financing rapid industrialization tied the Russian state and economy more closely to Western Europe. To supplement the weak capacities of the native bourgeoisie, foreign private investors were officially encouraged to invest in industries behind the tariff wall. Foreign capital invested in (mostly heavy-industrial) firms in Russia grew from 215 million rubles in 1890 to 911 million in 1900, to over 2 billion by 1914.¹⁵⁹ “In 1900 there were 269 foreign companies in Russia of which only 16 had existed before

1888. French and Belgian capital was mostly in the southern metallurgical industry and mines, British in petroleum, and German in chemicals and electrical engineering.”¹⁶⁰ At the same time, to pay for imports of industrial equipment and to maintain the balance of international payments upon which depended currency stability and investor confidence, Russia relied upon agricultural exports, mostly to England and Germany.¹⁶¹ And to help finance government investments in industry (which exceeded even the massive foreign investments), the tsarist regime depended upon loans brokered in Germany, England, and, above all, France.¹⁶² The amounts involved were very great:

The national debt . . . [grew] almost in step with the rising national income . . . By 1913 . . . Russia stood second among the nations of the world in absolute amount of national debt. In amount of payments per year on service of the debt, however, Russia was first . . . The amount of Russian debt held abroad slightly exceeded the amount held at home.¹⁶³

So closely, therefore, was the Russian economy tied to European finance that when, in 1899–1900, the Western money markets contracted, Russian industry, which had grown so rapidly in the 1890s, plunged into a crisis deeper and more prolonged than the recession that concurrently struck Western European industry.¹⁶⁴ This setback “aggravated the discontent throughout society in the five years or so preceding the Revolution of 1905.”¹⁶⁵

Was late Imperial Russia, then, a semicolony of Western Europe? A case can be made for this view. After all, she imported Western technology and surplus capital in return for primary exports and interest payments. At the same time, native consumption was squeezed to maintain the trade balance and the gold standard. Moreover, Russian political alliances came to favor her main creditors, France and England. On the other hand, in per capita terms, Russian foreign indebtedness was less than that of Sweden or the United States.¹⁶⁶ And investigators have failed to find that foreign firms or investors sought control in addition to profits, or that government officials in either Russia or Western Europe regarded the tsarist state as dependent by virtue of her economic ties.¹⁶⁷ In any case, those ties extended to Germany as well.

Rather, it makes more sense to assume that Russia continued to operate as a competing Great Power in the European states system. Russian alliances leading into World War I can be explained perfectly well on that basis. During much of the nineteenth century, Russia was loosely allied with Prussia and Austria-Hungary, and diplomacy could be relied upon to protect Russian interests. Then came the unification and rapid industrialization of Imperial Germany—an occurrence that unsettled European diplomacy and threatened Russia (and especially its interest in the Balkans,

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as Germany gradually slid into an Austrian alliance). It was, therefore, well within the logic of the European "balance of power" that Russia was "pushed . . . toward a Western alliance which put the security of her Western frontiers on a military rather than a political footing."¹⁶⁸

This is not at all meant to imply that late Imperial Russian economic development was not fraught with serious international political implications—just that the most important effects had to do with Russian *capacities* to meet international military competition. For despite the impressive record of industrial expansion after 1880, especially in heavy industry, Russian economic development left the country still very far behind other nations with which it had to deal diplomatically and, potentially, militarily. By the eve of World War I, for instance, real income per capita in Russia was still only one-third that of the United Kingdom and the United States.¹⁶⁹ Even more telling is the fact that, although Russia's average rate of growth in terms of real income per capita was between 1860 and 1913 about equal to the European-wide average, it nevertheless fell considerably below the 2½ percent rate in the United States, the 2 percent rate in Germany, and the 3 percent rate for Japan (1878–1912).¹⁷⁰ Clearly Russia "failed to catch up economically with the western world and even fell farther behind its leaders."¹⁷¹

The decisive problem was the low level of real growth in agriculture—which remained the preponderant sector of the Russian economy. Even the extraordinary and disproportionate expansion of heavy industry after 1890 could not make up for the backwardness of Russian agriculture. Thus Witte's program of forced industrialization failed to achieve the strategic objective of international parity that had motivated the tsar to back it in the first place, even as it reinforced social tendencies at home hostile to continued absolutist rule.¹⁷²

The Impact of Wars

By the turn of the twentieth century, then, the stage was set for a revolutionary crisis precisely because Imperial Russia remained "a Great Power set, as part of its harsh destiny, into the crosscurrents of European and global power politics" even as its economic development lagged.¹⁷³ Born and tempered in warfare, insulated from, and supreme against, the forces of society, the Russian state could only succumb through massive defeat in total war. Thus World War I was to be a necessary cause—as well as the occasion—of the revolutionary crisis that brought Imperial Russia to its demise.

To see exactly why, it is most instructive to contrast February 1917 with the failed Russian Revolution of 1905. Trotsky once called 1905 a "dress rehearsal" for 1917. Indeed virtually the same social and political forces took part in both dramas. And yet the plots were very different. Isaac

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Deutscher is really closer to the truth when he suggests that in 1917 the revolution "started again from the points at which it had come to a standstill in 1905. . . . The 'constitutionalist' phase of the revolution had actually been played out before 1917."¹⁷⁴

The 1905 "Revolution" resembled that of 1917 in that it came in the midst of a losing war. Thinking to combine semicolonial acquisitions in the Far East with the diversion of internal unrest in what Minister of the Interior Viacheslav von Plehve supposed would be a "victorious little war," the tsarist regime went to war with Japan in 1904. But as the Imperial army and navy reeled from defeat to defeat, a revolutionary movement encompassing all classes of society gathered momentum at home. Representing landowners, professionals, and bourgeois, the All-Russian Zemstvo Congress demanded (in November 1904) civil liberties, legal equality for all classes and nationalities, and a national, representative, legislative assembly—in effect, a liberal constitutional monarchy. A mounting wave of industrial strikes voiced economic demands and supported the political movement against autocracy. Naval units rose in the famous Potemkin Mutiny of June 1905. The climax came in October 1905 with a rail strike, which turned into a general political strike. In the face of all this—seemingly a very Western-style social revolution indeed—the tsar retreated: Civil liberties and a legislative Duma based on a wide franchise were granted in the October Manifesto.¹⁷⁵

Yet the Revolution of 1905 was rolled back and defeated by 1907. Why? The reason was starkly simple. With short-term defeat apparent and revolution threatening, the regime quickly concluded the war with Japan. The Peace of Portsmouth was signed in September 1905, leaving the Imperial army in Manchuria in a position to be redisciplined and then selectively reintroduced into turbulent European Russia.¹⁷⁶ Clearly the Revolution of 1905, and the labor and agrarian unrest that continued into 1906, went as far as they did not only because war aggravated social tensions and because defeats disillusioned the upper classes but also because during 1905 "European Russia was largely denuded of troops."¹⁷⁷ But that was a temporary condition that tsardom could readily correct given the limited and peripheral nature of the Russo-Japanese conflict. Thus as the troops came home to crush strikes and agrarian revolts and arrest troublesome political leaders, Nicholas II rolled back his constitutional concessions one by one, until absolutism was, in substance, fully restored. For him the Revolution of 1905 became a "passing squall."¹⁷⁸

World War I created a very different situation. This conflict engulfed the whole of the European states system. Russia could neither remain aloof nor withdraw at will once the war was underway. "The Russian decision to mobilize in 1914 was a direct response to Austria's military action against Serbia and to the threat to Russian territory which Germany's

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support of Austria posed.”¹⁷⁹ Once France and Britain had entered the war, they depended upon the cooperation of their ally. Imperial Russia was condemned to a protracted confrontation with formidable Germany.

The inexorable consequences for the Imperial regime were military defeats and economic and administrative chaos. These in turn gave rise to the revolutionary crisis. Objective conditions allowed no other outcome. From 1914 to 1917 Russia mobilized fifteen-million men for its armies, but the country lacked the economic infrastructure to support their efforts against Germany. (Substantial victories were gained only against Austro-Hungarian and Turkish forces.)

At the beginning of the war Russian infantry divisions had only half as many light artillery batteries as German divisions. The discrepancy of heavy batteries was worse: The Russian army had 60, to 381 for the Germans. As for ammunition, the annual output of state factories was 600,000 rounds, whereas the annual requirement during the war quickly became seventy times that. Private industries were ill-equipped to convert to munitions production, and did so only very slowly. As early as the fifth month of the war the army was acutely short of munitions; many front-line soldiers went into battle without rifles. Only by 1917 was Russia producing enough weapons— though failing to keep up with technological innovations by the enemy.¹⁸⁰

By then, however, Russian armies had suffered repeated massive defeats at the hands of the Germans. Millions of men had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, and a large proportion of the original professional officer corps had been wiped out. The officers could be replaced only by educated civilian reservists and promotions from the ranks. Fatefully, no longer was the tsarist army a professional organization segregated from society and led by staunch conservatives.¹⁸¹

Another fetter for Russia was the transportation system. Given the lack of good roads and the insufficiency of inland waterways, railroads were the key factor. But however fast and considerable the expansion of the Russian rail system since 1860 had been, by 1914 the density of the German system (miles of railroads to square miles of territory) was over ten times that of the Russian. In addition, the Russian rolling stock was technologically obsolete. Lacking air brakes, for example, freight cars had to move very slowly.¹⁸² This meant that support services (supplies and evacuations) for the armies on the fronts were hampered. It also meant that, in the rear, industrial production was curtailed and that the cities—swollen by increased numbers of military recruits, workers in war industries, and personnel for auxiliary services—were deprived of vital transportation services. “Hardest hit by the inadequacy of the railroad system were the large cities, where shortages of food, fuel, and raw materials became acute in the winter of 1916–17.”¹⁸³

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The Revolutionary Political Crisis of 1917

How did these conditions translate themselves into the revolutionary crisis? As the magnitude of Russian defeats (beginning from the spring of 1915) became apparent, the dominant strata steadily lost confidence in the tsar and autocracy. And as the strains imposed by the endless war persisted, the lower classes, suffering terribly, became war-weary and rebellious. Finally these social discontents—given new potency due to the breakdown under wartime conditions of the usual barriers between state organizations and social groups—crystallized in the cities of Russia to give political expression to the near-universal repudiation of the autocratic regime.

At the beginning of the war all politically articulate groups (except the Bolsheviks and a few Mensheviks) pledged “enthusiastic” support for the defense of “the Homeland.” As the difficulties of the war effort surfaced, the initial response of the privileged strata was to create committees and to extend existing representative and local organizations to provide maximum support for the army and administration. In August 1914, provincial *zemstvos* joined together to form the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos for the Relief of Sick and Wounded Soldiers, and the municipalities united to create the All-Russian Union of Towns. Receiving financial resources from the government, these organizations helped military authorities to maintain military hospitals and hospital trains and to supply the army with food and clothing. They also aided in the evacuation of refugees, participated along with war-industries committees in the drive to mobilize private industries for war production, and did what they could to meet civilian needs. By 1915, close relations, institutionalized in special councils, had been established among the heads of these voluntary/representative organizations, Duma members, and the ministers and bureaucrats of the autocracy.¹⁸⁴

The main significance of this *rapprochement* between the state and privileged society turned out to be political. For although some headway was made in meeting the immediate needs of the army for supplies and services, even this fusion of bureaucracy and voluntary organizations could not overcome the basic difficulties. Defeats at the front and “the creeping disorganization of economic life on the home front” continued.¹⁸⁵ Partly in response to these realities, and partly in response to the peculiar behavior of Tsar Nicholas in the crisis (for, while continuing to assert his absolute authority, he narrowed his contacts to his German wife, to the bizarre Rasputin, and to a court clique of formerly pro-German arch-conservatives), a reformist political program was formulated by the majority of the Duma, supported by the *zemstvos*, towns, and committees. In August 1915 it was demanded of the tsar that he appoint only ministers enjoying “public confidence” and the support of legislative institutions, and that he implement liberal measures of conciliation toward national minorities and

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trade unions. Perhaps because they had been brought by the war into ever closer working relations with the "constitutional liberals," many ministers, state bureaucrats, and army officers supported these very moderate demands. But Nicholas would not sacrifice the autocratic principle: and so upper- and middle-class civilian and official disgust with him grew. Public criticism flourished especially because it could be couched in nationalistic terms, deploring the mismanagement of the war effort for which the tsar and his coterie were held responsible as convenient scapegoats. Still more ominous for Nicholas, talk of a possible coup d'état spread within the officer corps, swollen with recently promoted or recruited members.

Yet—fearful of popular explosions, and perhaps realizing that they could not in fact handle the wartime difficulties any better with the tsar gone—the privileged strata held back. They never acted decisively to change the regime. When the tsar prorogued Dumas, they obeyed. Instead, in February 1917, when bad weather exacerbated delays in the supply of food to the city, the workers and soldiers of Petrograd toppled the moribund autocracy from below. Indeed:

The collapse of the Romanov autocracy in March 1917 was one of the most leaderless, spontaneous, anonymous revolutions of all time . . . No one, even among the revolutionary leaders, realized that the strikes and bread riots which broke out in Petrograd on March 8 would culminate in the mutiny of the garrison and the overthrow of the government four days later.¹⁸⁶

To be sure, the insurgents of Petrograd benefited from the initial acquiescence of the privileged strata and the supreme army command at the front in the abolition of tsardom.¹⁸⁷ Yet links were forming between workers and the army rank and file that would soon nullify any attempted upper-class resistance. For the garrisons of the cities in the rear—including the crucial Petrograd garrison—were swollen with recent recruits apprehensive about going to the front and directly familiar with the circumstances of the civilian workers suffering from skyrocketing prices and shortages of basic necessities.¹⁸⁸ Thus, when an industrial shutdown and demonstrations on International Women's Day coincided in Petrograd to produce swelling protests generously leavened with calls for the overthrow of the autocracy, it was not too difficult for fraternizing demonstrators to convince police and army units not to fire upon them. Once the initial rebellion was underway, it spread irrepressibly from military unit to military unit, from factory workers to railway men, from the capital of Petrograd to Moscow and to the provincial cities.¹⁸⁹

Suddenly the tsarist autocracy was gone, and the state rapidly disintegrated. After February, organized political forces in the capital and other cities, working through and around the new "Provisional Government," maneuvered to define and control the organs of a unified, liberal-

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democratic national government to replace the defunct autocracy. But in the immediate wake of the tsar's abdication, the rebellious military garrisons became virtually impossible to coordinate from above. And the Imperial administration soon became incapacitated and disorganized as soviets and other popular political organs competed with *dumas*, *zemstvos*, and the Provisional Government for authority over its various agencies and functions. Party rivalries in the cities only served to deepen and politicize the spreading chaos, which was also aggravated by the inexorably on-going war.¹⁹⁰

Meanwhile, revolts from below were gathering force—in the cities, at the fronts, and in the vast countryside. And without the protection of the Imperial administration and armies upon which they had always been so thoroughly dependent, the urban privileged strata and the landed nobility would be nakedly vulnerable to assaults from below. The result, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 6, was to be the most rapid and spontaneous overthrow of an established regime and dominant classes in the annals of modern revolutions.

Now that Bourbon France, Manchu China, and Romanov Russia have been analyzed in some detail, we can tentatively conclude that revolutionary political crises emerged in all three Old Regimes because agrarian structures impinged upon autocratic and proto-bureaucratic state organizations in ways that blocked or fettered monarchical initiatives in coping with escalating international military competition in a world undergoing uneven transformation by capitalism. In France and China, prosperous and politically powerful landed upper classes blocked even the initial progress of modernizing reforms. In Russia, a weak landed nobility could not block reforms from above. Yet the agrarian economy and class structure served as brakes upon state-guided industrialization, thus making it impossible for tsarist Russia to catch up economically and militarily with Imperial Germany, her chief potential enemy in the European states system. In all three cases, moreover, the ultimate effect of the impediments to state-sponsored reforms was the downfall of monarchical autocracy and the disintegration of the centralized administrative and military organizations of the state. Revolts from below might emerge and spread without the dominant classes having recourse to the accustomed backing of the autocratic-imperial states. Social revolutions were at hand.

JAPAN AND PRUSSIA AS CONTRASTS

The arguments presented here about the distinctive causes of revolutionary political crises in France, Russia, and China must stand or fall primarily according to how well they make sense of these three historical cases. Yet,

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in terms of the logic of comparative historical analysis, we can be more certain of the adequacy of these arguments if it can be demonstrated that the causes highlighted for France, Russia, and China also differentiate their patterns of societal development and crises from broadly similar patterns and crises in comparable countries that did not experience social-revolutionary transformations. For this purpose, comparisons to some of the conditions accompanying the Japanese Meiji Restoration of 1868–73 and the Prussian Reform Movement of 1807–15 are most enlightening. By asking why these political crises were not proto-social-revolutionary, rather preludes to effective structural reforms instituted from above, we can further validate by contrast the arguments about the distinctive causes of the social-revolutionary political crises. Comparisons of Prussia and Japan to France and China are especially appropriate, and these will be stressed in the following discussion. At the end of each section, though, relevant comparisons to Russia will also be made.

The Japanese Meiji Restoration

The Meiji Restoration of 1868–73 was a sudden and fundamental reorganization of the Japanese polity. A set of regionally based aristocratic governments constituting the *baku-han* system under the hegemony of the Tokugawa Shogunate was transformed into a bureaucratic and fully centralized national state focused on the Meiji Emperor.¹⁹¹ The Restoration set the stage for fundamental modernizing reforms administered from above by the Meiji oligarchs in the 1870s and 1880s—reforms that, in turn, rendered possible Japan's rapid industrialization and ascent into the ranks of major modern military powers.

Like the revolutionary political crises of Bourbon France and (especially) Manchu China, the crisis leading to the Meiji Restoration was triggered by foreign military pressures. After the arrival of Admiral Perry in 1853, there were recurrent intrusions by industrializing Western powers upon Tokugawa Japan's political sovereignty, forcing her to open ports to foreign emissaries and traders. Coming as they did at a time when the Tokugawa shogunal administration had become weakened relative to many *han* (provincial domains) administered by *daimyo* lords nominally vassals of the shogun in Edo, the foreign intrusions set off not only antiforeign movements but also struggles within Japan's political elite. The results, however, were in sharp contrast to political developments in the wake of internationally induced crises in France and China. Tokugawa Japan had a far less centralized structure of government than either Bourbon France or late Imperial China, so that there were seemingly ideal conditions for the success of would-be anticentralist movements. Nevertheless, the actual scenario of the Japanese Meiji Restoration

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was *not* (as in France and China) one of resistance against monarchical attempts at rationalizing reforms. Instead, noble leaders who came primarily from outlying and less privileged *han* carried through in 1868 a coup d'état at the center, replacing the Tokugawa Shogun with the emperor as head of state. They then used the military power of their native *han* along with the resources and prestige of the new central government to push through, step by step, a series of fundamental social and administrative changes. Aristocratic statuses and privileges were abolished, to make all citizens formally equal. And previously decentralized and fragmented administrative jurisdictions were superseded by a unified, centralized, and highly bureaucratic national government, which subsequently undertook further reforms from above, including state-promoted industrialization.

Why could the Japanese Meiji Restoration happen as it did? A key part of the explanation lies in the *absence* of a politically powerful landed upper class in Tokugawa Japan. We have noted that in old-regime France and China, economically prosperous landed upper classes had gained collective footholds within imperfectly bureaucratized imperial state organizations—footholds that they used to drain potential state revenues away from central control, and from which they could prevent the implementation of modernizing reforms that hurt their class interests. In Tokugawa Japan, too, there were landlords—families roughly comparable to landed gentry and rich peasants in China, in that they were economically prosperous and dominant in local villages and market towns.¹⁹² However, along with merchants, these landlords were excluded from extralocal levels of military and administrative power. For historically in Tokugawa Japan, there had developed a virtually complete bifurcation between private economic wealth and the administrative power of the shogun, the *daimyo*, and their numerous agents of the *samurai* caste. Wealth holders such as landlords and merchants were forbidden to bear arms and could hold governmental posts only at local levels, within their communities and under the strict supervision of *samurai* administrators.¹⁹³ Concomitantly, the Tokugawa regime, though imperfectly centralized, had achieved an extraordinarily high level of bureaucratic rationalization for a preindustrial and aristocratic regime. Within virtually all of the *han* domains, *samurai* agents of the lords had been, since the sixteenth century, separated from direct, personal ownership of lands and supervision of peasant communities and had been gathered together within urban garrisons and administrative centers. Excluded thus from control of the land, the *samurai* were rendered dependent upon stipend salaries paid through central treasuries. Gradually but inexorably they found themselves transformed from rude warriors into formally educated, and often specialized, officials, subject to tight and increasingly impersonal and meritocratic discipline in their assigned duties as administrators for the domains of the shogun and the *daimyo*.¹⁹⁴

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This remarkable bifurcation between landed—commercial wealth and bureaucratic political power that was built into the Tokugawa system helps to explain why the changes of the Meiji Restoration happened as they did in response to Western pressures on Japan. The men who led the Restoration were *samurai*.¹⁹⁵ Their access to administrative and military power in the “outer” *han* of Choshu and Satsuma provided them with independent resources to use against the Tokugawa Shogun. Yet because they were not landlords or closely tied to them, nothing prevented these men from pursuing national salvation for Japan through programs of political centralization. “Not being of a landed aristocracy, their ambitions could be met by success only in government service.”¹⁹⁶ And the same was true for many other members of the Tokugawa governing stratum, who either participated in the Meiji movement or acquiesced in its reforms in return for appointment to the new state offices that replaced those that were abolished.

It was also important that the struggles of the Restoration crisis could proceed within the ranks of the existing bureaucratic governing stratum, without at any point involving landed upper classes who possessed political power to resist state centralization. Such a politically powerful landed upper class simply did not exist in Tokugawa Japan. Thus, its resistance could not undermine autocratic political authority, challenge the existing state functions, and disorganize state controls over the lower strata, as the resistance of landed classes did in France and China. Rather in Japan, the political and administrative strata remained agreed on the continuation of routine fiscal and policing functions throughout the Restoration crisis.¹⁹⁷ Changes in the overall structure of the political regime were accomplished bit by bit by the Meiji reformers, working through the established structures and personnel. “While the shogunate and the *han* were abolished, it nevertheless proved possible to utilize many of the old channels of authority and much of the existing machinery of administration, and thus to satisfy modern needs with small incremental changes.”¹⁹⁸

Classes and groups formerly excluded from politics thus gained no new opportunities to intervene during the Restoration, which has been aptly described as a “revolution from above.”¹⁹⁹ Most crucially, although localized “peasant riots,” common enough prior to the mid-nineteenth century, continued to occur—and even became more frequent during and after the Restoration—no nationwide peasant rebellion contributed to the Meiji transformations. As Hugh Borton points out,

the Meiji Restoration developed independently of the peasants. The Restoration was directed against the danger of foreign pressure threatening the semicolonization of Japan and against the Tokugawa regime because of its inability to govern effectively. It was brought about by a coup d’etat within the Imperial Palace and the farmers found them-

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selves victims of changes engineered and perpetrated by members of the ruling class of warriors . . . The power to rule had shifted from one group of leading warriors (the Tokugawa) to the Emperor and the group of Western Clans which supported him. There was no overthrow of the ruling warrior class, no rise of the peasants to power and no radical change in their conditions.²⁰⁰

Non-*samurai* became involved in the Restoration only through carefully controlled military mobilizations. Moreover, when violent clashes did break out, they tended to happen after the fact of the changes they attempted to resist, and they involved rather small disaffected sections of the Tokugawa political elite. From the start the military forces loyal to the emperor had the technological edge, and they grew steadily stronger after 1868.²⁰¹

The Meiji Restoration—as a centralizing and nationalizing political revolution without landed upper-class obstruction and without class-based revolts from below—proved *possible* as a response to imperialist pressures on Japan precisely because the Tokugawa regime had already become so bureaucratized despite its imperfect centralization. Once foreign threats made state centralization mandatory for Japan's sovereign survival, sections of the Tokugawa governing elite could quickly accomplish a political transformation from within and above. And they could do this without destroying existing administrative arrangements or disturbing controls over the lower strata—exactly what the more complexly intertwined monarchical staffs and politically powerful landed classes in Bourbon France and Manchu China could not do.

Finally, what about the comparison of Japan to Tsarist Russia? In both Japan and Russia from the 1860s, autocratic political authorities managed, unlike those of Bourbon France and late Imperial China, to ride out internationally induced crises and to implement modernizing reforms from above. Significantly, though, the economic changes that transpired after the Restoration, propelled or encouraged by the Meiji regime, were much more successful in meeting the exigencies of Japan's international situation than the tsarist post-Crimean reforms and programs of state-guided industrialization were in meeting the exigencies of Russia's situation. A complete analysis of all of the reasons for Japan's rapid development after 1880 is beyond the scope of this discussion; nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Japan enjoyed advantages corresponding to disadvantages that have previously been emphasized for Russia.

For one thing, early-industrializing Japan was not fettered by a lagging agricultural sector. Structured very much as it had been in Tokugawa times before the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese agricultural sector was able, as the Russian was not, to increase its productivity very markedly between 1870 and 1920. To explain this fully, we would have to delve into the different production possibilities and requirements of riziculture

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versus bread-grain agriculture. For the fact is that Japanese agricultural development in both Tokugawa and Meiji times occurred without “modernized” inputs, through the more labor-intensive application and spread of traditional technologies. Population growth had not caught up with productivity increases in Tokugawa Japan, as it had in late Imperial China, and there was room for more growth along the same lines for a time after 1870.²⁰² As a result, Japanese agriculture not only provided exports (as did Russian agriculture, under unremitting pressure from the state) but also contributed investment resources (channeled through the state), food and manpower, and support for small-scale industries, to the first stages of Japanese industrialization. In large part because of its ability to rely upon such contributions from agriculture (and, indeed, from the traditional economic sector generally) the Meiji regime was able to avoid, as the tsarist regime could not, heavy reliance upon foreign investments and borrowing in its efforts to promote infrastructural and heavy-industrial development through state investments.²⁰³

Moreover, Japan enjoyed another advantage. After the successful consolidation of an autonomous national state in the Meiji Restoration, early-industrializing Japan did not face nearly so frustrating or threatening an international military environment as Tsarist Russia. Around the turn of the century, Japan fought two limited wars, one against China and the other against Russia. And as the victor in both conflicts, she avoided disruptions of defeat such as those that faced the tsarist authorities in 1905–6. Yet, of course, the key difference is that early-industrializing Japan was not fully involved in the European states system and, consequently, was never subjected to the terrible blows of any such prolonged and total modern war as World War I. Thus both sets of differences between Meiji Japan and post-Emancipation Tsarist Russia point to the lesser involvement of early-industrializing Japan in international relations that might have undermined her autonomy and stability. The early industrialization of Tsarist Russia, in contrast, only pulled her ever more deeply into such involvements, leading to the dissolution of the Imperial state in World War I.

The Prussian Reform Movement

Compared to the political transformations wrought in the Meiji Restoration, those involved in the Prussian Reform Movement of 1807–14 were slight indeed. The overall structure of Hohenzollern absolute monarchy remained essentially unchanged; the only significant modification “was the replacement of capricious royal rule by a more impersonal system of bureaucratic absolutism . . .”²⁰⁴ That is, the direct, personal, and dictatorial monopoly by the king over all policy initiatives and supervision of admin-

istrative and military affairs was replaced by a more flexible and professional system of de facto rule by “the legally regulated collective autocracy of the bureaucratic aristocracy, headed by a small elite of ministers and ministerial councilors responsible to their conscience and to . . . strong ‘prime ministers’ . . .”²⁰⁵ The occasion for this political modification was the advent of a succession of reforming ministers appointed and given unusually free rein by the Prussian king after his armies incurred disastrous defeats at the hands of Napoleon at Jena and Auerstadt in 1806. The reforming ministers, as they strengthened their own official positions within the absolute monarchy, simultaneously introduced a series of socio-economic and military reforms designed to revitalize the Prussian system: the abolition of status (*Stände*) monopolies on access to occupations and rights to own landed estates; the elimination of the personal disabilities of serfdom; and the institution of universal military conscription.²⁰⁶

Several things are remarkable about the Prussian Reform Movement: first, that the Prussian state survived to implement it at all; second, that the struggles involved remained entirely factional political intrigues within the governing class, “the internal affair of the upper ten thousand,”²⁰⁷ without involving the lower strata except as objects of manipulation; third, that resistance by landed nobles was limited and in considerable part overridden; and fourth, that merely a limited set of changes served so thoroughly to revitalize the Prussian state as to enable it to help defeat Napoleon after 1814, and thereafter to go on to take the lead in the unification of an industrializing Germany.

In 1806, the defeat of the Prussians and other German forces by Napoleon’s *grande armée* led to the occupation of many German territories (including for a time parts of East Prussia), to the formal loss of Prussian territories west of the Elbe, and to the imposition by France of crushing indemnities. Yet the Hohenzollern autocratic regime did not collapse, as did the Romanov regime in 1917 Russia. Both the battles and defeats were sudden, and quickly resolved, and considerations of the post-1806 power balance between France and Russia dictated that Prussia east of the Elbe should be left at peace and nominally independent.²⁰⁸ Thus the international pressures on Prussia in 1806, though great, were not as massive and unrelenting as those on Russia during World War I.

Once again, as with the Meiji Restoration, the immediately significant comparison is with France and China. Why could Prussian bureaucrats initiate reforms leading to only limited resistance, whereas comparable attempts by the Bourbon ministers in 1787–8 and the Manchus in 1905–11 precipitated revolutionary political crises? The answer is not quite so simple as in the case of Japan, because Prussia did have a landed upper class, the Junkers, many of whose members were officials in the army and civil administration.

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In fact it was precisely from some Junker landlords that there arose resistance to many reforms, and even political counterinitiatives calling—reminiscent of the French nobility in 1787–8—for the establishment of representative estates to share governing with the monarch. But the effectiveness of Junker resistance was limited (like that of the Russian nobility against the post-Crimean reforms) to modifying the implementation of decrees freeing the serfs. Readily overridden or ignored by the reforming ministers were any complaints against the removal of status restrictions on estate ownership and occupations, as well as reactionary demands for reinstitution of *Ständestaat* government (monarchy checked by decentralized noble assemblies).²⁰⁹ Clearly the French privileged strata had much more leverage against the Bourbon monarchy, as did the Chinese gentry against the Manchus in 1911. What, then, made Prussia different, even though it too was a regime based on a political alliance between a landed upper class and a royal autocracy?

“The uniqueness, the extraordinary strength . . . [of] Prussia lay in the fusion of the economic and military power of its nobility with the order, system and efficiency of its bureaucracy.”²¹⁰ Here was an agrarian state in which the landed nobility retained complete political control at local levels, yet participated only as an aggregate of manipulable and disciplined individuals in the royal military and administrative machineries that knit provinces together into the kingdom. In the French and Chinese systems, wealthy upper-class individuals *and groups* were allowed to infiltrate the middle and upper reaches of royal administrations; and they gained formally recognized rights to impede centrally coordinated administrative functions. But this could not and did not happen in Prussia, “the classic country of monarchical autocracy.”²¹¹

The old saying that Prussia was not a country with an army, but an army with a country, suggests the reason why. From the mid-seventeenth through the eighteenth century, a succession of Hohenzollern kings, intent upon making their dynasty a recognized power in European politics, forged an extraordinarily disciplined and efficient administrative machine. This machine was meant solely to unify and exploit financially a diverse collection of dynastically inherited and noncontiguous territories, including primarily relatively poor ones east of the Elbe River.²¹² The first crucial steps were taken by the Great Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg in the 1650s and '60s, when he built up a standing army and used it to clip the powers of the noble-dominated representative estates that had previously administered the disparate Hohenzollern territories and controlled financial grants to kings. The successors of the Great Elector went on to develop an administration modeled on military principles of organization, which was designed to squeeze out every possible penny “to support the army of a first-rate power on the resources of a third-rate state . . .”²¹³

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In the Prussian administration, unlike the French, the number of officials was kept to a minimum, and no significant offices were for sale. Taxes were not “farmed out” to independent enterprisers but collected by officials who were held strictly accountable under a surprisingly modern system of annual budgetary controls. Officials were not allowed to exercise personal judgment or initiative but were kept under tight, multiple, and continuously documented controls by peers and superiors, with lines of information and initiative converging only on the king himself.²¹⁴ Although the Prussian bureaucracy employed mainly nobles from landed upper-class backgrounds, there were no corporate groups such as the French *parlements* ensconced in the Prussian administration, and officials had no property in office. Indeed, they did not even possess security in office: At the slightest suspicion of an official’s corruption or disobedience, the king could, and often did, dismiss, imprison, and even execute the person in question. “The bureaucrat was the galley slave of the state . . . The entire bureaucratic mechanism was based on the assumption that no official could be trusted any further than the keen eyes of his superiors could reach.”²¹⁵

Then too, by 1740, the “Prussian crown had stripped its nobility of the last remnants of political power in the provinces”²¹⁶—something that neither the French Bourbons nor the Manchus in China accomplished with their privileged upper classes. This was possible in Prussia not only because the Hohenzollerns could coerce the Junkers but also because the Junkers, as a class of landlords owning commercial estates worked by serfs, had characteristics and needs that complemented the Hohenzollern military hegemony. Left politically sovereign on their estates and in the rural counties, the Junkers could keep the peasants in place, producing to pay taxes, and available for military conscription. In turn, since the Junkers had such absolute local control, they lost little by surrendering provincial and kingdom-wide leadership, and they gained in compensation some protection from the marauding armies of neighboring Great Powers. Even more important, since the agrarian economy of eighteenth century Prussia was not prosperous, the Junkers gained opportunities for the employment of family members in the king’s service.²¹⁷ This system of alliance between the state and the landed upper class was somewhat similar to the Chinese system at its prime; however, the Chinese state was much less centralized and militaristic, and Chinese society was more prone to peasant-based rebellions. And, of course, it was precisely the internal and external military failures of the Manchus that opened the way to encroachments by the gentry on the provincial levels of state power after 1840. As for the comparison to France, the contrasts are obvious: The French monarchy succeeded in edging aside the seigneurs at the local levels of power. It did this, however, only to suffer from the infiltration of diverse but

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increasingly allied groupings of holders of proprietary wealth at the middle and upper levels of the royal administration—thus losing potential bureaucratic initiative versus dominant-class social and economic interests. This was not the difficulty to which the Prussian monarchy was prone.

The Prussian system succeeded during the reign of Frederick the Great (1740–86) in providing the wherewithal for military victories in the Seven Years' War that turned Prussia suddenly into a Great Power.²¹⁸ Through the end of the eighteenth century, the bureaucracy continued to generate taxes very efficiently. But once Prussian territories had expanded and the decisive coordination and leadership of Frederick the Great was gone, the Prussian administration and officer corps became predictably lumbering and inflexible overall—the natural penalty of encouraging blind official obedience to rules at the expense of initiative. When forced suddenly to confront the speed and flexibility of Napoleon's plebiscitary dictatorship, the Hohenzollern autocratic machineries proved inadequate.

Yet they retained the potential for speedy recovery once threatened from without.²¹⁹ Professional administrators such as Karl von Stein and Karl August von Hardenberg, and military reformers such as Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August Neithardt von Gneisenau could step to the fore, push aside the debilitated personal controls of Hohenzollern despotism, and use the still existing and functioning state organizations to implement limited measures to make the economy and society more flexible supports for military autocracy. Noble titles and prerogatives were not abolished but were rendered legally accessible to born commoners who could afford to purchase the landed estates or obtain the education and patronage necessary for promotions in the bureaucracy or officer corps. Serfs were given their personal freedom. And universal military conscription was begun, a measure that allowed the Prussian armies to expand suddenly and to benefit from the increased enthusiasm of citizens newly benefited by the reforms or aroused to hostility by several years of French intervention and financial exactions. All of these reforms *could* be implemented from above relatively smoothly because the Prussian state was already so very strong within society, and because the Junkers—whose established economic and status interests were somewhat contradicted by the reforms—were nevertheless in no institutional position to block concerted policy initiatives by the state.

Thus comparisons with Bourbon France and late Imperial China clarify why the Prussian state was able successfully to implement immediately adequate modernizing reforms in 1807–14. But a final point about the Prussian reforms needs to be made through a comparison to the Russian Emancipation of the serfs. As we have seen, the Russian Emancipation was implemented within the confines of the preexisting agrarian class structure. And that structure condemned Russian agriculture to very slow rates of

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growth (without breakthrough to modern techniques) after 1870. Now, it happens that the liberation of the serfs in Prussia after 1807 also occurred as a series of juridical reforms and property adjustments implemented in ways that reinforced the preexisting class relations between landlords and peasants. Yet the Prussian abolition of serfdom helped to facilitate the modernization and increasing prosperity of Prussian agriculture during the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century.²²⁰ How do we explain this important difference between the effects of the tsarist post-Crimean reforms and the Prussian reforms after 1806?

The answer lies in differences, both before and after the abolition of serfdom, between the agrarian relations of production of the two countries. In Russia, the actual processes of agrarian production were mostly controlled by serf (and later peasant-smallholder) communities, with landlords functioning mainly as appropriators of surplus through dues and labor services, or through rents. But in Prussia, agricultural production, both under serfdom and afterwards, was centered on large, commercially oriented estates owned and run by the lords or their agents. In Prussia as in Russia, when serfdom was abolished, the landlords influenced the process in ways that ensured as far as possible the maintenance of their accustomed economic hegemony in new forms. Prussian peasants were forced to cede to the large, Junker-owned estates one-third to two-thirds of the holdings they had worked for themselves under serfdom, in order to gain property title to the lands that remained. This meant that the vast majority were left with inadequate land to support themselves, thus ensuring that they would continue to work on the Junker estates, henceforth as wage laborers.

Thus, once the Prussian reforms had both abolished serfdom and opened the market for noble estates to all well-to-do investors, Prussian landlords—owners of large, consolidated domains under unified management—could begin to adopt innovative techniques that required “free” wage labor. They were able to respond to new market opportunities to sell grain both within greater Germany and abroad. The resulting agrarian prosperity (which lasted until about 1870) helped to support the successful bid of the Prussian state to become the core of a unified, rapidly industrializing, and internationally powerful, Imperial Germany.²²¹ In contrast, as we have seen, the sluggishness of Russian agriculture after the Emancipation fettered tsarist attempts to adapt Imperial Russia to the exigencies of the modernizing European states system.

Summing Up

Our brief examination of the conditions underlying the political crises of the Meiji Restoration and the Prussian Reform Movement has tended to

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reinforce by contrast the central arguments of this chapter about the causes of revolutionary political crises in France, Russia, and China. Bourbon France, Hohenzollern Prussia, Tokugawa Japan, Manchu China, and Romanov Russia—all became subject to military pressures from more economically developed nations abroad, and all experienced in response societal political crises. Yet only France, Russia, and China were plunged into the upheavals of social revolution, whereas Prussia and Japan, relatively speaking, adapted speedily and smoothly to international exigencies through reforms instituted from above by autocratic political authorities. The different fates of these agrarian monarchical regimes faced with the challenges of adapting to the exigencies of international uneven development can be explained in large part by looking at the ways in which agrarian relations of production and landed dominant classes impinged upon state organizations—although it is also important to assess the severity of the pressures from abroad with which each regime had to cope.

In Russia, the revolutionary crisis of autocratic rule and dominant-class privilege was due to the overwhelming stress of World War I upon an early-industrializing economy fettered by a backward agrarian sector. The Imperial regime was strong enough to override dominant class interests and enforce modernizing reforms after the shock of defeat in the Crimean War, but it was not able to reorganize agrarian class relations that were inimical to modern economic development or rapid increases in productivity. Even extraordinary successes of state-propelled industrialization were not enough to allow Tsarist Russia to make up her economic lag behind the West, and she remained entangled within the European states system as it careened toward World War I. By contrast, neither Japan nor Prussia was as agriculturally backward or as internationally pressed during early industrialization as Tsarist Russia.

Both Bourbon France and Manchu China had fairly prosperous agrarian economies and experienced foreign pressures no greater than those experienced by Tokugawa Japan and Hohenzollern Prussia. Another pattern is the differentiating cause here: specifically, the presence or absence of a landed upper class with institutionalized political leverage at extralocal levels, leverage in relation to fiscal and military/policing functions centrally organized by royal administrations. If such politically organized and administratively entrenched landed classes were present, as they were in France and China, then the reactions of these classes against autocratic attempts to institute modernizing reforms deposed the monarchies and precipitated breakdowns of administrative and military organizations. This meant that externally induced political crises developed into potential social-revolutionary situations. But if, as in Japan and Prussia, politically powerful landed classes were absent, so that the old-regime states were more highly bureaucratic, then foreign-induced crises could be resolved

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through political struggles confined, broadly speaking, within the established governing elite and administrative arrangements. And this precluded the possibility for social revolution from below.

Social revolutions in France, Russia, and China were launched, it has been argued in this chapter, by crises centered in the structures and situations of the states of the Old Regimes. Still, the actual occurrence of social revolutions in these three countries depended not only upon the emergence of revolutionary political crises but also upon the conduciveness of the agrarian sociopolitical structures of the Old Regimes to peasant revolts. To go on with the analysis from here, therefore, we must reexamine the prerevolutionary societies from the opposite perspective, no longer from the top down with emphasis on the state, the dominant class, and the international context, but now from the bottom up with emphasis on the structural situation of the peasants in the agrarian economy and in local political and class relations. This is the task of Chapter 3.

3 Agrarian Structures and Peasant Insurrections

When non-peasant social forces clash, when rulers are divided or foreign powers attack, the peasantry's attitude and action may well prove decisive. Whether this potential is realized is mainly dependent upon the peasants' ability to act in unison, with or without formal organization.

Teodor Shanin

MASSIVE AS THEY WERE, societal political crises alone were not enough to create social-revolutionary situations in France, Russia, and China. Administrative and military breakdowns of the autocracies inaugurated social-revolutionary transformations—rather than, say, interregnums of intraelite squabbling leading to the break-up of the existing polity or the reconstitution of a similar regime on a more or less liberal basis. This result was due to the fact that widespread peasant revolts coincided with, indeed took advantage of, the hiatus of governmental supervision and sanctions. In Barrington Moore's vivid phrase, "the peasants . . . provided the dynamite to bring down the old building."¹ Their revolts destroyed the old agrarian class relations and undermined the political and military supports for liberalism or counterrevolution. They opened the way for marginal political elites, perhaps supported by urban popular movements, to consolidate the Revolutions on the basis of centralized and mass-incorporating state organizations.

Peasant revolts have in truth attracted less attention from historians and social theorists than have urban lower-class actions in revolutions—even for the predominantly agrarian societies with which we are concerned here. This is understandable. Urban workers, whether preindustrial or industrial, have often played highly visible parts in (failed as well as successful) revolutions. And their aims and achievements have been linked to those of self-consciously revolutionary leaderships. Hence insurrectionary urban workers seem like true revolutionaries compared to peasants who merely "rebel" in the countryside, far from the centers of national-political consciousness and decision.

Nevertheless, peasant revolts have been the crucial insurrectionary ingre-

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dient in virtually all actual (i.e., successful) social revolutions to date,² and certainly in the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. This is not really surprising, given that social revolutions have occurred in agrarian countries where peasants are the major producing class. Without peasant revolts, urban radicalism in predominantly agrarian countries has not in the end been able to accomplish social-revolutionary transformations. The cases of the English and German (1848) Revolutions (to be discussed below) help to demonstrate this assertion. Both of these contrast cases had vigorous urban—popular revolutionary movements. Yet they failed as social revolutions in part for want of peasant insurrections against landed upper classes.

This does not mean that revolts of urban workers made no difference in the Revolutions at hand, especially the French and Russian. The actions of French *sans culottes* and Russian industrial workers helped to shape the revolutionary conflicts and outcomes distinctive to France and Russia. As we saw in Chapter 2, the revolts of urban workers constituted intervening moments in the processes by which the French and Russian Old Regimes were undermined (although the fundamental causes were the international pressures and dominant class/state contradictions discussed in depth). Moreover, as we shall see in Part II, urban revolts contributed crucially to the political struggles through which new, urban-based revolutionary regimes were built up in France and Russia. But here, in this chapter, our concern is with causes of social revolutions in France, Russia, and China alike. Peasant revolts against landlords were a necessary ingredient in all three Revolutions, whereas successful revolts by urban workers were not. Thus, for the explanatory purpose at hand, attention to the conditions for and against peasant insurrections is far more important than a focus, however more customary, upon the urban revolts.

How, then, shall the peasant contribution to the great Revolutions be explained? To begin, it is necessary to identify those aspects of peasant participation in the revolutionary drama that led to its social-revolutionary impact. The peasant revolts of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions were remarkable in that they became at once widespread and directed particularly against landlords. Their revolutionary impact depended upon these two facets. Because they spread across wide areas of France, Russia, and China, the peasant revolts achieved an impact transcending the localities to which peasant organizations remained confined. By striking especially against the property and powers of dominant-class landlords, the revolts weakened mainstays of the socioeconomic and political orders of the old regimes. Together the extensiveness and antilandlord focus of the revolutionary peasant revolts created decisive constraints at the societal level on the range of sociopolitical options available to elites contending for national power.

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Here was something really new in the histories of France, Russia, and China. Historically there had been in these countries massive revolts of marginal regions against the exactions or representatives of the central monarchies. In China, such revolts ended up (if they did not begin) under the leadership of gentry, so that actual and potential antilandlord actions were ultimately suppressed or diverted.³ In France, some regional revolts were led throughout by nobles. Others started that way and then gave rise to peasant revolts against their lords, thus facilitating repression by the monarchy in which peasants also lost out.⁴ In Russia, traditional peasant-based rebellions involved a larger component of direct attacks on landlords. But this was true only because border-dwelling Cossacks, rather than landlords with regional political and military leverage, provided the military impetus and shield for any large-scale uprisings.⁵ On their own in traditional times—without the aid of regional revolts—peasants in all three countries certainly engaged in localized and sporadic violent resistance against landlords. But peasants had never achieved a successful, widespread, direct assault on the property or claims of landlords.

However, a widespread direct assault on landlords is exactly what ultimately *did* come about in the French, Russian, and Chinese social revolutions. Thus we are looking for an explanation of a pattern of peasant behavior that transcended spotty and localized unrest, and that accomplished something very different from previous peasant-based rebellions. Our explanatory hypotheses give short shrift to the factors typically made central in other approaches, such as revolutionary ideology, the simple presence of exploitation, or the acuteness of relative deprivation.

We need not dwell upon explanations that attribute “peasant revolution” to peasants’ arousal by new goals, values, or system-transcending ideologies. It can hardly be overemphasized that peasant goals in the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions were *not* intrinsically different from previous peasant aims in rebellions or riots. Peasants participated in these Revolutions without being converted to radical visions of a desired new national society, and without becoming a nationally organized class-for-themselves. Instead they struggled for concrete goals—typically involving access to more land, or freedom from claims on their surpluses. Such goals were entirely understandable in terms of the existing local economic and political circumstances in which peasants found themselves. In France and Russia, peasants mobilized for action through traditional village community organizations. In China, peasants first participated as traditional “social bandits” and then finally were directly (re)organized by the Chinese Communist Party. Even then, however, Chinese peasants acted for concrete, immediate goals,⁶ not unlike those they had attempted to achieve in historical riots and rebellions.

As for the possibility that peasants become revolutionary in reaction

against exploitation,⁷ this approach tries to turn a constant feature of the peasant condition into an explanatory variable. By definition, peasants are invariably subjected to nonreciprocal claims on their production. Peasants are primary agricultural cultivators who must, because of political and cultural marginality and relative socioeconomic immobility, bear the burden of varying combinations of taxes, rents, *corvée*, usurious interest rates, and discriminatory prices.⁸ Peasants always have grounds for rebellion against landlords, state agents, and merchants who exploit them. What is at issue is not so much the objective potential for revolts on grounds of justifiable grievances. It is rather the degree to which grievances that are always at least implicitly present can be collectively perceived and acted upon.

The short-term subjective exacerbation of specific grievances—the factor that is emphasized by relative-deprivation theorists—may well play a precipitating role, accounting for the timing of particular rebellious acts. Yet it is important to remember that relative deprivation is an aggregate-psychological state for which it is almost impossible to find genuine direct historical evidence. Strictly speaking, peasants in many localities would have had to have been interviewed individually at the outbreak of, and recurrently during, the three Revolutions. But this kind of evidence, or even the more usual indirect measures of relative deprivation,⁹ still cannot address the question of how and why something—and specifically what—can be done about felt grievances by an aggregate of individuals. The really important question is what transforms the peasantry, if only at local levels, into a collective force capable of striking out against its oppressors.

As Eric Wolf has pointed out, “ultimately, the decisive factor in making a peasant rebellion possible lies in the relation of the peasantry to the field of power which surrounds it. A rebellion cannot start from a situation of complete impotence . . . ”¹⁰ If they are to act upon, rather than silently suffer, their omnipresent grievances, peasants must have “internal leverage”—some organized capacity for collective action against their exploitative superiors. In my view, the extent to which peasants have had such internal leverage, particularly during historical political crises of agrarian states, is explained by structural and situational conditions that affect: (1) the degrees and kinds of solidarity of peasant communities; (2) the degrees of peasant autonomy from direct day-to-day supervision and control by landlords and their agents; and (3) the relaxation of state coercive sanctions against peasants revolts. The first two factors—peasant solidarity and autonomy—have to be investigated through analysis of the agrarian structures of prerevolutionary old regimes. Class structure and local political structure both matter, and something can be said here about why each is important and how each should be investigated.

In examining class relations in the countryside, it is never enough merely to identify different strata of property holders, abstracting away from

institutional contexts. This widely employed approach¹¹ can be misleading about the power base of a landed upper class, underestimating it in instances where such a class (e.g., the Chinese gentry) supplements its income from sheer landownership with other complementary forms of surplus appropriation. Similarly, many analysts have been misled about possible degrees of solidarity among peasants when they have noted only facts about individual property-holding and economic differentiation between richer and poorer peasants. They have neglected to examine kinship and community institutions with collective economic functions that may tie richer and poorer relatively closer together than their individual property interests might suggest.¹²

Rather, to investigate a class structure means to look for the *historically specific institutional arrangements* by which two analytically basic kinds of social relationships are simultaneously established: on the one hand, relations of direct producers "to one another, to their tools and to the land in the immediate process of production," and on the other hand, relations "by which an unpaid-for part of the product is extracted from the direct producers by a class of non-producers."¹³ Peasant solidarity and autonomy may (or may not) be built into agrarian class structures depending upon the exact institutional form that these relationships take.

Certain tentative findings do seem to have emerged from previous studies sensitive to the effects of institutionalized class relations on peasant insurrectionary capacity.¹⁴ Agricultural regimes featuring large estates worked by serfs or landless laborers tend to be inimical to spontaneous, self-organized peasant rebellions. This is true not simply because the serfs and laborers are poor, but because they are divided from each other and subject to close and constant supervision and discipline by landlords or their managers. Rentier agrarian systems, where smallholder peasant families possess and work the land on their own, are notoriously more susceptible to peasant revolts¹⁵—in particular, I would argue, where socioeconomically based community relations tie the individual families together in opposition to landlords. As we shall see, class relations in France and Russia fit this rentier/community pattern.

However, even if large-estate agriculture is not present, an agrarian order may still be immune to autonomous peasant revolts if landlords directly control administrative and military sanctioning machineries (such as militias and poor relief agencies) at local levels. This points to the necessity of going beyond class analysis alone if we are adequately to comprehend the conditions for and against peasant revolts. We must analyze the political structures of agrarian orders, looking especially at the nature of local government and its relationship to central political authorities, monarchs and their agents. Do peasants, bureaucrats, or landlords control local political decision-making? Do landlords serve as, or instead

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of, local agents of the monarchical state? Apparently, those agrarian orders most vulnerable to sudden and autonomous peasant revolts were those that not only had class relations favorable to peasant solidarity and autonomy. These vulnerable agrarian orders also had sanctioning machineries that were centrally and bureaucratically controlled, even as peasant communities enjoyed considerable local political autonomy.

Finally, though, it needs to be stressed that an exclusive focus on the structural situation of peasants in local class and political structures is not sufficient to explain either the simple occurrence or the specific patterns of the widespread, antilandlord revolts that occurred in the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. For in all three Revolutions, the revolutionary political crisis of the autocratic state—itsself occasioned by national and international developments quite independent of the peasantry—was also a crucial cause. This political factor interacted with the structurally given insurrectionary potential of the peasantry to produce the full-blown social-revolutionary situation that neither cause alone could have produced. It was the breakdown of the concerted repressive capacity of a previously unified and centralized state that finally created conditions directly or ultimately favorable to *widespread* and *irreversible* peasant revolts against landlords. If similar agrarian class and local political structures had not previously given rise to the same pattern of peasant revolts, it was because the missing ingredient was a world-historical development in the affairs of the dominant class. As soon as—and only when—that class, under international pressure in a modernizing world, had backed itself into a revolutionary political crisis, did the peasantry become able to achieve long-implicit insurrectionary goals. The conjunctural result was social revolution.¹⁶

Nor does a conjunctural analysis of peasant revolts in social revolutions properly stop with the discussion of the causes of the peasant revolts themselves. In addition, the immediate achievements of peasant revolts have potent “feedback” effects upon the course of national politics within the unfolding revolutionary crises. Such effects provide indispensable keys to shared and varied patterns of social-revolutionary dynamics and outcomes. Yet on this score, the reader must wait until Part II. The chapter at hand necessarily takes for granted that peasant revolts are consequential for the course of social revolutions and seeks to understand the structural and situational conditions that explain their occurrence.

Arguments about these conditions have been previewed, but they need to be spelled out in detail for each case of social revolution and for appropriate contrast cases (where successful social revolutions did not occur). Let us therefore turn to the cases. We shall begin with France, proceed next to Russia, and then examine seventeenth-century England and Germany in 1848–50 as contrasts. Finally, we shall discuss, against the background of all of the previous case analyses, the special issues raised by China.

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PEASANTS AGAINST SEIGNEURS IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

One of the most celebrated dates of the French Revolution is August 4, 1789. On the evening of that famous day members of the Constituent Assembly vied with one another to denounce and renounce “feudal” structures of French society and politics. Seigneurial dues, the venality of judicial offices, tax immunities, hunting rights, court pensions, seigneurial justice—all were surrendered “as one speaker after another renounced his own—or his neighbour’s—privileges.”¹⁷ Symbolically, the changes that would earn the Revolution the right to be labeled a *social* revolution—one that went beyond political changes to transform society—were launched that night. Yet the liberal nobles and Third Estate representatives assembled at Versailles would never have initiated this session of sweeping reforms had not a spreading agrarian revolt against the seigneurial system forced their reluctant hand. Shocked and surprised by intensifying peasant resistance to the payment of dues and tithes and by mounting violence against *chateaux* and individuals, the men of property and privilege sitting at Versailles hastily decided to make unplanned concessions. Without the peasant revolution—which the greatest historian of the Revolution, Georges Lefebvre, has labeled “spontaneous” and “autonomous”—“one can be sure that the Constituent Assembly would not have struck such serious blows against the feudal regime . . . ”¹⁸ The Revolution might never have developed beyond constitutional reforms.¹⁹

Structural Conditions

The potential for the peasant revolts that erupted in 1789 was inherent in an agrarian social structure peculiar to France (and to the western parts of a disunited Germany) within eighteenth-century Europe. Not that the oppression of the French peasantry was the worst—though real grievances surely existed. Rather the socioeconomic and political conditions influencing the ability of peasants to react against seigneurial exploitation were comparatively very favorable in France.

In contrast to the serfs of Eastern Europe and to the increasingly dispossessed agricultural lower strata of England, the French peasantry virtually owned a substantial portion of the land of France. At least one-third of the land—and an even higher proportion of the cultivable soil—was held by millions of peasant farmers in small pieces that could be managed, bought and sold, and passed to heirs, subject only to various seigneurial claims. In addition, because very few large landowners directly cultivated their own holdings, roughly another two-fifths of the land was rented to peasant

tenants and sharecroppers in mostly small pieces. Peasants therefore controlled the use of most of the land involved in agricultural production.²⁰

Yet they did so only subject to heavy rental claims on what they produced. The "ground rent—royal, seigneurial, tithe and proprietorial— . . . [was] the driving force of the realm and of its social system. Rent-payers [were] the ruled, receivers of rent and their agents the rulers."²¹ The tithe—collected in kind at harvest time—averaged about 8 percent and went largely to wealthy bishops, canons, and lay lords outside the local parishes. Seigneurial dues (which went to bourgeois landowners and religious houses as well as to nobles) varied enormously by region and locality; in general, they were heavy in Brittany and eastern France and light in the areas south of the Loire (where, however, tithes were heavier). Taxes—from which noble landowners were largely exempt—took between 5 and 10 percent of gross production in the *pays d'élection*, but less in the *pays d'état*. Proprietorial rents were often the heaviest drain: In areas of the south and west where *métayage* (sharecropping) predominated, the sharecroppers had to yield half the harvest to the landlords; otherwise rents claimed at least a fifth of the harvest. Overall, the various rental claims on the peasants' production took between one-fifth and three-fifths of their gross income (that which remained after at least one-fifth of the harvest was held back for seed, and the subsistence of laborers and costs of production and maintenance were met), with important variations across regions and time. Normally the rental claims were burdensome; in times of crises of production or marketing they loomed as an almost insupportable drain on the margin of livelihood or subsistence.

Peasant well-being depended upon the extent to which a family possessed land subject to minimal rental claims plus the means, including tools and livestock, necessary to work the land. But in all areas of eighteenth-century France, those who could live securely on their own holdings, or on substantial rented farms, were a small proportion of the peasantry.²² True, each community might have one or two rich *coqs de village* who perhaps acted as agents for the seigneurs, or, failing that, at least some substantial *laboureurs* (independent middle-peasant owners), but the majority were poor and insecure. Either as tenants they had to pay heavy rents to work small pieces of land for subsistence, or else they owned nothing but a house and garden and had to find supplementary income through agricultural day-labor, industrial putting-out employment, or seasonal migration to find work away from home. At the very bottom of the socioeconomic scale were vagrants who lacked even the minimal holdings that would give them a home and community. As population rose faster than the rate of economic growth could provide new employment, the numbers of such impoverished vagabonds—those who lived by a combination of beggary, occasional employment, and brigandage—grew at the end of the Old Regime. And many

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settled families were never far from the fate of the wanderers. Rising prices for land and grain could not help them, for their prospect—and problem—was merely to hold on to enough land and employment to pay rental claims and eke out a subsistence.

Settled French peasants under the Old Regime did not, however, face the struggle for survival merely as an aggregate. They were not yet, as Marx would aptly write in the mid-1800s, like so many potatoes in a sack. True, economic differentiation within the ranks of the peasantry was far advanced, and “agrarian individualism” had gained solid footholds in the countryside.²³ Nevertheless, the peasant community, shaped through centuries of struggle for economic security and administrative autonomy, was still a reality. The fundamental basis of the community was economic. The center of the setup was the *terroir*, that is, “the sum of all the types of land cultivated or exploited by a group of men either centered on a big village or around several hamlets or else dispersed over a patchwork of scattered holdings.”²⁴ The peasant community was vested in “collective ownership and use of . . . communal goods” or “collective constraints upon private property for the benefits of the inhabitants as a group . . .”²⁵ In the *pays de bocage* of Normandy and Brittany, where farmsteads were dispersed, peasant communities possessed common lands, including woods, which had to be administered for the collectivity and defended against the counterclaims and encroachments of outsiders. In the north and east, peasant villages held fewer common lands, but cultivation itself was hedged by communal rules about rotation of crops, fixing of harvest dates, rights to pasture on the fallow, regulations on enclosure, and so forth. These customs, too, not only had to be applied to community members but also upheld against outsiders. In most places, the seigneurs—whose domain lands with attached peasant tenures overlapped the peasant communities—were the key competitors for agrarian rights. At stake were such important rights as access to woods or pasture, or prerogatives to decide how lands would be cultivated. And it was above all in struggles against the seigneurs over such matters that the peasant communities, despite internal tensions, maintained a certain residuum of cohesion and self-consciousness.

By the eighteenth century, moreover, peasant communities enjoyed a substantial degree of self-government. The penetration by the royal administration into the localities and gradually edged aside the seigneur, leaving him merely the “first subject of the parish.” He, or his agents if he was an absentee (as was often the case), did retain the control of seigneurial justice; yet this was a right with much economic but little political significance. Otherwise the peasants, with the aid of the local priest, handled their own local affairs—responsible to the *intendant* through his subdelegate. *Terroirs* frequently coincided with parishes, so that the assembly of the heads of households of the community typically met after mass on

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Sundays to handle a wide range of community affairs, such as "sale, purchase, exchange or leasing of communal property; the maintenance of the church, of public buildings, roads, and bridges; the election of communal syndics, of the schoolmaster, the communal shepherd, the hayward, the collectors of tithes, the assessors and collectors of the *taille*."²⁶

Although it was true that the village assemblies were more often than not informally dominated by the well-to-do peasants, still they potentially functioned as vital arenas for the discussion of local affairs by all family heads; and their decisions controlled key aspects of village life.²⁷

The Impact of the Political Crisis of 1789

But how exactly did these structural conditions help to bring about the demise of the Old Regime in the countryside? To find the answer we must look to the trends and events of the revolutionary period. We shall begin with some economic trends that helped to ignite popular disturbances in 1788–9, and then focus upon the combination of agrarian structural conditions and national political events that ensured that the popular uprisings of 1789 would have a revolutionary aspect.

The formidable economic historian Ernest Labrousse has established, through painstaking research on price and wage trends, that a crisis in the French economy precipitated popular uprisings at the end of the Old Regime.²⁸ From about 1733 to 1770 the French economy was in the upswing of a cycle that was part of a nearly century-long phase of economic expansion. Agricultural and industrial productivity, colonial and domestic commerce, all were expanding. Prices and rents were rising faster than wages, so the growth benefited entrepreneurs and larger landowners disproportionately. Nevertheless, many poorer people could manage so long as the expansion continued. After 1770, however, a "period of economic distress, a period of contraction, set in . . . [and] by the end of 1778 at the latest, it was an accomplished fact. Prices were everywhere in full decline."²⁹ Agrarian incomes fell and industry languished; unemployment rose.

The old problem of mouths and the food to fill them, already aggravated during the first two thirds of the century by the decline in the mortality rate, entered an acute stage and for a time became much more explicit as the conflict . . . between a revolutionary increase in population and an economy in a state of contraction became most strikingly apparent.³⁰

By the mid 1780s the economy was beginning to recover. Then in 1788 there came a "serious accident of a kind that happened periodically."³¹ The grain harvest failed. Rural incomes fell (as there was too little to sell even though prices were high), and agricultural unemployment increased. Markets for industrial products contracted, and so more laborers were

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thrown out of work. Meanwhile bread prices shot up (1789–90), and the millions of poorer peasants and urban artisans and laborers who had to buy all or part of their food suddenly faced acute want.

Popular response to rising bread prices in 1789 followed well-established forms.³² Recurrently in the eighteenth century, whenever bread prices rose suddenly, the rural and urban poor responded with bread riots. Peasant communities seized grain being transported for sale outside their communities and instead sold it for a “just price” to local consumers. Urban consumers responded to shortages and high prices by seizing bakers’ stocks and handling them in a similar way. Off and on, the royal government attempted to promote national free trade in grain, but the people still believed in fixed prices and guaranteed local supplies for everyone. Not long before the Revolution, in 1775, massive bread riots (the “*guerre de farines*”) forced the Crown to abandon innovative policies and restore order through a combination of supplying grain to the needy and repressing demonstrations. Much of what happened in 1789 was a replay of this recurrent form of popular unrest.

In 1789, however, the results were extraordinary. In part this was because urban bread riots coincided with quarrels among the privileged elites over formulas for political representation to produce the Municipal Revolution.³³ Even more, it was because events developed into full-fledged social revolution in the countryside. During the spring, well before the Municipal Revolution, peasants began to go beyond bread riots to attack the seigneurial system. “The first wave of rural uprisings was . . . aimed mainly at tithes, feudal rights, and the men who received them . . . ”³⁴ Very often the target was the feudal records of the local seigneur, but there were also seizures of “hoarded” grain stores. Even these early outbreaks were widespread, occurring in Anjou, Dauphiné, the Paris region, Picardy, Hainault, and the Midi. With the coming of summer, unrest intensified and spread over most of the country, partly through the awesome agency of “the Great Fear.”³⁵ This was a collective panic inspired by the belief that “brigands” would attack the ripening grain crop. The belief grew that an “aristocratic plot” to starve the people was afoot; and the peasants organized themselves to meet the nebulous threat. Hostility fused with the hopes for change that had been aroused by the convening of the Estates-General, to intensify the revolt against the upper classes:

Now that the States-General were assembled but slow in responding to . . . expectations of liberty, the great mass of the peasantry reached a simple, spontaneous decision. The harvest was over. They would stop paying the tithe-gatherers, the seigneurs, and even the royal tax-collectors. Angry minorities assailed charter rooms and châteaux with pitchforks and firebrands. The majority adopted the safer and more effective course of passive resistance, and refused to pay up.³⁶

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Thus the supports were pulled out from under the Old Regime in the countryside, and the urban-based political reformers were faced with an uninvited crisis of property and order that they would have preferred to avoid.

Why did the peasants rebel starting in 1789 – and why did they in general revolt against the seigneurial system first and foremost? The causes consisted in the interaction of existing socioeconomic and political structures with political events in 1789 that reinforced the existing capacities, and created new opportunities, for collective antiseigneurial revolts.

Of enormous significance were the processes set in motion by the king's decision of January 29, 1789, to convene the Estates-General. Deputies for the Third Estate were to be elected in the *bailliages* by delegates of urban and rural communities. In each rural community, every man twenty-five or older who paid any amount of taxes was eligible to participate in a meeting that both elected representatives to the *bailliage* assembly and drew up a *cahier de doléances* expressing local grievances. Extraordinary as it may seem, every peasant community was invited by order of the king to ruminate collectively upon its troubles. The result surely was, on the whole, to heighten possibilities for the peasants to rebel, especially against seigneurs and nonlocal recipients of the tithes. Not that the *cahiers* explicitly singled out these targets; instead the *cahiers* were mostly filled with limited and highly varied local complaints.³⁷ Moreover, any more general demands for change contained in them cannot simply be attributed to the peasantry, because the assemblies were often led or influenced by priests, bourgeois, and local representatives of the seigneurs.³⁸ But more significant than the content of the *cahiers* was the process by which they were drawn up. That process raised hopes for change and brought peasants together in community settings where antiseigneurial struggles, especially, had historically been a shared enterprise.

The strengthening of collective consciousness and organization associated with the drawing up of the *cahiers* better prepared the peasants to act for the insurrectionary ends of 1789. Some revolts, in fact, occurred in the immediate wake of the local assemblies. Apparently, this was because in certain instances peasants believed that the mere act of expressing grievances in the *cahiers* meant that particular payments or practices were henceforth abolished. Lefebvre reports the laments of royal officials on this point:

“What is really tiresome,” wrote Desmé de Dubuisson, lieutenant-general of Saumur *bailliage* during the elections, “is that these assemblies that have been summoned have generally believed themselves invested with some sovereign authority and that when they came to an end, the peasants went home with the ideas that henceforward they were free from tithes, hunting prohibitions and the payment of feudal dues” . . .

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And at the other end of the kingdom, the *sub-délégué* for Ploërmel uttered a cry of alarm on 4 July 1789: “. . . All the peasants around here and in my area generally are preparing to refuse their quota of sheaves to the tithe-collectors and say quite openly that there will be no collection without bloodshed on the senseless grounds that as the request for the abolition of these tithes was included in the *cahiers* . . . such an abolition has now come into effect.”³⁹

And, even if they did not occur until long after the *cahiers* had been drawn up, revolts typically emerged from the same settings in which such community meetings had always normally been held:

So often did the same type of [anti-seigneurial] revolt break out in exactly the same way right up to 1792. Things would begin to stir on a Sunday: throughout the whole period, this day, like feast days in honour of local saints and *baladoires*, was always a most critical day; the peasants would go to mass, then having nothing else to do, would drift along to the local café: there was nothing like this for starting a riot.⁴⁰

Another major condition facilitating the spread of revolts from 1789 was the disorganization and division of the upper strata, including those in charge of police and army. Especially after the Municipal Revolution in July, the propertied classes were in a poor position to repress the rural disturbances. Many *intendants* had been chased from their posts. Urban militias had seized arms and ammunition. Desertions from the army were increasing. Moreover, the peasant soldiers were as usual allowed to go home for the summer to help with the harvest, and they carried along news of the political events in the towns.⁴¹

Perhaps even more decisive was the fact that the supporters of the National Assembly were in a quandary: If (as many would have preferred) they used militias or called upon the royal army to protect property rights in the countryside, they would play into the hands of autocratic reaction. This was a chance that most were unprepared to take.⁴² Only in a few localities did urban forces act against the peasants. Overall, the repressive forces were uncoordinated and not decisively deployed, thus encouraging the peasant revolts and resistance to spread across the country.

Finally, urban forces were vociferously attacking what they labeled “the aristocratic reaction.” This probably encouraged peasants to focus on exploitative practices that they particularly associated with nobles—that is, seigneurial dues, tax exemptions, and tithes (most of which did *not* go to the curés for local church expenses). Through the *bailliage* assemblies, peasant delegates came into regular contact with urban leaders. And, ultimately, the Constituent Assembly’s reform decrees would make it easier for the peasants to focus continuing effective resistance right through 1793 on tithes and feudal dues, rather than upon regular rents and taxes.

All of these factors specific to the political crisis of 1789 help to account

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for the fact that there were *widespread* revolts of peasant communities especially against the seigneurial system commencing in the spring of 1789. To be sure, these conjunctural factors alone could not have been effective had it not been for the broad conduciveness of French rural structures to antiseigneurial peasant revolts. To varying degrees in different places, but more or less everywhere, seigneurs and tithe collectors for privileged absentee recipients vexed peasants who possessed considerable property, community autonomy, and antiseigneurial solidarity. There was, in short, a preexisting potential for antiseigneurial revolts. And the events of 1789 enhanced peasant solidarity and consciousness and weakened dominant-class (and particularly seigneurial) defenses in exactly the ways that could release that potential.

Regional variations in combinations of community structures, landholding patterns, forms of rent extraction, and eighteenth-century socioeconomic trends were apparently not very important in determining the general shape and incidence of peasant revolts in 1789 (however much they may have had to do with which particular grievances were emphasized and which specific targets were attacked by individual peasant communities). What happened after 1788 was spurred by a *national* political crisis into which peasants everywhere—those with potential as well as actual grievances—were drawn through almost simultaneous, kingdom-wide events such as the drawing up of the *cahiers* and the Municipal Revolution. The peasant rebellion was indeed autonomous and spontaneous—but only within this national context. Peasant actions in 1789 thus cannot be understood merely as extensions of “subterranean” struggles carried on in localities throughout the eighteenth century. The French social historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has drawn upon detailed studies of rural social relations to show that there were marked regional variations in the form, extent, and intensity of peasant struggles during the (major-rebellion-free) period from 1675 to 1788.⁴³ “Antiseigneurial” struggles were important only in the north and northeast, where modernizing landlords were using “feudal” mechanisms to expand commercial farming against the resistance of peasant communities. In central, southern, and western regions, landlords were less powerful and less dynamic; and peasant struggles were mild and not notably antiseigneurial. Yet, as Le Roy Ladurie himself notes, in 1789, even peasant communities in Basse-Auvergne and Brittany, which had been quite passive between 1675 and 1788, readily joined in the antiseigneurial revolts of 1789. And peasants in Languedoc merged their long-standing resistance to tithes into the general revolutionary ferment.

What these facts suggest is that, for the specific purpose of explaining the peasant revolution that began in 1789, one must assign greater weight to both (1) the broadly similar structural features characterizing agrarian social relations across all of France and (2) the national political dynamics

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of 1789, than to the local and regional variations on the overall themes. I would be nice to be able to correlate detailed information on social-structural patterns and the exact processes of political mobilization for each locality and region. But until that is possible we should—and can—continue to make generalizations about the Revolution as a whole. For it was, by nature, quite other than simply an aggregation of local or regional events and processes. As Charles Tilly has very aptly put it, “a revolution is a state of a whole society, not of each segment of society.”⁴⁴

The Limits of the French Peasant Revolution

Although a full discussion of the outcomes of the French Revolution in the countryside depends upon an analysis (to be made in Chapter 5) of how urban politics and the consolidation of revolutionized state power intersected with the agrarian situation, nevertheless one final issue needs to be discussed in this chapter. We have already seen that, before the Revolution, straightforward proprietorial rents were probably the heaviest charge on the peasantry as a whole. They were surely more of a drain overall than seigneurial dues and tithes. Moreover it was noted that during the eighteenth century in France, rising population had promoted acute land hunger among the majority of peasants, who either owned or rented no land at all or else not enough to support their families by agricultural production alone. Yet it is a clear-cut fact about the French Revolution that, despite the crucial contribution of peasant revolts to its success, there was very little redistribution of land ownership as such. Only about 10 percent of the land, confiscated from the Church and from some emigrés, changed hands in the Revolution. And no more than half of that went to peasants.⁴⁵ Besides, recipients of confiscated lands had to purchase them from revolutionary governments hard-pressed for resources, and this requirement effectively barred the poorer peasants from acquiring new lands. An obvious question about the agrarian component of the French Revolution is why the rebellious peasantry, given that a majority were land hungry, stopped short of actually seizing the lands owned by seigneurs, the Church, and others, including rentier townsmen?

The answer lies in the intrinsic limits of village community solidarity.⁴⁶ As we have seen, the French peasantry was internally differentiated with respect to individual ownership of land, livestock, and equipment. Even more important, community customs, although they might limit the uses to which individuals' property could be put, did *not* involve any infringements on individual ownership, such as rules against private sales or periodic redistributions of individually owned plots. Instead community customs united groups of individual cultivators against outsiders whose rights and claims affected them all. Thus customary practices and universal self-

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interest alike united entire villages against tithes, seigneurial dues and noble tax exemptions, and seigneurial claims on designated common lands. But any attacks on individual land-ownership would have threatened many rich- and middle-peasant smallholders, the very people who were the leaders of local communities. Furthermore, such attacks would have necessitated collective peasant action for entirely nontraditional goals.

The peasant revolution stopped well short of any such radical, antiproperty revolts. When it came to dues and tithes, collective resistance by peasant communities to paying them—or to buying them out as the Assembly first decreed in 1789—was persistent. Because it was so unequivocal and persistent, this resistance was ultimately and permanently rewarded with success when these claims were abolished without compensation in 1793. Overall, the peasantry was relieved of a drain of about 10 percent on its income (although, again, the benefits went disproportionately to the better-off landowners). Especially as the Revolution wore on, peasant communities also frequently resisted the claims of the revolutionary authorities for taxes and manpower. But this form of traditional resistance was doomed to defeat insofar as it dared to emerge, because (as we shall see) the Revolution only strengthened centralized administration in France. As for the remaining seemingly ‘logical’ target for peasant revolt—larger private landholdings as such—no real movement for radical equalization developed. There were many (indeed a majority of) poorer peasants consciously in need. Nevertheless, the agrarian social patterns that facilitated and shaped the initial collective revolts against seigneurialism simultaneously blocked their extension against landed property in general.

Indeed, a most ironic result of the French peasant revolution was that its very success tended to undermine the residual community solidarity that had made the revolution possible in the first place. For the seigneur—the traditional local antagonist against whom the peasant community had been forged and united—was removed, institutionally speaking, from the scene. And the legal changes of the Revolution strengthened private property, thus facilitating the break-up of communal controls in agriculture. To be sure, many collective customs long survived the Revolution, and there were communally based peasant disturbances in France through the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the agrarian revolution of 1789–93 left French peasants more internally divided in their economic interests, and with less capacity for united action against nonpeasants. “What happened,” writes R. R. Palmer, “was that during the Revolution the peasant bloc, the communal village, agrarian solidarity, were broken. Never again could there be a universal agrarian upheaval as in 1789.”⁴⁸

The agrarian revolts of the French Revolution, in sum, were the accomplishment of richer and poorer peasants alike. But the results were inordi-

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nately to the benefit of those peasants who were already economically secure and well established as leaders in local politics.

THE REVOLUTION OF THE OBRSHCHINAS: PEASANT RADICALISM IN RUSSIA

Turning from revolutionary France to Russia, one sees that similar factors—rentier agriculture, peasant community structures, and the breakdown of the repressive apparatus—explain the origins and nature of peasant revolts. Indeed the logic of events in Russia is more starkly apparent, for the picture is painted in bolder hues.

Serfdom was historically consolidated as the basis of the Russian autocracy “not in the absence of opposition, but in spite of it.”⁴⁹ Fettered to estate lands, communities of peasants were held collectively responsible for payments and labor obligations to service-nobles who possessed nearly exclusive jurisdiction over them (unless they belonged directly to the tsar). With the establishment of the Imperial regime, heavy taxes and provision of military recruits were added to the obligations of the serf communities. Peasant resistance took the form of either flight to the open steppes or sporadic local outbursts. Occasionally these conflicts exploded into murderous assaults (especially on the nobles), when allies from the towns and the border Cossacks could be found. But by the end of the eighteenth century the Russian state had pacified the steppe frontiers and coopted the Cossacks as an Imperial gendarmerie. The Pugachev Rebellion of 1773–5 was the last massive revolt before 1905. Faced with a unified repressive apparatus, and without any countervailing military force, the peasants could express no more than sporadic, localized resistance—always more or less quickly and ruthlessly crushed.⁵⁰

As we saw in Chapter 2, the “Emancipation” of the serfs in 1861 came at the initiative of the tsar and his bureaucrats, and its purpose was to enhance the social stability and political vitality of the Imperial system. How ironic, then, that the Emancipation itself set the stage for the agrarian revolution that uprooted the prerevolutionary social order in 1917. For the actual effect of this reform was to reinforce those structural patterns that rendered the Russian rural order prone to rebellion, without stimulating the economic development and social transformation of the bulk of the countryside that might have undercut the potential for rebellion.

Agrarian Conditions after the Emancipation

The Emancipation was initiated at the insistence of the Imperial authorities, but the details of its implementation were left to the nobles of the various regions. Partly because of the landlords’ intervention and partly

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because of the claims of the state after the 1860s, the peasants were liberated with more obligations to meet than they had experienced under serfdom.⁵¹ In the infertile northern forest provinces, nobles ceded extra lands to peasants in return for inflated redemption payments that the ex-serfs could pay only by turning increasingly to seasonal industrial employments. In the black soil and southern steppe provinces, landlords “cut off” more than one-fifth of the lands formerly worked by the serfs so that the peasants would be forced to rent or work the landlords’ soil. Former state serfs and those tied to Polish landlords enjoyed better terms in their settlements. But ex-domestic serfs were left landless. Furthermore, all allotment holders were to remain tied to the land for forty-nine years in order to pay off what the state advanced to the nobles in compensation for the loss of their serfs. As a whole, liberation from serfdom had little but bitterly ironic consequences for the peasants. Although the Emancipation allotted the peasants over one-half of the land, it left them economically worse-off. They still yearned for liberation from exploitative obligations and for access to the remaining lands of the nobles, which the peasants believed should be theirs to own and work for themselves.

Even more important than the economic consequences of the Emancipation was its institutional basis. For ownership of the lands allotted to the ex-serfs was assigned according to traditional patterns, which meant that collective ownership through the *obshchina* remained the predominant form of land tenure in European Russia.⁵² The *obshchina* was a village commune that controlled property in land and distributed access to it among individual households. These often consisted of patriarchal extended families, each of which managed cultivation and reaped the fruits on an individual basis. Each household, depending upon its size, putatively had an equal right to an allotment of plowland and access to meadows, common pastures, and forests. Periodically the community’s land was “re-partitioned” in order to reaffirm the principle of equal access in the face of changing family composition.

Historically, the *obshchina* had been reinforced by the nobility and the state, because it provided a useful mechanism for the collective guarantee of peasant obligations and for assuring the maintenance (at subsistence levels) of the maximum number of serf “souls.”⁵³ The Emancipation continued this tradition in a new way, for the state would act as intermediary in the process of redemption only if all of the households in a community jointly assumed responsibility for subsequent repayments over the forty-nine year period.⁵⁴ Once this was agreed, it became virtually impossible for an individual peasant to break his ties to the *obshchina*. To do so, he had to pay off his entire portion of redemption or find someone to buy him out. Moreover, individualist agricultural practices were discouraged; for any consolidation of holdings, or escape from the rhythm of collec-

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tively enforced three-field cultivation, required the assent of two-thirds of the village assembly. Finally, the communes themselves had to have government permission to sell off allotment lands. The effect, inescapably, was to keep the bulk of the peasants on the land, at work in the old ways.

To be sure, there were important regional variations in the development of Russian agriculture and relations of production in the last decades of the nineteenth century, for the Emancipation reinforced preexisting trends that furthered the commercialization of agriculture around the edges of European Russia while the core remained untransformed.⁵⁵ In the Baltic provinces an early emancipation in 1817 had freed serfs without land allotments and denied them the right to migrate; thus landlords enjoying access to Western grain markets were able to develop large-scale capitalist estates worked by wage laborers. In the western Ukraine, peasants rented allotment lands to previously established capitalist grower-processors of sugar beets and sought work, along with seasonal migrants, in these “factories in the fields.” In the southeastern regions, railway construction allowed many former Imperial serfs, who had been freed with relatively generous allotments, to turn to commercial smallholder farming. Similarly, after 1890, with the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad, new settlement in Siberia was promoted by the state. And those petty nobles and wealthier peasants who could take advantage of this opportunity founded small capitalist farms without regard to traditional forms of community or cultivation. Finally, in the northern forested provinces (of the Lakes, Central Industrial, and Northern regions), where agriculture could not be commercially profitable except near big cities, nobles avidly sold off their remaining lands after the 1860s. In the same areas, peasant communities saddled with extensive allotment lands accelerated the pre-Emancipation tendency of sending seasonal migrants to industrial jobs in the cities. This trend particularly intensified with the growth of factories after 1880. And, when the Stolypin reforms of 1906 allowed peasants to break their communal ties, many northern peasant-workers took advantage of this opportunity to migrate permanently to urban areas.

Yet the massive core of agricultural Russia—comprising the many provinces of the Central Black Earth and the adjacent steppes of the middle Volga region—remained largely uncommercialized, with traditional relations of production surviving in modified form.⁵⁶ This was the area where the Emancipation had left “cut-off” lands in the hands of the nobles, and where the controls of the *obshchina* over peasant property and cultivation were strongest and almost universally present. Some poorer nobles sold their lands. (Indeed, by 1905, Russian peasants in general had increased their share of ownership to nearly two-thirds of all farmlands.).⁵⁷ Yet many landlords held on by renting out pieces of their estate lands in return for labor dues or shares of the crop.

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*Map 2. The main regions of European Russia. Source: Hugh Seron-Watson, *The Russian Empire 1801–1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 770.*

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Since the peasants were tied to the soil and increasingly land hungry the noble could easily rent out his estate in small plots for extraordinarily high rates and live from the proceeds. Rentier relations were easily substituted for the traditional [noble–serf] relation of subsistence agriculture. This enabled the noble to draw an income from the estate lands while leaving the bulk of the responsibility for managing cultivation and providing the implements and livestock to the peasants.⁵⁸

The renters were frequently whole peasant communities. Otherwise the leased lands appear to have gone primarily to peasant families (tied to communities) who simply needed more soil to work for subsistence. Especially in the core provinces, land purchases and rentals did not generate a strong rich-peasant stratum. Rather such purchases and rentals “served as a prop to subsistence cultivation among those elements of the peasantry which still retained the minimal requisite capital to till the land.”⁵⁹

On the eve of the 1917 Revolution, fully one-half to two-thirds of the peasant households in Russia were still essentially subsistence producers.⁶⁰ These were concentrated in the central regions of rentier agriculture and included a mixture of allotment holders and tenants who coexisted within the traditional *obshchina* framework. Theirs was a continuous struggle for survival in the face of deepening poverty brought about by the coincidence of stagnant technology, poor market opportunities, and rising population—all in addition to the heavy exactions imposed upon peasant incomes by the landlords and the state.

Although the Emancipation and its aftermath made economic survival even more problematic for its members, paradoxically, the peasant community was freed in most respects from political control by the nobility and its estate managers. The peasants were given rights of self-government under the supervision of bureaucratic agents of the Imperial State.⁶¹ The *mir*, or village assembly of all household heads, became the center of formal political authority. In addition to its basic economic functions of allocating land and regulating the crop cycle, the *mir* now had responsibilities for the enforcement of community obligations for taxes and redemption payments as well as the regulation of the passport system governing movements of peasants from the village. The elected elder, traditionally an informal leader of the collectively self-governed *mir*, was made responsible to and removable by land captains and police, the official overseers of village affairs. In this sense, the peasant conduct of village affairs was modified by bureaucratic intrusions. Still, the overall effect of the post-Emancipation measures was to increase the peasants’ collective handling of their own local political affairs and thus to render the villages more autonomous and solidary against outsiders.

How could there have been a set of conditions more conducive to agrarian revolution? A nobility in economic and political decline maintained,

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nevertheless, a foothold in the countryside—tied to the peasants by baldly exploitative and functionless rentier relations. Meanwhile, the collective institutions and political independence of the peasant communities had been strengthened; while the peasants were burdened with heavier outside demands to be met with unchanged methods of production. Indeed, as the taxes necessitated by Witte's industrialization programs coincided with the general agricultural crisis to render the peasants' situation desperate, local disturbances occurred more frequently after 1890, even in the face of sure repression.⁶² All that was necessary to ensure a general conflagration was the failure of coercive controls. That happened temporarily in 1905, and again—this time irreversibly—in 1917. Both times the occasion was war and defeat for the Imperial military.

The Impact of the Political Crises of 1905 and 1917

The Revolution of 1905 began in the cities but soon spread to the countryside. With the army bogged down in the futile war with Japan and the government preoccupied with urban unrest, peasants joined the fray beginning in the spring of 1905.⁶³ For a time the peasants were free from effective repression. As Gerschenkron points out:

The government had long developed a simple technique for dealing with peasant violence or resistance. An army detachment would be sent into the riotous village, dispersing the crowds, if necessary by the use of firearms, arresting the ringleaders, staging mass whippings, and then departing with peace and order re-established. Those methods were efficient enough as long as riots were few and far apart. When they became a nearly ubiquitous mass phenomenon, with large segments of the government forces deflected by the war in the Far East, and, when in addition peasant rebellion coincided with a widespread strike movement in transportation, communications, and manufacturing, the revolution was at hand.⁶⁴

Following its own rhythm punctuated by the seasons, the peasant movement reached a peak in the autumn of 1905, then tapered off, only to revive substantially in the spring and summer of 1906. During the last half of 1906, however, the government—having reintroduced the army into European Russia after hastily concluding the Russo-Japanese War in the fall of 1905—was able, bit by bit, to suppress violently the peasant rebellion.

Peasant actions during the abortive Revolution of 1905 followed patterns that render certain possible explanations more plausible than others. Data concerning what happened come from a questionnaire sent out in 1907 by the Imperial Free Economic Society to correspondents in forty-seven out of fifty provinces of European Russia. Analyses of this information have been made by G. T. Robinson, in his *Rural Russia Under the*

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Old Regime, and by Maureen Perrie, in an article entitled "The Russian Peasant Movement of 1905–1907."⁶⁵

The immediate peasant objectives in the Revolution of 1905 were overwhelmingly economic, not political. Their quarrel was with the landlords, and conflicts with police and other governmental representatives came mainly as a by-product of these conflicts with the landlords. According to Perrie:

The forms assumed by the movement against the landowners were determined primarily by the system of land-tenure and agrarian relationships in each given locality. The movement was strongest in those areas, such as the Central Black Earth, the Volga, and the Ukraine, where the exploitation of the peasant renters by the gentry landowners was greatest, or where the severest hardships had been caused by the transition from renting to large-scale capitalist farming. Here the predominant form of the movement was the attack on the landowner's estate. This often involved the destruction of the manor house and outbuildings, to ensure the "master" would never return, and the seizure of the estate lands and property by the peasants. In some areas, such as those in the west, where the estates were worked by an agricultural proletariat, strikes for better wages and conditions were common.⁶⁶

Respondents to the 1907 questionnaire downplayed the effects of agitation by revolutionary parties on the peasants, but they emphasized that local leadership frequently fell to peasants with extralocal contacts and experiences as town laborers or army recruits. However, Robinson points out that the practice of going away temporarily to the towns for wage-work was much more widespread, and this particular kind of opportunity for mass contact with urban ideas was therefore more general, in the villages north of the forest-step boundary than in those to the southward, whereas the economic situation of the peasants was in general more difficult in the *guberniias* lying in a broad band along and below this boundary; and . . . with exceptions . . . it was not to the north of this boundary, but to the south of it that the most serious agrarian disturbances of this revolutionary period took place.⁶⁷

Furthermore, Robinson argues that it was "probably not a matter of pure coincidence that among the twenty *guberniias* [provinces] in which the landlords suffered the heaviest losses during the disturbances of the Autumn of 1905, sixteen show a predominance of repartitional tenure over hereditary holding by individual peasant households."⁶⁸ Finally, Perrie maintains that "in most cases, the peasants participated in the movement as an entire village or commune . . . ,"⁶⁹ and that, in the name of the traditional "labor principle" of equal access to the land by all families that worked it, the peasant communities frequently attacked rich peasants with separate individual farms as well as the estates of the nobility.⁷⁰

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From all of this it makes sense to conclude that the deepest impulses of the agrarian revolts in 1905–7 came from the impoverished peasant *obshchinas* of the core provinces of European Russia. The basic “reason” for revolt was economic hardship, and a temporary opportunity was provided by the Russo-Japanese War. Quite traditional ideas and forms of community solidarity shaped the struggle: “The organizational basis of the peasant revolution was, so to speak, ‘ready made’ in the villages.”⁷¹

Certainly this was the conclusion reached by the tsarist authorities. Having squeaked by the Revolution of 1905, the tsarist regime abandoned its policy of shoring up the peasant commune. It undertook in the so-called Stolypin reforms to promote the break-up of repartitional lands into private holdings and to facilitate land sales by poorer peasants and purchases by richer ones. Between 1906 and 1917, these measures, in tandem with general economic developments, helped somewhat to alleviate agrarian stagnation, promote permanent migration to urban industrial areas, and increase economic differentiation and individualism in the countryside. Still, by 1917—although the proportion of peasant households officially holding allotments under hereditary as opposed to communal tenure had increased from less than one-fourth to more than one-half—only one-tenth of all peasant families had, since 1905, been resettled on consolidated individual holdings.⁷² One must also consider that “after a separation of title alone, the old land-linkage was still preserved in many of its aspects, and that even a physical consolidation failed in many cases to cut the last tie of common property.” Thus one cannot but agree with Robinson that “a great deal still survived of the old collective interests and the old apparatus for collective action . . . ”⁷³ Even where the new measures were most successful in promoting permanent migration by the poor or separation by the rich peasants, they may simply have reinforced the radical solidarity and control over the village assemblies of the middle peasants who remained behind. Moreover, the Stolypin reforms had “little impact on the central provinces where the peasant problem was most acute.”⁷⁴

Not surprisingly, therefore, the agrarian revolution of 1917 closely resembled that of 1905 in its forms and rhythm.⁷⁵ In the wake of the February Revolution against tsardom in the cities, the peasant movement against the local estates commenced in the spring with encroachments upon landlords’ properties and the withholding of rent or labor services. Then the conflict gradually accelerated and deepened into direct, violent attacks on manors and seizures of estate lands to be redistributed among the peasants. The climax was reached by the autumn of 1917 and was officially sanctioned after the Bolsheviks came to national-urban power in October. As in 1905, peasant actions were most violent and radical in “the block of provinces south and southeast of Moscow which made up the Central Agricultural and Middle Volga Regions,”⁷⁶ where rentier landlords and repartitional

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communes prevailed. To be sure, landlords elsewhere were, sooner or later, also driven out—either through less violent direct actions by peasants and agricultural laborers, or through the administrative extension of revolutionary policies, or both. But the peasant movement in the core provinces set the pace and tone of the agrarian revolution.

The really important difference between 1917 and 1905 lay in what happened with the army. Whereas in 1906 a basically intact Imperial army could be used to crush rural revolts, during the summer and fall of 1917 the bloated army that had been mobilized to fight a total European war disintegrated. The decisive defeat of the June offensive into Austria was what finally turned the front-line troops defeatist.⁷⁷ After that, the dissolution of the army and the deepening of agrarian revolt became intertwined. Former soldiers returned to the villages to join in, and often lead, the land seizures. The Provisional Government had no reliable troops to suppress the spontaneous and violent movement against property, which it never could accept and endorse. And the peasants became increasingly emboldened as they sensed that no official force could be brought against them, and as the social power of their collective solidarity was reinforced by the arms of the ex-soldiers. “Apart from resentment at the Government’s ineffective attempts at repression and from the natural momentum with the passing of time, the upswelling of the peasant movement in the autumn of 1917 is explained by the arrival of more and more soldiers, demobilized and ‘self-demobilized,’ in the villages.”⁷⁸ Above all, the soldiers’ arrival, and the collapse of official repression that it implied, sealed the success of the peasants revolution in 1917, in contrast to its costly defeat in 1906–7.

The Leveling Outcome in Russia

What the Russian peasants wanted most out of the Revolution and what they immediately achieved was possession of the land and the available means for working it.⁷⁹ Virtually everywhere the landed estates of the nobility were seized or requisitioned, and their arable land, woods and water, livestock, buildings and tools were divided up by the peasants. In many (though by no means all) cases the proprietor himself or herself was violently attacked and the estate buildings burned in order to ensure the irrevocability of the land transfer: “One man explained in quaint language what this aim was: ‘the *muzhiki* [peasants] are destroying the squire’s nests so that the little bird will never be able to return’—the ‘bird’ here being a euphemism for large-scale landed property in general.”⁸⁰ In addition to the landed estates, the peasants, especially in the core provinces, seized the farms of the *khutors*, peasants who had consolidated individual properties and separated them from the *obshchina* (perhaps in response to the Stolypin reforms). Similarly, they pressured peasants who had enclosed individ-

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ual farms within the villages to once again submit to the collective disciplines of repartition and coordinated cultivation.

In the aggregate, the Russian peasantry gained possession of the land and resources formerly held by the landlords and they freed themselves from rental obligations to the former estate owners. Of course there were losses as well as gains, because much of the land seized had formerly been rented out to peasants and because possibilities for wage labor disappeared with the estates. One contemporary statistical estimate showed an average increase in land held by the peasants of about three to five acres per household.⁸¹ But there were enormous variations across provinces and even localities—because the increase in peasant lands depended upon the exact location of the noble and tsarist properties that were taken. Moreover, not all of the lands gained were equally useful. And not all were actually cultivated even if they were useful, because their new owners often lacked the necessary tools or seeds. Overall, many peasant households failed to gain much from the land revolution.⁸²

Of more interest and significance than aggregate results were the distributional effects within the peasantry. By 1919, virtually all agriculture in Russia had become the activity of peasant smallholders. For, as Chamberlin has pointed out, the “general result of the wholesale peasant land seizure of 1917 was a sweeping levelling in peasant agriculture.”⁸³ Richer peasant households were proportionately fewer and possessed on the average less land and fewer cows and horses. Households formerly of middling wealth seem to have held their own or gained a bit. And certainly the middling ranks were proportionately swelled by the agrarian revolution. For the big gainers were previously land-poor peasants, who especially benefited from the division of the estates. Likewise many (though not all) landless agricultural laborers and others without land who returned to the villages during the crisis were allotted modest holdings.⁸⁴

Plainly, the accomplishments of the Russian peasant revolution of 1917 contrast in important ways with the accomplishments of the French peasant revolution of 1789. In France, seigneurial claims and controls were abolished by the rebellious peasants. But private property, including both larger estates and rich peasant farms, was respected and not attacked. And within the French peasantry the big winners were those rich and middle peasants who already owned their own land (and other means of production). In Russia, however, the peasant revolution not only abolished rental claims of landlords but also seized and redistributed most private landed properties. This worked to the inordinate benefit of the less well-to-do and land-poor peasants. Still it is true that the processes of the French and Russian peasant revolutions were similar in many ways. And both the similarities and the differences can, analytically speaking, be explained in comparable terms.

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For one thing, in Russia as in France, the peasant village assembly, relatively autonomous as it was from outside control, provided the organizational basis for spontaneous and autonomous revolts. As Teodor Shanin says of the peasant rebellion in Russia: "Its organization was remarkable. Village assemblies decided how to divide the non-peasant property in each locality. Then action was taken, all households being compelled to participate in order to ensure success—and equal responsibility in the event of possible subsequent reprisals."⁸⁵ Higher authorities, try as they might to control or channel the local peasant revolts, had little success.⁸⁶ Land committees, set up by the Provisional Government as part of a bureaucracy to moderate the land revolution, were infiltrated from below and redirected to the peasants' own goals of land appropriation and local autonomy. Similar things happened to Socialist-Revolutionary Party organs and Bolshevik-inspired soviets during 1917–18. As a result, no one (the Bolsheviks after October included) could preserve the economic integrity of large estates. And the nature and extent of property redistributions were determined at village, district, or, at most, county levels, depending upon the extent of grass-roots cooperation among neighboring villages. The ironic result could be that peasants in some parts of provinces or counties got far more land to divide up than others, with higher authorities unable to promote wider redistribution. Yet it all makes sense when one realizes that the land revolution was above all autonomously controlled by the local village assemblies themselves.

Another comparison with France points to a difference between the two peasant revolutions. In both cases locally controlled peasant revolts were influenced by the specific nature of the society-wide political crises within the context of which they occurred. In France, the revolutionary crisis was primarily an internal political development. Although the royal administration and army were eventually weakened enough to become ineffective against the peasants, there was nothing similar to the sudden breakup of the huge armies that had been mobilized to fight World War I in Russia. Not only was that breakup essential to the success of the Russian peasant revolution, it also influenced the rapidity and the shape of the peasant accomplishments. For much of the intravillage politics of rural Russia in 1917 took the form of younger men, with guns and ideas brought home from their wartime military experience, challenging the authority and caution of the older traditional leaders of the *mir*, who were also often heads of patriarchal extended families. The result was almost certainly to push the land revolution to its conclusion sooner and more violently. Furthermore, part of the explanation for the leveling down of richer peasant households that occurred during 1917–18 is that formerly extended families were tending to break up during the crisis, leaving more households overall with smaller average size and wealth.⁸⁷ Some of this surely oc-

curred as a by-product of the self-assertion of the younger men. This, in turn, can be attributed to the fact that Russia's revolutionary political crisis came in the midst, and because of, national defeat in a massive, modern war. By contrast, in France the revolutionary political crisis first impinged upon the villages when the king called for elections to the Estates-General. Radicalizing as this was, we can imagine that the village assemblies for the occasion were convened and led, not (as in Russia) by militant "Young Turks," but by the usual (older as well as richer) community influentials.

Finally, we come to the common analytic factor that makes sense of the major difference between the two peasant revolutions: Just as the socioeconomic basis of the French peasant community explained the accomplishments and limits of the peasant revolution in France, so did the qualitatively different basis of the *obshchina* provide the key to the content of the peasant victory in Russia. French peasant communities, based as they were simply upon the coordination of the agricultural cycle and the management of residual common lands, supported the antiseigneurial revolts of 1789. But then they disintegrated in the face of the conflicting interests of richer and poorer peasants over private property rights. In contrast, the Russian *obshchina*, though it recognized and made possible landholding and cultivation by individual peasant households, did not legitimate private landed property as such. Rather "all land belonged to God," and the peasant community as a whole strove to gain access to as much as possible and then distribute it roughly equally to households (according either to their number of adult male laborers, or their number of "eaters," or some combination of these criteria). Furthermore, all land allocations were only temporary, until the next periodic repartition, when individual households would gain or lose strips of land according to their relative size. Obviously peasant communities with this sort of socioeconomic basis did nothing to enforce respect for private property (especially not that of exploiting landlords) among Russian peasants. Moreover, the repartitional aspect of the *obshchina* gave enormous leverage to advocates of equalitarianism within the Russian village.

In Russia during 1917, the pace of the peasant revolution was set where the *obshchina* was strongest. And even in areas where communal tenure or repartition had fallen into disuse, these practices were frequently revived for the revolutionary occasion. Contemporary observers wrote that the "land commune, coming alive with quite exceptional force, was undoubtedly the basic ideological kernel of the social mechanism which in fact carried out the agrarian revolution within the peasantry itself."⁸⁸ Understandably so, since the *obshchina* was the best and most familiar instrument at hand for the peasants to strike out effectively against their landlord antagonists. And it was the collective interest of the *obshchina* in

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expanding its landholdings, as well as its traditional deemphasis of private property rights, that rendered the Russian peasant revolution so all-encompassing and leveling in its accomplishments.

TWO COUNTERPOINTS: THE ABSENCE OF PEASANT REVOLTS IN THE ENGLISH AND GERMAN REVOLUTIONS

The agrarian upheavals that contributed indispensably to the French and Russian social revolutions could happen because both Old Regimes were in similar ways structurally prone to peasant revolts against landlords. Given that revolutionary political crises had deposed the absolute monarchs and disorganized centralized administrations and armies, agrarian class relations and local political arrangements in France and Russia afforded peasant communities sufficient solidarity and autonomy to strike out against the property and privileges of landlords. Conditions so conducive to peasant revolts were by no means present in all countries. And their absence could account for why a successful social revolution could not occur, even given a societal political crisis. Again, as in our examination of the causes of revolutionary political crises in Chapter 2, we can help to confirm the appropriateness of the hypotheses set forth for positive cases of social revolution by making contrasts to cases in which successful social revolutions did not occur. The English Revolution of the seventeenth century and the German Revolution of 1848–50 are two such cases. Though their respective characteristics and outcomes were quite different—the English Revolution was a successful *political* revolution, whereas the German Revolution was a *failed* social revolution—both were prevented from becoming successful social-revolutionary transformations. This was true in large part because the agrarian class and political structures of the English and German (East of the Elbe) old regimes gave predominant power to landlords and not to peasant communities. The national political capacities and interests of the English and the East Elbian landed upper classes were not the same; hence the differences between the Revolutions as wholes. But, for our purposes here, the significant point is that, in contrast to France and Russia, English and German landlords could not be successfully challenged from below, even during revolutionary political crises. To see why in a bit more detail, let us look briefly at each case in turn.

The English Parliamentary Revolution

The key events of the English Revolution span half of the seventeenth century, from the calling of the Long Parliament in 1640 through the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688–9, though most of the relevant action

took place between 1640 and 1660.⁸⁹ In many ways the dynamics of the English Revolution resembled those of the French. Charles I, facing a war-induced financial crisis, convened an upper-class-dominated parliament. This parliament quickly went on the offensive against his policies and demanded institutional changes to limit royal powers. Parliament benefited from popular demonstrations (especially by journeymen, artisans, and other petty propertied people)⁹⁰ and from a municipal revolution in London.⁹¹ This upheaval gave it some of the administrative and military resources it needed to forestall an attempted royal coup and later to field forces against the royalists in the Civil War. Successive crises split and polarized the original revolutionary supporters. And before it was ultimately reversed in the 1650s and '60s, the radicalization of the Revolution culminated in the arrest and execution of the king, the declaration of a republic, the popular assertion of democratic political and social demands, and the emergency establishment of a centralized political and military dictatorship. All of these were very similar indeed to the developments that would mark the trajectory of the French Revolution 150 years later.

Partly because of such similarities and partly because both Revolutions happened in countries that became capitalist, liberal democracies, the English and the French Revolutions are often similarly labeled "bourgeois revolutions." Whatever the appropriateness of this label for either Revolution,⁹² it should not blind us to the very important differences between them. Though the English Revolution was certainly a successful revolution, it was not a *social* revolution like the French. It was accomplished not through class struggle but through a civil war between segments of the dominant landed class (with each side drawing allies and supporters from all of the other classes and strata). And whereas the French Revolution markedly transformed class and social structures, the English Revolution did not. Instead it revolutionized the political structure of England. It abolished the right (and institutional capacity) of the king to intervene in local political, economic, and religious affairs, and, in general, forced him to rule only with the confidence and legislative support of Parliament.⁹³ Henceforth Parliament was by law regularly convened, and it became the central arena of British national politics, securely and solely controlled by the dominant class until the nineteenth century. To be sure, this political revolution functioned to further capitalist socioeconomic development in England. Yet it did so not because it suddenly placed a new class in power, but because it reinforced and sealed the direct political control of a dominant class that already had many (well interspersed and socially integrated) members engaged in capitalist agriculture and commerce.

Indeed, if we want to understand the English Revolution, we must look to the class that launched it, led it throughout, and ultimately benefited from it. That class, though it had merchant components, was fundamen-

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tally a landed upper class, consisting of a small elite stratum of juridical aristocrats and a large majority of landed gentry (who were socially regarded as gentlemen, though not legally ennobled). In sharp contrast to the aristocrats, seigneurs, and other *privilégiés* in France after 1789, this English landed upper class was not in any way (structurally) displaced by the Revolution. True, there were challenges to its hegemony especially from the Levellers, popular democrats somewhat similar to (though much less important than) the *sans culottes* of the French Revolution.⁹⁴ But what was missing in England—something that would have constituted both a direct assault on the base of power of the dominant class and an opening for urban radicals—were widespread peasant revolts against landlords. And it is not difficult to understand why such revolts were missing when we examine the agrarian class and local political structures that existed in England at the time.

By the seventeenth century, the English peasantry, though by no means as marginal as it would eventually become, had lost the battle to retain control over the approximately one-half of the agricultural land that it had held subject to the lords in medieval times.⁹⁵ There was a certain tragic irony here. Like the French peasantry, the English peasantry had won its freedom from serfdom during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but unlike the French, the English ex-serfs were not finally able to achieve secure tenure in their customary holdings. At first, they seemed to be doing better in this respect than the French, because they escaped seigneurial dues and began to establish clear freehold claims to their tenements. But English landlords succeeded in expanding their own domains and in keeping many peasants as “copyholders,” which meant that their holdings could be sold or inherited only subject to the payment of fines to the lord. And, as economic historian Robert Brenner writes, “in the end entry fines often appear to have provided the landlords with the lever they needed to dispose of customary peasant tenants.”⁹⁶ The way was left open for landlords to engross and enclose large holdings to rent out (capitalist-style) to leasehold tenants, a development that was greatly encouraged by expanding market opportunities for wool and grain producers from the sixteenth century on. The upshot was that by the seventeenth century, the English landlords seem to have owned at least two-thirds of the land, which (unlike the French) they were not merely renting to peasants in small plots but often leasing to commercial tenants.⁹⁷

Similarly, during the entire period (from the sixteenth century on), the peasant community was in many places being polarized from within by, on the one hand, the rise of prosperous commercially oriented yeomen farmers (some becoming tenants of great landlords and others rich freeholders) and, on the other hand, the decline into poverty or insecurity of husbandmen with inadequate land.⁹⁸ These became increasingly dependent

upon servants' work or (where available) wage labor. Unlike the situation in France, where of course some such economic differentiation also occurred, rich and poor could not unite against seigneurial dues and controls that affected all peasant landholders, for these did not exist in England.

As if such socioeconomic impediments were not enough, local political arrangements in seventeenth-century England were even more unfavorable to widespread and concerted peasant actions against landlords; and these affected peasants everywhere, even in the many places where enclosing landlords did not hold sway. There were no peasant-run village assemblies partially subject to a royal bureaucracy and partially shielded from landlord dominance by that same bureaucracy. For the kings (or queens) of England had no paid bureaucracy or standing armies that penetrated (even nominally) into the localities. Instead, from the time of Henry VIII, they ruled (if at all) through unpaid appointees from among the county landed gentry.⁹⁹ Landed gentlemen served as lords' lieutenants, deputy lieutenants, justices of the peace, and sheriffs. And yeomen closely allied to them often served in important subordinate offices such as that of constable.¹⁰⁰ Parish clergy, far from being as in France potential allies or protectors of the peasants, were appointed by and loyal to the landlords. These county landed establishments, as they may very appropriately be labeled, controlled all important political and judicial affairs. They dispensed justice, ran the militia, enforced the poor laws, and did whatever implementing of royal decisions they were inclined to do. Peasants as a whole had no unity or autonomy in the face of these county establishments. For the yeomen were in effect coopted as subordinate officials, and the laborers and servants were typically strongly tied to their landlord masters. Even when local disorders such as resistance to enclosures could be mustered, sanctioning instruments of cooptation and repression were close at hand for threatened landlords.

Indeed, it was from its bastions of county-level political power that the English landed upper class came together through its elected representatives to Parliament in 1640–1 to challenge the would-be absolutist Charles I in the name of upper-class liberty. And throughout the Civil War, even as national political quarrels divided the "natural rulers," county-level political machineries continued to operate. Mostly these machineries remained under the leadership of whichever landed families were tied to the ascendant faction; and, at the same time, kinship and social relations still functioned to tie the local landed classes together.¹⁰¹ Only at the radical height of the Revolution did the county committees that governed in each locality sometimes fall under the leadership of people not from the dominant class, such as yeomen. Yet even yeomen, much as they might sympathize with Leveller ideas about political democracy for all economically independent citizens, were not interested in leading (or allowing) a peasant revolt against landlords.

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Besides, the radical phase of the Revolution, with its dual threat (from the viewpoint of the landed upper class) of political centralization and social leveling, soon passed. The landed upper class compromised its way back into a restored monarchy, though this time one that had to respect the ultimate control by the county rulers and their Parliament over military forces, taxation, church affairs, and economic regulation. When another Stuart monarch started to forget in the 1680s, he was quickly reminded (and replaced), this time with very little fuss. Meanwhile, the preindustrial English lower classes remained on the defensive politically and economically as the country moved toward capitalist industrialization. They—especially the peasantry—had not possessed the collective strength to challenge successfully the landed upper class, even when it quarreled with the monarchy and within its own ranks during the English Revolution. Consequently, that Revolution remained an upper-class-dominated political revolution, rather than developing into a social revolution from below.

Now we move through two-hundred years of history to look briefly at another revolution, this time an aborted social revolution, where the absence of peasant revolts against an entrenched landed class also made a difference.

The Failed German Revolution of 1848–50

The German Revolution of 1848–50 was really a series of revolts centered primarily in the urban capitals of the various separate monarchies and principalities that comprised the loosely integrated Germanic Confederation. These were but a subset of a rash of similar revolts that swept through all of Europe. Yet they culminated in a concerted attempt to establish through the work of the Frankfurt Parliament a unified, liberal-democratic German nation, with the former Prussian king as an elected constitutional monarch.¹⁰²

The social and political program worked out by the German liberals assembled at Frankfurt—liberal civil rights for all citizens; representative government; and removal of social and political obstacles to national unification and economic freedom—was not much different from that enacted in 1789–90 by the constitutional monarchists of the French Revolution. Nor should this seem surprising, because Germany in 1848 was not much more economically or politically developed than France in 1789. And the social composition of the Frankfurt Parliament (mostly lawyers in and outside of government employ) was very similar to the composition of the French revolutionary Assemblies.¹⁰³

There were also important similarities between the dynamics of the German Revolution and those of the French. In both cases, liberal politicians rose to official power when monarchs were put on the defensive by

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popular uprisings, especially those of urban artisans, shopkeepers, and journeymen disgruntled by harsh economic conditions in recessions. It is often stressed in accounts of the German Revolution that the goals of such popular rebels—lower food prices; higher wages; political guarantees of guild organization and/or employment—were irrelevant to the political objectives of the liberal politicians and antithetical to the dominant laissez-faire liberal economic ideas of the time. Indeed, this is typically cited as a major explanation for the failure of the German Revolution.¹⁰⁴ But, of course, during the French Revolution, popular and “bourgeois liberal” goals were equally at odds,¹⁰⁵ and yet that Revolution succeeded.

What really set the German Revolution apart from the French, and accounted crucially for the failure of 1848–50, was the ability of the Prussian king, after a year of revolutionary politics, to put a decisive stop to the whole affair. He was able to ignore the laboriously constructed Frankfurt Constitution, disband the Parliament, and crush any resistance throughout Germany by force. We can easily imagine that, by 1790 in France, Louis XVI would have dearly loved to have been able to do the same. But he could not. What accounts for the difference?

Part of the answer lies in the contrasting behavior of the French dominant class in 1787–8 and the Prussian Junkers in 1848. We have already noted that the French privileged strata, in launching the French Revolution, rendered the royal armies unreliable as instruments for suppressing the initial popular demonstrations and set in motion processes inside and outside the army that facilitated the eventual breakdown of military discipline. In contrast, the German Revolution was not launched by noble revolts against monarchs. Rather it was triggered by news of the suddenly successful Parisian revolution against Louis Philippe, an event that emboldened urban rioters in German capitals and rendered German monarchs nervous about their ability to remain in power without making political concessions to liberals. Specifically, in Prussia, “revolutionary events” all over Europe combined with news of Metternich’s fall in Austria and with the eruption of violence in Berlin between soldiers and popular protestors to inaugurate dramatic changes. The rather timid Frederick William IV, acting against the vehement advice of his military advisors, withdrew his army from Berlin, authorized the creation of an urban militia, and turned ministerial powers over to liberals.

Thus the Prussian monarchy (like many other German monarchies) was perhaps not quite so weakened when the liberals took over as was the Bourbon monarchy in France by 1789. However, a potentially social-revolutionary situation had emerged just as surely in Prussia in the spring of 1848 as in France by the early summer of 1789. In both cases the monarchy was on the defensive in the face of a municipal revolution, and its military monopoly and authority were weakened. When Louis XVI

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sent his troops away from Paris after July 14, 1789, he too, or some of his supporters, must have hoped that they could be used if necessary later on. But Louis XVI's initial hesitations evolved into a rout for him, and for the monarchy and the nobility, whereas the equally indecisive and timid Frederick William IV proved able to change his mind a year later.

Surely an important part of the explanation for the contrasting evolution of events lies in the failure of popular, particularly peasant, revolts to promote the dissolution of the Prussian armies in 1848–9. In contrast, by 1790, after a year and a half of urban and rural popular revolts throughout all of France, the French royal armies had suffered mass desertions and politicization leading to breakdowns of discipline, as well as the loss of thousands of noble officers spurred to emigrate in substantial part because of the popular revolts.¹⁰⁶ (Besides, if the comparison to Russia in 1917 is considered, we may note that there peasant revolts accelerated the dissolution of standing armies even though the revolutionary political crisis was not originally launched by dominant class actions against the monarchy.)

Not that peasant revolts were entirely absent in Germany in 1848. In fact there *were* intense antiseigneurial revolts—apparently similar in objectives, forms, and results to the peasant revolts of the French Revolution—in the small states of southwestern Germany and moderately widespread ones of the same kind in central Germany (Saxony and Hanover). But East of the Elbe, except for some outbreaks in Schleswig-Holstein and Silesia, no major peasant insurrections developed. However restive they may have been, the peasants of the Junker heartlands, recruiting grounds for the officers and men of the formidable Prussian armies, did not revolt.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the differential incidence of peasant revolts in Germany in 1848 corresponds to the contrast between features of agrarian sociopolitical structure in the regions of Germany west versus east of the River Elbe along the very lines that our general hypotheses about conditions for peasant revolts would predict.

Generally speaking, agrarian structures west of the Elbe in Germany resembled those of France. Land was divided up into small, scattered units to a large extent owned or rented by individual peasants, but with patterns of land use still subject to significant community controls. Peasants had become free in their persons and possessed secure rights to own and transfer lands. And the feudal prerogatives of the lords survived primarily in the form of rents, fees, and dues, and weak rights to influence the use and transfer of the former seigneurial lands. Local political jurisdiction had mostly passed to the agents of monarchs anxious to afford the communities of peasant taxpayers independence and protection from encroachments by the nontaxpaying nobility.¹⁰⁸

In stark contrast, east of the Elbe the Junker landlords were in a much

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stronger position than their western noble cousins. As David Landes writes:

Noble estates (*Rittergüter*) tended to be large and the demesne was farmed as a commercial enterprise; the bulk of the lord's income came from the sale of cash crops, primarily cereals, both within Germany and abroad. Even peasant homesteads often stood apart and were not subject to the communal servitudes of the open-field system.¹⁰⁹

Throughout the eighteenth century, the Junker estates were worked by serf laborers subject to virtually unlimited claims on their persons and labor time. The claims were readily enforced because the Junkers were not only estate lords but also the local agents of the Prussian state. Like the English gentry, the Junker landlords controlled justice and military units for their own purposes. After the Reform Movement, many serfs received personal "freedom," but the continuation of the Junkers' monopoly on local administrative sovereignty, and the paucity and precariousness of peasant landholdings in the east, combined to guarantee that many ex-serfs would remain as laborers on the *Rittergüter*.¹¹⁰ Certainly the abolition of serfdom put the peasants east of the Elbe in no better position to revolt collectively against their oppression in the nineteenth century than they had been in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. Thus their relative quiescence in 1848, while their already much better-off counterparts in the west were revolting against the remnants of seigneurial authority, is hardly surprising.

Yet the consequences for Germany were momentous. Not only did the class power of the Junkers remain intact, so did the military capacity for counterrevolutionary reversal of gains already achieved in 1848. If there had been widespread and continuing peasant revolts in Prussia in 1848, then, given that the Prussian army was recruited almost exclusively in the rural districts, its officer corps would have been disrupted and its rank and file "would have been susceptible to revolutionary propaganda. As it was the Prussian army remained a reliable instrument in the hands of the King."¹¹¹ And Frederick William used it in 1849–50 to destroy the liberal and social revolution throughout Germany. The close alliance of the Junker nobility and the bureaucratic Prussian monarchy remained intact and ascendant, soon to unify Germany on an authoritarian basis.

PEASANT INCAPACITY AND GENTRY VULNERABILITY IN CHINA

Finally, it is time to turn to the complexities of the third positive case of social revolution. The Chinese Revolution is, by common consent, the most obviously peasant-based social revolution of the trio featured in this book. Surprising as it may seem, though, the agrarian class and local political structures of old-regime China, despite some similarities to France

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and Russia, resembled those of England and Prussia in key respects. By analyzing the Chinese agrarian structures in comparative perspective, we shall put ourselves in a position to understand the distinctive rhythms and patterns of China's revolutionary interregnum between 1911 and 1949. A peasant revolution against landlords did ultimately occur in China as in France and Russia, but the peasants of China lacked the kind of structurally preexisting solidarity and autonomy that allowed the agrarian revolutions in France and Russia to emerge quickly and relatively spontaneously in reaction to the breakdown of the central governments of the Old Regimes. In contrast, the Chinese agrarian revolution was more protracted. And it required for its consummation the establishment through military conquest of secure "base areas," within which collective organization and freedom from direct landlord control could be created for the peasants.

Structural Conditions

As in eighteenth-century France and post-Emancipation Tsarist Russia, agrarian life in China was significantly shaped by rentier relations between peasants and landlords, although the extent of inequality of landholding in particular was least in China. About 40 percent of the land overall was rented—relatively much more in the south, and less in the north. Between 20 and 30 percent of all peasant families rented all of the land they tilled, and many of the remainder rented pieces to supplement their own small holdings. Landlords who did not work or live in the villages (though they often lived in local towns) owned about three-quarters of the rented-out land. This means that they possessed about 30 percent of the land overall, and such lands brought them rents of up to 50 percent of the crop.¹¹² From these facts about landholding alone we might conclude that Chinese landlords were considerably weaker and that Chinese peasants were considerably stronger than their respective French and Russian counterparts.

But this was not the case, either economically or sociopolitically. It is important to remember that the Chinese gentry appropriated surpluses not only through land rents. They also realized earnings through usurious interest rates on loans to peasant producers, sharing in Imperial taxes and local surtaxes, and claiming fees for organizing and directing local organizations and services (such as clans, Confucian societies, irrigation projects, schools, and militias).¹¹³ Imperial taxes were similarly a source of income for the French and Russian dominant classes, but usury and the various local fees and taxes were forms of surplus appropriation much more distinctive to the Chinese gentry. In turn, these reflected and depended upon the fact that, in sharp contrast to French seigneurs and Russian estate owners, the Chinese gentry had a preponderant organizational position within local communities. Theirs was a position somewhat

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analogous, especially in its political consequences for the peasantry, to the local hegemony of the English landed class and the Prussian Junkers. Chinese peasants did not have their own village communities set in opposition to the landlords. And, although they were smallholders like the French and Russian peasants (and owned more land to boot), Chinese peasants, like their hapless English and Prussian counterparts, lacked ties among themselves that might have supported communal-class solidarity against the gentry. Instead, the Chinese gentry dominated local rural communities in ways that simultaneously enhanced their economic position (from what it would be through landholding alone) and kept an internally fragmented peasantry under firm sociopolitical control.

To fully understand this situation in its particular Chinese form, we must note that the basic unit of community in traditional China was *not* the individual village (i.e., cluster of peasant residences and/or individual holdings) but the marketing community composed of a cluster of villages. As G. W. Skinner writes:

What might be called the basic ground plan of Chinese society was essentially cellular. Apart from certain remote and sparsely settled areas, the landscape of rural China was occupied by cellular systems of roughly hexagonal shape. The nucleus of each cell was one of approximately 45,000 market towns (as of the mid-nineteenth century), and its cytoplasm may be seen in the first instance as the trading area of the town's market. The body of the cell—which is to say the immediately dependent area of the town—typically included fifteen to twenty-five villages, usually but not necessarily nucleated.¹¹⁴

Though they resided and worked in individual villages, the marketing community was the significant local world of the peasants. There they regularly bought and sold at the periodic markets, obtained craftsmen's services, secured loans, participated in religious rites, and found marriage partners.

The local gentry, not the peasants, directly or indirectly provided the leadership for organized social activities within the market community and represented the locality at its interfaces with the larger society. Clans (where they flourished) and many kinds of peasant-recruiting associations—which were everywhere organized for religious, educational, welfare, or economic purposes—all tended to be based within marketing communities and managed by gentry. Especially in wealthier, more internally stratified localities, gentry organized and controlled militias and other organizations that functioned, in effect, as channels of popular control and poor relief. Ironically, this meant that the relatively wealthiest gentry, in areas with the highest tenancy rates, were perhaps least susceptible to local class-based peasant revolts against their privileges. But the same sort of thing occurred throughout China: The gentry, by creating and leading local organizations, coopted peasants, thereby enhancing local bargaining

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power in relation to imperial officials and deflecting potential unrest from themselves.¹¹⁵

Whereas associational, clientage, and extended quasi-kinship ties thus cut across class distinctions between peasants and gentry landlords in traditional China, peasants in the villages were largely isolated from and in competition with one another. As Fei Hsiao-tung put it: "As far as the peasants are concerned, social organization stops at the loosely organized neighborhood. In the traditional structure, peasants live in small cells, which are the families, without strong ties between the cells."¹¹⁶ Except where gentry-run organizations played a role (say, in building and maintaining irrigation works), agricultural production was managed by individual, basically nuclear families.¹¹⁷ These families had to possess or rent their own land and possess or buy their own equipment and (if needed) supplementary labor. Families were constantly maneuvering to acquire more than their neighbors in a system where factors of production could be bought and sold, and where the very poor could lose out altogether. There were no common lands for the peasants themselves to manage; if clans or associations owned lands, they were managed by gentry or their associates. And peasants rarely cooperated to perform agricultural tasks except on a commercial-contractual basis. In short, unless Chinese peasants came together organizationally under gentry aegis, they tended to remain in competitive isolation.

Patterns of Agrarian Unrest

Given these characteristics of local communities, it should hardly seem surprising that, in late Imperial times, agrarian unrest rarely took the form of concerted attacks by peasants against landlords within their communities. From time to time individual landlords were attacked by peasants who protested the hoarding of grain in periods of dearth or the collusion of gentry in corrupt tax-collections. But the more prevalent and better organized forms of agrarian rebellion involved attacks upon the official agents of the Imperial state. These ranged from frequent riots at the office-compounds (*yamens*) of county magistrates, held to protest taxes or demand famine relief, to occasional massive rebellions that erected counteradministrations encompassing entire regions and sometimes succeeded in toppling, and replacing, ruling dynasties.¹¹⁸

Certainly both riots and rebellions always depended upon peasant participation. And their declared goals always made reference to peasant grievances—especially against "evil practices" such as official corruption, hoarding of grain, and prices and rents perceived as unusually exorbitant. Then, too, non-Confucian secret societies that sought to recruit poor peasants frequently elaborated millenarian ideologies featuring utopian dreams of

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political justice and equality of access to land.¹¹⁹ The Taiping ideology, as a kind of extreme case, envisaged a social world without gentry, and with both economic and male-female equality within agrarian communities.¹²⁰

In terms of organization, though, all of the more sustained forms of peasant-based revolt were sooner or later led or infiltrated by nonpeasants. Locally and regionally based secret societies with heterodox religious or political purposes often provided the organizational basis for revolts. Yet they were frequently led by merchants or would-be literati who had failed the Imperial exams—that is, by individuals on the margins of (and aspiring to join) the gentry.¹²¹ Riots against taxes or officials were very often led by local gentry themselves.¹²² Furthermore, when any rebellion grew to significant proportions, it usually attracted orthodox Confucian gentry into positions of active support and leadership, and hence eventual influence over the movement's goals and practices. Historically, even peasant bandit leaders who successfully led rebellions that made them emperors came to rely upon the gentry to govern the country. For the gentry alone had the connections and interests that bridged the gaps between administrative towns and the vast settled countryside. At the height of its power in the mid-nineteenth century, the Taiping Rebellion was showing similar tendencies, although it was not so successful at winning gentry supporters—a failing that may help to explain its ultimate defeat.¹²³ Throughout Imperial Chinese history, peasant grievances fueled revolts—but especially the successful rebellions simply revitalized the existing system. For peasants lacked the local community-based autonomy to render their resistance even potentially revolutionary.

Does all of this mean that the Chinese gentry were as invulnerable to widespread peasant revolts as the English and Prussian landed upper classes? In many respects they were in a comparably strong position because of their similar local hegemony over the peasantry. Yet there were important ways in which their situation was less secure. For one thing, whereas the seventeenth-century English and nineteenth-century Prussian landlords were masters of agrarian sectors that (albeit in different ways) were making successful transitions to capitalist production, the Chinese gentry were the dominant class in a significantly commercialized but developmentally stymied agrarian economy. Furthermore, the Chinese gentry were sitting atop, not yeomen farmers and/or agricultural laborers, but a mass of peasant smallholders, most of whom would stand to gain if gentry lands were redistributed and their surplus appropriations abolished. In these strictly economic respects, therefore, the situation of the Chinese gentry was like that of the French seigneurs and the Russian estate owners.

Besides, although the local sociopolitical predominance of the Chinese gentry resembled that of the English and Prussian landlords, their relationship to the central political power, the monarchy, was not the same as

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either. On the one hand, in contrast to the Prussian Junkers, the Chinese gentry (especially from the mid-nineteenth century on) found themselves increasingly at odds with the monarchy and its bureaucratic agents. And, as we saw in Chapter 2, the locally and provincially ensconced gentry played an active role in bringing down the dynasty and dismantling the Imperial state in 1911 and immediately after. But, on the other hand, unlike the English landed upper class, the Chinese gentry was historically *dependent upon* a centralized, significantly bureaucratic imperial state. There was no national parliament to knit together dominant-class representatives from all of the various marketing communities. No such simple conjunction of local and national power had developed historically in a country so vast as China, with its several levels of administration intervening between Peking and each locality. Instead the locally rooted Chinese gentry was knit together on regional and country-wide bases only through participation in and cooperation with the Confucian Imperial bureaucracy. Likewise, only the unified administrative and coercive power of the Imperial state could provide certain backing over the long run for the dominant-class position of the gentry. The irony is that although the Chinese gentry had, during the period leading into 1911, both the capacity and the interests to undermine the Imperial state, once that had happened they were vulnerable as a class to any extralocally organized political force that might become determined to attack their position in the agrarian order.

Nor would such an antilandlord force be unable to recruit peasant supporters for a struggle against the landlord gentry. True, settled, working peasants would be hard to reach at first. But there was a *component* of the long-run cycle of dynastic decline, rebellion, and renewal that involved greater peasant insurrectionary autonomy than processes in or involving settled communities. During periods of central administrative weakness and economic deflation and catastrophe in Chinese history—phenomena that tended to happen together—“social banditry”¹²⁴ invariably blossomed. Precisely because Chinese agrarian relations were significantly commercialized, peasants were often not cushioned against economic dislocations by any village communal ties. During periods of economic decline, poorer peasants, especially in communities without well-to-do local elites to employ them, would lose property, livelihood, and even family, and be forced to migrate to avoid starvation. Impoverished migrants often gathered as bandits or smugglers operating out of “border areas” at the edges of the empire or at the intersections of provincial boundaries, places where they were beyond the reach of the local gentry and of the Imperial state when it was not at its very strongest. To survive or prosper the bandits attacked settled communities and, whenever possible, especially their richer members, because attacking the rich maximized the bandits’ income and also improved chances of escaping capture by the authorities.

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In such social banditry, therefore, class struggle was expressed, even if only indirectly and, historically speaking, always ephemerally.

The nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century constituted a period of dynastic decline and political interregnum in China. Economic difficulties, peasant impoverishment, spreading social banditry, and violent conflicts among local militias, bandit groups, and warlord and/or “ideological” armies, characterized the entire time span and peaked during the mid-nineteenth century and during the 1920s and 1930s. As we have seen, this period of central government decline was complicated in novel ways by Western and Japanese imperialist intrusions. Yet although imperialism fundamentally dislocated and revolutionized dominant-class and national politics, it did not fundamentally alter the economic and political situation of the vast majority of peasants and rural communities.¹²⁵ Except near the treaty ports, major navigable waterways, and the sparse railroad network (built after the 1880s), the traditional standard marketing networks, agents, and patterns of exchanges were not displaced by modern economic development. Peasants continued to work the land with traditional techniques, raising mainly grain crops for subsistence and to sell for money to pay rents and taxes (unless payments were claimed in kind). Insofar as life became more difficult for peasants in a given locality or region—or perhaps even overall (the evidence is not conclusive)—the reason was not that modern economic forces were fundamentally altering agrarian relations of production. It was rather that political disorders were endemic and brought in their train economic dislocations and confiscatory “taxes” and that recurrent catastrophies, such as floods or droughts, resulted in greater suffering when no stable government existed to facilitate relief and rehabilitation. Peasants got by if they could; if not, they rioted, starved, migrated, or joined an army or bandit gang. The grievances of the ever-increasing numbers who were displaced in the early twentieth century were acute, but no different and no more pressing than they had recurrently been, especially throughout recent Chinese history. Nor had any basic structural changes fundamentally altered the terms by which the peasants themselves could strike out at the causes of their troubles.¹²⁶

Instead, as we shall see in Chapter 7, a new kind of national political leadership, the Chinese Communist Party, operating in the context of political–military fragmentation, ultimately found it necessary to attempt to fuse its efforts with the forces of peasant-based social banditry in order to build a Red army capable of taking and holding regions to administer. Then, under the umbrella of protection afforded by Communist military and administrative controls, local politics was finally reorganized in a fashion that afforded Chinese peasants the collective leverage against landlords that they had historically lacked. Once this occurred—as it did in North China in the 1940s—peasants revolted violently against the rem-

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nants of the gentry and destroyed its class and power positions. Thus, the peasant contribution to the Chinese Revolution resembled much more a mobilized response to a revolutionary elite's initiatives than did the peasant contributions in France and Russia. The reasons for this mass-mobilizing aspect had little to do with revolutionary ideology and everything to do with the "peculiarities" (as seen from a European perspective) of the Chinese agrarian sociopolitical structure. That structure did not afford settled Chinese peasants institutional autonomy and solidarity against landlords. But it did, in periods of political-economic crisis, generate marginal poor-peasant outcasts whose activities exacerbated the crisis, and whose existence provided potential support for oppositional elite-led rebellions—including, in the twentieth-century context, a revolutionary movement. Thus the activities of the Chinese Communists after 1927, and their ultimate triumph in 1949, depended directly upon both the insurrectionary potentials and the blocks to autonomous peasant revolts built into the existing Chinese agrarian order.¹²⁷

But the details of the story of how the Chinese Communists, originally an urban-based and -oriented party, ended up in the countryside, and how first bandits and other displaced peasants and then settled peasant cultivators contributed to the success of a Communist consolidation of the Revolution in China, must remain to be told in Chapter 7. For, uniquely in the Chinese case, peasant revolution and the consolidation of national power by a revolutionary elite were so intertwined as to be virtually indistinguishable.

Summing Up

Chapters 2 and 3 have presented a comparative-historical analysis of the causes of social revolutions in France, Russia, and China. I have argued that (1) state organizations susceptible to administrative and military collapse when subjected to intensified pressures from more developed countries abroad and (2) agrarian sociopolitical structures that facilitated widespread peasant revolts against landlords were, taken together, the sufficient distinctive causes of social-revolutionary situations commencing in France, 1789, Russia, 1917, and China, 1911. Table 1 summarizes the causal arguments that have been developed at length for France, Russia, and China, as well as those made somewhat more briefly for Prussia/Germany, Japan, and England as contrast cases.

Yet "social revolutions" are so labeled only because societal crises have culminated in the emergence of new sociopolitical arrangements. Thus our analysis cannot stop with causes. It must proceed to show what changed in the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions and why those changes logically emerged from the social-revolutionary situations whose origins we have already traced. These are the tasks undertaken in Part II.

Table 1. *Causes of Social Revolutions in France, Russia, and China*

A. Conditions For Political Crises

	Monarchy/ Dominant Class	Agrarian Economy	International Pressures
France	Landed–commercial dominant class has leverage within semibureaucratic absolute monarchy.	Growing, but no breakthrough to capitalist agriculture.	Moderate. Repeated defeats in wars, especially due to competition from England.
Russia	Highly bureaucratic absolutist state; landed nobility has little political power.	Extensive growth; little development in core regions.	Extreme. Defeats in 1850s and 1905. Prolonged participation and defeat in WWI.
China	Landed–commercial dominant class has leverage within semi-bureaucratic absolutist state.	No developmental breakthrough; near limits of growth, given population and available land.	Strong. Defeats in wars and imperialist intrusions.
<i>Contrasts</i>			
Prussia/ Germany	Highly bureaucratic absolutist state; landed nobility has little extralocal political leverage.	Transition to capitalist agriculture.	1806 – Strong 1848 – Mild
Japan	Highly bureaucratic (though not fully centralized) state. No true landed upper class.	Productivity increasing within traditional structures.	Strong; Imperialist intrusions.
England	No bureaucratic state. Landed class dominates politics.	Transition to capitalist agriculture.	Mild

Table 1. (*continued*)

B. Conditions For Peasant Insurrections

	Agrarian Class Structures	Local Politics
France	Peasant smallholders own 30-40% of land; work 80%+ in small plots. Individual property established, but peasant community opposes seigneurs, who collect dues.	Villages relatively autonomous under supervision of royal officials.
Russia	Peasants own 60%+ and rent more; control process of production on small plots; pay rents and redemption payments. Strong community based upon collective ownership.	Villages sovereign under control of tsarist bureaucracy.
China	Peasants own 50%+ and work virtually all land in small plots. Pay rents to gentry. No peasant community.	Gentry landlords, usurers, and literati dominant local organizational life; cooperate with Imperial officials.
<i>Contrasts</i>		
Prussia/ Germany	West of Elbe: resembles France. East of Elbe: large estates worked by laborers and peasants with tiny holdings, and no strong communities.	Junker landlords are local agents of bureaucratic state; dominate local administration and policing.
Japan	Communities dominated by rich peasants.	Strong bureaucratic controls over local communities.
England	Landed class owns 70%+. Peasantry polarizing between yeomen farmers and agricultural laborers. No strong peasant community.	Landlords are local agents of monarchy; dominate administration and policing.

Table 1. (*continued*)

C. Societal Transformations

Results of A plus B	
France	1787–9: Breakdown of absolutist state; and widespread peasant revolts against seigneurial claims.
Russia	1860s–90s: Bureaucratic reforms from above. 1905: Unsuccessful revolutionary outbreak. 1917: Dissolution of state; widespread peasant revolts against all private landed property.
China	1911: Breakdown of Imperial state; spreading agrarian disorder, but no autonomous revolts by peasants against landlords.
<i>Contrasts</i>	
Prussia/ Germany	1807–14: Bureaucratic reforms from above. 1848: Failed social revolution; bureaucratic monarchy stays in power.
Japan	Political revolution centralizes state; followed by bureaucratic reforms from above.
England	Political revolution establishes parliamentary predominance within nonbureaucratic monarchy.