The Parliamentary Tradition in Russia

by Charles A. Ruud

On January 1, 1992, the Soviet Union was replaced by a new Commonwealth of Independent States. The largest, most powerful of the new states is Russia and the new situation has given rise to much discussion about the long term prospects for western style parliamentary democracy in Russia. The problems and possibilities are often discussed without a full appreciation of the ongoing struggle in Russian history between Slavophil (nationalistic) forces on the one hand and pro-western forces on the other. In this article an historian looks at previous attempts to establish representative and parliamentary institutions in Russia.

Today and throughout their history, the Russian people have mainly done without parliaments, even as they have adopted many other procedural forms from the West. Why this disinterest and even nonchalance? The usefulness of absolutism to autocrats in power is, of course, one cause, but so is entrenched ideology – that holds that the Russian psyche and absolutism are uniquely compatible.

Examined historically, Russian autocracy has its origins in the medieval Muscovite Tsardoms. But not until the reign of a tsar conventionally described as a reformer – Peter I "the Great" (1682-1725) – did it acquire its mature and enduring absolutist form. Although from time to time advised and assisted by various institutions, Peter (who preferred the European title of Emperor) established that he alone held final power to decide and promulgate laws and decrees.

Nor would Peter ever have entertained the notion of bowing to a higher moral code on human rights. His ruling prerogative stood paramount, and he used it for arming Russia and for requiring his subjects to pay the bill. Peter and his eighteenth century successors, including the "enlightened" Catherine II, took for granted their right to squeeze out of their subjects (most of whom were serfs in a condition of chattel bondage) whatever they needed for their monumental projects.

Early in the reign of Alexander I (1801-1825), ideas emanating from France on the rights of man caused a ripple of discussions within high state councils – and even on the pages of the few periodicals, all fully censored – about introducing some form of representative government. One striking result in 1809 was a project for constitutional change by M.M. Speransky, an advisor to the Tsar, who proposed that a narrow group of voters from the land- and serf-owning class elect local legislative assemblies. Above that level were to be three higher tiers of assemblies, each elected from and by the one below.

Only the national assembly, the Duma, would "initiate" legislation, and it could exercise that right solely should the autocratic government 1) encroach on the very limited rights of citizens or 2) fail to present a budget on time. In proposing very little for the Duma to do, Speransky ostensibly took care not to place the tsar in the "unpleasant" position of having to reject Duma legislation. But, more to the point, he knew that proposing any larger legislative role for the Duma would

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certainly fail to win approval from the tsar and his ministers.

Still a partisan of eighteenth century ideas of gradual – and therefore orderly – progress in the wake of the cataclysmic excesses of the French revolution, Speransky put forward his minimalist "constitutional" plan as a modest first step in creating elective bodies from the landowning elite subordinate to the autocrat. His opponents, however, responded by raising doubts about Speransky's long-term commitment to the autocracy and thereby convinced Alexander to exile his advisor from St. Petersburg. Little of his reform program survived and, following the Napoleonic wars and the failed liberal rebellion by the Decembrists in 1825, Russia abandoned any plans for legislative reform.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the reigning Emperor Nicholas I (1825-55) adamantly opposed anything akin to a constitution (the word itself was banned in the heavily censored press) and deliberately promulgated the idea that a parliament was a Western institution alien to higher Russian values. The Tsar's propagandists insisted not only that the Russian people innately loved their Tsar, but also that their deeper spiritual life had given rise to the Autocracy. Elected representative legislatures, in contrast, were institutional expressions of the inferior Western culture which promoted ongoing struggles for advantage by pitting one group against another. Besides, the argument went, such institutions only fraudulently claimed to provide participatory democracy because they did not truly represent the people as a whole.

Russia had found a better way, said the Slavophil thinker, Ivan Kireevsky: "In Russia laws were not formulated in advance by some learned jurists; they were not ponderously and eloquently discussed at some legislative assembly; and they did not subsequently fall like an avalanche in the midst of the astounded citizenry, wrecking some existing institution or custom of theirs." Rather, Kireevsky insisted, Russian law formed first as folk wisdom in the minds of the people. Making use of those truths as benevolent legislators, the tsars over time wisely decreed into law only those instruments and procedures that met the broad needs and desires of the people. (The Slavophils contended that the institution of the Autocrat was a brilliant example of Russian political thinking, in that its placement of all power in the hands of one ruler freed everyone else from the contaminations of political life.)

Such ideas, of course, rationalized national superiority – especially for the Slavophils. In Russia alone had the heretofore silent masses long and unostentatiously been creating the best political and cultural institutions in the world. Westernized Russian intellectuals, with their penchant for French ideas, were to be pitied, at best, for never having noticed.

In the years before Kireevsky made his case, the Autocracy had already very dramatically expressed its displeasure with Westernizers. In 1836 the head of state security had dealt severely with Peter Chaadaev for being the author of a published letter that belittled Russia. With the three-fold effect of discrediting, isolating, and punishing him, officials had Chaadaev certified "insane" and subjected to home confinement with daily visits by a doctor. The hapless author protested that his words – contained in private letters to friends – had been published without his knowledge or consent. But he could not dispute their message: that backward and sterile Russia had contributed nothing to world culture. In 1837, a chastened Chaadaev wrote "Apology of a Madman" to prophecy a bright future for Russia.

During the reign of Tsar Alexander II (1855-81), a series of liberal changes raised hopes that the autocrat would introduce some kind of legislative, representative assembly. His liberation of the some 40 million serfs and his reforms of local government, the judiciary, censorship, and education were decidedly Western. He did not – in the liberal jargon of the day – "crown the edifice" with a parliament. Events and advisors prevented that institutional change.

P.A. Valuev, the Minister of the Interior, was one such advisor. From the start of his tenure, he openly deplored that some of his compatriots, viewing the advance of legislative assemblies in western Europe, argued that "it should therefore be the same with us." Instead, held Valuev, the Russian landed gentry must realize its political ambitions in the new institution of local government, the *zemstvo*. Here the gentry would be "the principal collaborators" of the autocracy. As for some semblance of a legislature in the capital, Valuev suggested modifying the State Council to incorporate representatives from the gentry class who would merely advise the government on legislative projects. But nothing of the sort took place.

Influential thinkers outside the tsar's government bolstered Valuev's stand against replicating a Western parliament, one being Boris Chicherin. In 1866, this historian at Moscow University, who would later serve as mayor of Moscow, issued a book entitled *Popular Representation* to insist on limiting that political form to the local *zemstvo*, as did Valuev. Chicherin held that the absolutist monarchy would thereby avoid both the excesses of popular despotism (he was thinking of the rule of Napoleon III) and the crippling chaos of western-type party strife. He did interject that the Autocracy, in accord with "national tradition," must be

subject to law, but he stressed overall that no step be taken to alter the unilateral, patriarchal government that made Russia great.

One of Valuev's successors as Minister of the Interior, M.T. Loris-Melikov, repeated Valuev's proposal for gentry consultants on the State Council in 1880 and urged, as well, the creation of a new General Commission that could therefore be described as "representational." Such reformist measures, he contended, would blunt the charges of revolutionaries that the autocracy gave the people no voice in government and would offset the repressive measures he had to take against the mounting terrorist movement.

Citing the low "moral level of society" as cause for granting only to the upper class the right to elect state-level representatives, Loris-Melikov favoured seating such representatives (elected by the *zemstvos*) in a consultative – certainly not a legislative – assembly to be called a General Commission. Completing the membership would be legal and policy experts appointed by the tsar, and the Commission as a whole, meeting in regular sessions, would make recommendations to the Council of State.

Alexander II decided to implement Loris-Melikov's plan for the General Commission. By chance, the day he was to announce this innovation to the public was also the day that the eighth terrorist attempt in 17 months to kill the tsar succeeded.

Retrenchment followed under Tsar Alexander III (1881-1894), whose chief advisor for a series of "counter-reforms" was the reactionary K.P. Pobedonostsev. This official, who had a totally mordant view of human possibilities, held that only strong rule from the top could save the fundamentally depraved Russian people. As for parliaments, the claim put forth by liberals that such bodies somehow "represented" the people, he scoffed, was "the great lie of our time."

Under the next and final tsar – Nicholas II (1894-1917) – emerged, at last, a popularly-elected, national legislative body, the Duma, that can fairly be called a parliament. After a fractious start, it would prove to do the work a parliament is supposed to do – a distinction that makes it unique in the history of the Russian people.

Nicholas II at no point welcomed a parliament, a position he made clear at the very start of his reign by terming a *zemstvo* appeal for "public institutions" as "senseless dreams." But, as his security agency sent him more and more warnings of spreading dissatisfaction with the autocracy and as overt protests mounted to become the Revolution of 1905, Nicholas was forced to relent.

In his manifesto of 30 October 1905, Nicholas II promised the creation of a Russian parliament, or Duma; and he shortly followed up with an electoral law for the Duma that enfranchised almost all male property owners. By including the millions of male peasants who held title to their small plots, the autocrat wrongly expected to shape a voting majority that would seat a strongly conservative Duma. Instead the voters chose representatives of every stripe from right to left, ensuring that the initial Duma – and the one that followed – would be little more than a battlefield for airing bitter political and ideological differences. On the eve of the second Duma, easily sensing what lay ahead, the Tsar wrote with some smugness to his mother: "...it will soon be evident whether the Duma intends to get down to serious work or to squander its time and small prestige in useless chatter and abuse."

As for the powers in the hands of the Duma when it first convened in April of 1906, the tsar's government had by then transformed the State Council into an upper house whose assent was required before any legislation passed by the Duma, or lower house, became law. Designed to be safely conservative, the Council acquired half its membership through appointments made by the tsar and half through elections held in various institutions acceptable to him. The Tsar – he continued to call himself Autocrat – claimed superiority to both houses; and, besides controlling one-third of the national budget and holding final veto power over their joint legislation, he additionally reserved to himself alone the right to revise the Fundamental Laws, including those that spelled out the power of the Duma.

Justified by legislative stalemates, Nicholas prorogued the first two Dumas of 1906 and 1907 within a few months of their beginnings and then called new elections. In the second instance, the tsar's prime minister, P.A. Stolypin, breached existing laws to disenfranchise many peasants and members of minority nationalities in what is called the "electoral coup d'état" of 16 June 1907. What resulted was the relatively conservative Third Duma (the only Duma to last the full five years of its mandated term), which accomplished a series of constructive legislative programs, especially in 1908, 1909, and 1910. The government and the Duma were at last sufficiently like-minded to work together.

In 1911, the terrorist who killed Prime Minister Stolypin deprived Imperial Russia of its last truly effective statesman; and the Fourth Duma, elected in 1912, fell into bitter conflict with the tsar's government – especially after the outbreak of war with Austria and Germany. The influence in high places of the Rasputin, sponsored by the German-born tsarina Alexandra Fëdorovna (whose own allegiance to Russia fell into question), strained relations even further.

By the time of the first revolution of 1917 (in March), the Duma – having found it impossible to work with the Tsar's government after 1915 – had virtually ceased to function. Because the revolution put an end to the tsar, who agreed to abdicate, what followed next was government by a Temporary Committee, self-created by a group of Duma liberals. These eleven men were bent on holding the country together to defeat Germany and determined to postpone during the wartime crisis a democratic vote for a Constituent Assembly, eventually scheduled for November.

It is important to note here that the Temporary Committee, which on 15 March 1917 renamed itself the Provisional Government, in no way constituted a parliament. Essentially it was a revolutionary dictatorship which could not govern. The unrelieved suffering from food and fuel shortages at the front and at home in the harsh winter of 1916-17 caused broad indifference among the Russian people to an ad hoc government that could not meet its basic needs. Lacking solutions to the combined military, economic, and social crises, the Provisional Government muddled on as anarchy deepened.

Because more and more Russians began listening to the promises from radical socialist parties – especially the Bolsheviks of Lenin – that they would end the war, transfer the land of the rich to the poor, transfer capitalists' factories to the workers, and transform Russia into a workers' democracy, a nascent and aggressively contentious centre of power made itself felt. Its base was the cross-province network of Soviets (councils) of Workers' Deputies begun during the Revolution of 1905. In the November revolution of 1917, a virtually unopposed Lenin and his Bolsheviks seized power in the name of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets meeting in St. Petersburg.

Because he had long argued for a Constituent Assembly, that is, a constitutional convention, and had criticized the Provisional Government for putting off the election of delegates until November, Lenin had no choice but to order that the election, based on universal suffrage, go forward as scheduled. In what would be the most democratic election ever held in Russia, the liberals and democrats saw their last chance for a genuine constitutionalism, even as they doubted that they could win.

Russian Word, a major liberal daily in Moscow, summed up the impending election dilemma in these words: "In another country, not so immense, with a population more cultured and politically developed, the task of electing a constituent assembly would not present special difficulties. It is another matter in Russia with its almost universally illiterate people, immense spaces, terrible communications, and polyglot population, especially under conditions of war."

When the votes were counted, the party that emerged with an absolute majority, or 370 out of 707 seats was the one that had most directly appealed to the peasants – the Social Revolutionaries – and four-fifths of all the ballots cast favoured socialist candidates of one kind or another. While the share of the total for the Bolsheviks amounted to only 23.8 percent, the Constitutional Democrats won a mere 4.6 percent of the votes and the seats. The Russian people had voted overwhelmingly against the major proponents of parliamentary government.

The first session of the Constituent Assembly met in St. Petersburg on 17 January 1918 and did not break its deliberations until 5 a.m. the next morning. When delegates returned to reconvene at noon on the 18th, armed troops from Lenin's Bolshevik government informed them that their work had ended and forcibly turned them away. Among the people of the new "workers' state," that abrupt conclusion to the long-sought democratic assembly was met with massive indifference.

No true parliament emerged under the Communist government that ruled the Soviet people for the next seventy-one years. Stalin's Supreme Soviet belongs in the realm of political theatre, not legislative government. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union on January 1, 1992, power has shifted to the newly sovereign republics and their legislative bodies.

Russians may yet build a parliamentary tradition, but a necessary ingredient for such a tradition, so far unmentioned here, is still in short supply among the Russian people. That essential is common trust. Because the past seven decades of Communist rule, have taught the Russian people not to trust the top holders of power, indifference about having or not having a parliament is a natural consequence. Will the view of the Slavophils in the days of the tsars that politics were intrinsically contaminated carry over into today's truism that public involvement in politics, including parliaments, is pointless?◆