“Faith, Tsar and Fatherland”:

Division and Mobilization in First World War Russia

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On July 20, 1914, the day after Germany declared war on Russia, Tsar Nicholas II issued a manifesto calling for unity among all Russian citizens. This call for a United Russia echoed the French declaration of a *union sacrée*—a “sacred union” of the nation. The Russian version of the sacred union had three central components. First was the traditional symbolic union of the tsar and his people, an alliance that during the First World War would be extended to a union between “faith, tsar and the fatherland.”¹ Second, importance was placed on the patriotism of *all* Russian citizens, regardless of racial, religious and political differences. Lastly, the narrative praised the willingness of *all* Russians to sacrifice for and serve their country. A vast majority of civilians mobilized to provide war relief; the “massive mobilization of military reserves” and volunteer soldiers was interpreted as proof of this willingness to serve, and of popular support for Russia’s “Motherland war.”² Considering the divided nature of the Russian Empire, this mass mobilization is even more astonishing. Stark religious, political and ethnic differences were all surrendered and replaced with narratives of unity and patriotism. Using the narrative of a sacred union, the Russian imperial government was able to orchestrate a mass mobilization despite long-standing ethnic, political and religious divides within the empire.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an increasing number of non-ethnic Russians living within the empire demanded liberal reforms and political autonomy, but the Russian government had no interest in granting them and therefore fracturing an “Indivisible Russia.”³ Moreover, with the rise of Russian nationalism, the tsarist administration was under

¹ Melissa K. Stockdale, *Mobilizing the Russian Nation: Patriotism and Citizenship in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 16.

² Stockdale, 16.

³ Violet Conolly, “The ‘Nationalities Question’ in the Last Phase of Tsardom,” *Russia Enters the Twentieth Century 1894-1917*, ed. Erwin Oberlander (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 153.

pressure to implement policies of russification. These policies of russification were not intended to be discriminatory: the acceptance of ethnic minorities was determined by loyalty to the tsarist autocracy, not by race. However, it is important to note that Germans were an exception to this rule. The German gentry was most prominent in Latvia and Estonia, two Baltic provinces acquired by Russia in the eighteenth century through the Treaty of Nystad. The position of Baltic Germans in Russian society was volatile. As diplomats, statesmen, and landowners Baltic Germans had acquired many prestigious roles in Russian society. However, between 1881 and 1917 the Russian imperialist government implemented policies of centralized russification which appeared to be an insult to the German gentry.⁴ In an attempt to weaken German hegemony, Russian policy was used to reinforce hostilities towards Germans in Latvia and Estonia. Tsar Alexander III showed a particular interest in the assimilation of Germans into Russian society and took steps to implement harsh russification policies in schools and government administrations. Alexander also refused to acknowledge the historical rights of the gentry and issued a severe attack on German cultural and religious activity in the Balkans.

However, despite policies of russification and the harsh suppression of German religious and cultural practices, Baltic Germans remained loyal to the tsar. Russian historian Melissa Stockdale notes that at the outbreak of the First World War, Baltic Germans, along with Jews, Poles and Muslims, gathered with the rest of the nation to declare their profound loyalty to the Motherland. Given the history of German oppression at the hands of Russian administrations, it is difficult to understand why Baltic Germans were so willing to sacrifice their lives fighting for Russia. During the course of the war, the status of Russian Germans would only deteriorate. Germany was portrayed as the main aggressor behind the war, which meant there was an

⁴ Connolly, 170.

outbreak of general outrage towards German citizens. In July of 1914, a large mob in Moscow sacked and set fire to the German embassy.⁵ All of a sudden, the borderline between Russian citizens of German ethnicity and genuine German nationalists was severely blurred, and anyone who exhibited any indication of “Germanness” became suspect. Echoing back to old policies of russification, various states began to monitor and ban the use of the German language. By 1915, anti-German attitudes continued to escalate as crowds in Moscow began to smash, pillage and burn German shops on Red Square. An investigation into the riots estimated that 732 separate businesses were destroyed, resulting in 50,604,754 rubles’ worth of damage.⁶ There was an influx of anti-German groups, most of which were concerned by the threat of Prussian cultural and economic domination; the Russian government began to introduce increasingly nationalistic policies that were meant to encourage Russian Germans to leave the Empire. As a result, land held by Russo-German settlers was abandoned and/or seized by the government. Tens of thousands of Germans were forced to sell their land, livestock and farming equipment at deeply deflated prices. Considering the treatment of Russo-Germans before and during the war, their willingness to sacrifice their lives for Mother Russia is even more baffling; their loyalty to the tsar persisted through policies of russification and deportation.

From the end of the revolution in 1905 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, public opinion was most commonly expressed through political parties and the press. Russian pre-war politics, specifically foreign policy, provides evidence that ethnicity was not the only cause of division within the Russian empire. The state parliament, known as the Duma, had a wide variety of political parties on both ends of the political spectrum. Groups on the right were united under a platform that advocated for harsh authoritarian governance, strict Russian

⁵ Stockdale, 192.

⁶ Stockdale, 194.

nationalism and the suppression of revolution. Despite a well-defined platform, right-wing groups formed an insecure coalition made up of priests, conservative gentry and proto-fascist organizations that had existed since the 1905 revolution. The right's inability to gain peasant support rendered the group largely unsuccessful, as they only represented approximately one-ninth of the representatives in the Duma. The Social Democrats were in opposition to all aspects of pre-war Russian foreign policy, believing it had been developed in the interest of the upper and middle classes.⁷ Many factions of the Social Democrats, particularly the Bolsheviks, were widely supported by the working class, making their opposition to foreign policy (and all other existing state structures) an important consideration. Unlike their German counterparts, Russian socialists were not patriotic and did not view the Russian government with much esteem. As a result, the presence of the Social Democrats in the Duma meant the Russian government could not pursue a "risky" or "aggressive" foreign policy.

The "centrist" approach to Russian foreign policy received the largest amount of support, both from the public and the Duma itself. Three centrist parties that were prevalent in the Third and Fourth Dumas—the Nationalists, Octobrists and Constitutional Democrats (Kadets)—rejected the views of the Social Democrats and condemned them as "a conspiracy of Europe's ruling classes."⁸ All the centrist parties begrudgingly acknowledged the Russian Imperial government as the protector of Russian interests in foreign affairs, though they believed that Imperial authority was only legitimate if it reflected public opinion. The Nationalists, Octobrists and Kadets all expressed support for the Triple Entente, as it advocated for peace, enhanced Russian security and improved the Empire's ability to develop a foreign policy free of German

⁷ Dominic C. Lieven, "Actors and Opinions," *Russia and Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 121.

⁸ Lieven, 121.

influence. However, these centrist groups lacked political and ideological continuity. The Kadets' ideological views regarding domestic policy sharply differed from those of most Octobrists and Nationalists; the parties also had minor disputes over foreign policy. Division in the Duma accurately reflected the social and political divisions that were present throughout Russia. The contrast between leftist, rightist and centrist ideologies indicates an internal struggle between working and upper classes.

However, in 1914, mass mobilization and the "sacred union" narrative not only momentarily erased ethnic divisions but socio-political ones as well. To transition Russia into a wartime sacred union, all "political, class and confessional differences"⁹ were abandoned, and a political truce was put into effect until the Central Powers could be defeated. After the declaration of war, Tsar Nicholas called for a legislative session that would convene on July 26. Duma representatives, who had been on summer recess, rushed to return to Moscow so the special session could be planned. In with the name of political reconciliation, long-time political foes shook hands, embraced and declared their loyalty to the sacred union. Stockdale notes that fourteen different representatives, each from a different nationalist group or political party, approached the podium within the Duma and announced that their constituents were willing to fight for Russia and unite with all other Russians "in the face of the common foe."¹⁰ Most anti-war sentiments were suppressed or were not reported by the press. In the period of time between the mobilization announcement and the end of 1914, only one known strike and three anti-war demonstrations were attempted. Within the political sphere, there was no officially expressed discontent with the outbreak of war and its handling by the authorities.¹¹

⁹ Stockdale, 15.

¹⁰ Stockdale, 24.

¹¹ Stockdale, 41.

Along with socio-political and ethnic divisions, the Russian Empire was also divided on matters of religion. Shortly after gaining power in 1917, the Bolshevik administration made a proclamation addressed “To All Muslims in Russia and the East.”¹² This proclamation was an attempt to gain the support and confidence of Russian Muslims and those residing along the Russian border. “To All Muslims in Russia and the East” indicated the Bolsheviks’ desire to resolve the long-standing conflict between Russian Muslims and Russian authorities. After Russia conquered the Islamic peoples that resided on the edges of their territory, the Russian government was hopeful that the dissension between the two would end. Unfortunately, this was not the case. By the 1880s, Muslims in Russian territory were actively resisting the tsarist regime. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a surge of pro-Islamic movements both within and outside of Russian borders. Non-Russian Muslim reform movements were all ideologically aligned around the idea that Islam was threatened by Christianity and the political power consolidated by Christian countries in the western world. Unlike their non-Russian counterparts, Russian Muslims identified Russia herself as a threat, claiming that the superiority of western ideals was reflected in the “Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian intelligentsia and the tsarist regime.”¹³

Three Muslim congresses held in 1905 and 1906 determined general objectives that would be pursued in the interest of Islamic minorities. These objectives included independence and sovereignty; equal religious, political and civil rights; educational reforms highlighting pro-Islamic ideologies; and denouncement by the Russian government of the anti-Muslim propaganda spread by Russian Orthodox missionaries. At the second congress in 1906, delegates

¹² Hans Braker, “The Muslim Revival in Russia,” *Russia Enters the Twentieth Century 1894-1917*, ed. Erwin Oberlander (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 182.

¹³ Braker, 192.

voted to found the All-Russian Union of Muslims. The presence of the Union in the Duma persisted through the oppression of the 1905 revolution, but due to a lack of proper representation within the chambers they were not able to apply enough pressure to pursue their demands, and by 1914 the Union had completely disintegrated.¹⁴ In spite of long-standing tensions, Russian Muslims were one of the minority groups that enthusiastically participated in the mass mobilization at the beginning of World War One. Muslim minority groups were so willing to aid the Russian war effort that leaders of Muslim philanthropic organizations sought—and were granted permission—to create a Provisional Muslim Committee of Assistance to Soldiers and their Families, which promptly opened sixty-six chapters throughout the empire.¹⁵ However, Stockdale states that Russian Muslims had the incentive to fight for Russia for reasons other than loyalty and patriotism; she suggests that the Muslim leaders who organized the Provisional Committee did so in the hopes that it would help Russian Muslims gain access to more rights following the conclusion of the war.

Several weeks before Tsar Nicholas officially declared war against Germany, tensions in St. Petersburg were extremely high. A bloody labour conflict fueled political strikes, resulting in both civilian and police casualties. Stockdale argues that the backdrop of this conflict made “all the more remarkable the patriotic tableau on Palace Square” the day the tsar encouraged the unification of all Russian people in the face of a common enemy.¹⁶ Approximately 250,000 people gathered in the Square to see the tsar and declare their love and loyalty to Mother Russia.¹⁷ The Russian imperial government harbored so much patriotism in the early days of the First World War that even those that had made themselves enemies of the state gathered together

¹⁴ Braker, 195.

¹⁵ Stockdale, 120.

¹⁶ Stockdale, 17.

¹⁷ Stockdale, 19.

in support of Russia's just war. However, the unified Russia that developed in 1914 would not persist to the end of the war. Rising political tensions and discontent with the imperial administration would result in the revolution of 1917, fracturing the brief unity within the Duma. Despite their loyalty, Russian Germans were demonized and forcibly removed from their land, and Russian Muslims were not granted the support or rights they desired. Considering the divisions in the socio-political and religious landscape of the Russian Empire, mass mobilization in support of the Motherland at the start of the First World War is reflective of the vast power of patriotism. Moreover, the narrative of a sacred union ensured the loyalty of minority groups (such as Russian Muslims) who had previously resisted and denounced Russian authority.

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