

**Four Russian Aristocrats In Transition:
From Imperial Russia Towards The Soviet Union, 1880 – 1923**



M.R. de Wolf
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Supervisor: Dr. J.H.C. Kern
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Illustrations on the front page:

Starting in the upper left corner (clockwise):

(Count) Constantine Alexandrovich Benckendorff,

<<https://nl.findagrave.com/memorial/61409482/constantine-alexandrovich-benckendorff>> (Retrieved on: 06-12-19).

(Count) Pavel Pavlovich Rodzianko,

<http://thepeerage.com/054792_001.jpg> (Retrieved on: 06-12-19).

(Prince) Felix Felixovich Yusupov,

<http://thepeerage.com/111208_001.jpg> (Retrieved on: 06-12-19).

(Prince) Serge Platonovich Obolensky,

<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Serge_Obolensky_by_Sorin_\(1917\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Serge_Obolensky_by_Sorin_(1917).png)>
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INTRODUCTION

*Poletaev, the lord of Spukha, was a cruel man. The peasants always spoke of him thus: "Insatiable beast". Never it seems will he have drunk enough of our blood." As soon as someone caused him displeasure or simply when he was in a bad mood, he would send a person to the stables for whipping and caning. And out of the stable people emerged either crippled or death [...].*¹

This quote, a recollection of an unknown Russian peasant from the Nizhegorod province in the summer of 1917, showed the perception of a Russian peasant in relation to his (land)lord. In some of the peasants' eyes, their masters were mean people, who despised them and only used them because they could and were allowed to do so. These lords, who had to be a member of the aristocracy/nobility, still 'owned' the peasants who worked the lands despite being emancipated in 1861 by Tsar Alexander II (r. 1855-1881). Although it doesn't change the perception of the peasant, it has to be said that this isn't the whole, or complete, story. Not every landowning nobleman or aristocrat was cruel and mean to their servants, and the serfs/peasants who worked their lands. But the reason why this quote is important, is because it shows one of the many perspectives people, in this case a peasant, had on the Russian nobility. In the end, which means 1917, these perspectives also contributed to the anger other people had towards the nobility on the whole. Although here depicted as a cruel person, members of the Russian nobility have played an important part in the Russian history from the very beginning, only to be wiped out in a very small amount of time in the 20th century. Because in 1917, after the October Revolution, their future became more or less sealed, and was finalised in 1923 when the Reds won the Russian Civil War (1918-1922). The fury and hatred from groups like the Bolsheviks towards everything that represented the "old regime", or "old order" of Imperial Russia, including the nobility, seemed unlimited and they seemed destined to cleanse them from the "new" Soviet-Union.

First of all, it is important to clarify several things about this research. The reason why this research has taken place is because of a previously performed research which has been done by the same author on the same topic, only on a much smaller scale. This curiosity started while investigating and reading about the recent "personal turn" in academic/scholarly articles and

¹ J. Daly and L. Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis 2009) 78.

books about the Russian Revolution of 1917. This personal turn focusses on the experiences of different people via their own writings in their situation back then. These experiences can be found in letters to newspapers, their dairies, or as in this research, their memoirs. This approach puts more emphasis on the perspective of the persons who lived and experienced the events during that specific time and place that historians want to investigate.

Two perfect examples of this type of research were performed by several historians. One is by historian Mark Steinberg, who has done a lot with his book; *Voices of the Revolution, 1917*. In this book he translated and analysed personal letters from all different kind of people, ranging from peasants to factory workers to supporters of the Social-Revolutionaries.² A second and similar research has been done by historians Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov with their book; *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History*.³ They did more or less the same thing as Steinberg, where they also reviewed and analysed different letters from different people before, during and after the Revolution of 1917. The only “problem” is that both authors and their books have in common is that it had an emphasis on the personal experiences of the popular classes. Meaning, the peasants, the urban factory workers, or the soldiers at the Western front who were at war with Germany and its allies. This problem made sure that other (social) classes and groups were left out of the story. This lack or lacuna provided room for more and extended research on other classes like the Russian nobility, and how they endured and experienced the societal changes of the 20th century leading towards the 1917 Revolutions.

More important is that it showed that there was a understudied topic in the (English) academic historiography about the Russian aristocracy/nobility and their experiences in relation to the Russian Revolution of 1917. This lack of diversification of academic and scholarly researches on other classes, like the nobility, was noticed by other historians. First to notice was historian Vera Kaplan. In 2013 she observed, in her analysing of the English literature about the Russian Revolution, a major defect on the Russian Revolution and its classes.⁴ In her opinion there was too much focus on the popular classes and more could be done to widen or to change this focus. Second, in 2015, historian Steven Smith also analysed the historiography about the Russian Revolution. He, also and again, concluded that; “we still know far less about the fate of Russia’s elite than we do about its popular classes [...] Yet little work has been done

² M. Steinberg, *Voices of the Revolution, 1917* (New Haven 2001).

³ J. Daly and L. Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis 2009).

⁴ V. Kaplan, ‘Weathering the Revolution: Patronage as a strategy of survival’, in: *Revolutionary Russia* 26:2 (2013) 97-127, there 98.

on their fate in 1917.”⁵ Because of the focus on the popular classes, like the proletariat or the workers, other groups such as the nobility have mostly been left out of the researches. This is strange because they were an integral part of the Russian society and its history. But, it has to be noted that recently there was a gradual change in writings about the Russian nobility towards their end in 1917.

One of the two major books, which were published in the last decade about this subject came from the hands of historian Matthew Rendle and his book *Defenders of the Motherland: The Tsarist elite in revolutionary*.⁶ In this book Rendle investigated the role of different groups of elites in Russia, where the nobility was one of the groups who contributed a lot to the society’s political, military, and other areas of expertise where they could be found. The other book, but completely different in its approach and story from Rendle’s book, is *Former People: The Final Days of the Russian Aristocracy*, which has been written by historian Douglas Smith.⁷ He investigated how two Russian aristocratic families (the Golitsyn and Sheremetev families) experienced the social changes in Russia in the 20th century and the aftermath it had on the families when the Soviet-Union was declared.

There also is another category of published books about Russians aristocrats in the somewhat similar period of this research (1880-1923), which were written by (former) noble descendants who investigated their own family history. For example, former Canadian politician, historian, and also noble descendant Michael Ignatieff who wrote the book *A Russian Album*.⁸ Another example was Valerian Obolensky with his book *Russians in Exile: the history of a diaspora*.⁹ In both cases, the (hoped) contribution for this research turned out to be very limited. For instance, the book of Valerian Obolensky on why its contribution turned out to be very limited. First, this book wasn’t written by an academic (or a scholar) who is familiar or experienced with historical research and its standards. Second, the book lacks: an index, footnotes and/or endnotes, a proper introduction where his research is explained, a “normal” lay-out for publication, and even page numbers are missing. Finally, the book doesn’t have an understandable structure for the reader and fails in its goal to position itself “as a contribution to the continuation of the remembrance of the higher classes in Russia”.¹⁰

⁵ S. Smith, ‘The Historiography of the Russian Revolution 100 Years On’, in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16:4 (2015) 733-749, there 742.

⁶ M. Rendle, *Defenders of the Motherland: The Tsarist elite in revolutionary* (Oxford 2010).

⁷ In this research the Dutch translation has been used; D. Smith, *Verloren Adel: de laatste dagen van de Russische aristocratie* (Amsterdam 2017).

⁸ M. Ignatieff, *A Russian Album* (London 1987).

⁹ V. Obolensky, *Russians in Exile: the history of a diaspora* (Lexington 2016).

¹⁰ Ibidem, no page number(s) available.

Research question and primary sources

As mentioned earlier, the topic of the experiences of the Russian nobility in relation to the changing Russian society, which culminated in the October Revolution of 1917, remained a under investigated area. To gain more insight and knowledge into this, the following research question was formulated. What can the memoirs of four Russian aristocrats tell us about the position of the Russian aristocracy during the transition from Imperial Russia to the Soviet Union between 1880-1923? The period that this research encompassed, 1880 until 1923, referred to the year of birth of Count Constantine Benckendorff, who was the oldest of the four persons used in this thesis, and the date to the year when both Prince Serge Obolensky and Count Constantine Benckendorff left Russia for respectively, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom. To answer the main research question, four primary sources have been selected to investigate the experiences of several members the Russian nobility. Below, I will shortly review how and why I selected them and what their memoirs bring as implications, such as (dis)advantages for this research.

The way the sources were selected was based on several primary characteristics. First, the intended characters had to be part of “upper nobility”, meaning the (old) titled aristocracy. From this moment on, the four main characters are called aristocrats, who belonged to the more general nobility. Second, they also had to be, at least, teenagers when the 1905 Revolution happened. The reason for this was to really make sure that they could have remembered the events between 1905 and 1923. For example, the youngest, Prince Serge Obolensky, was fifteen years old at that time, and the oldest, Count Constantine Benckendorff, was at that time twenty-five years old. Third, they had to have written memoirs which were published or translated into English and available in paper, or electronic form. Fourth, the memoirs should, obviously, have covered several topics about their life between the period of 1880-1923, and especially their thoughts on the 1917 Revolution. Therefore, the following memoirs were selected and used for this research, which formed the core of this research. They will appear in order of their age (old to young). First, *Half A Life: The Reminiscences of a Russian Gentleman*, written by Count Constantine Benckendorff and published in 1954.¹¹ Second, *Tattered Banners: An autobiography*, written by Count Pavel Rodzianko. This research used the electronic version of his book version which was republished in 2018, while the original book was published in 1939.¹² Third, *Lost Splendor: The amazing memoirs of the man who killed Rasputin*, written by

¹¹ C. Benckendorff, *Half A Life: The Reminiscences of a Russian Gentleman* (London 1954).

¹² P. Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners: An autobiography* (Philadelphia 2018).

Prince Felix Yusupov and published in 1954.¹³ Fourth, *One man in his time: the memoirs of Serge Obolensky*, was written by Prince Serge Obolensky and published in 1958.¹⁴ The four main characters and their families will be introduced more extensively in Chapter 1.

Although the four characters were selected via the demands mentioned above, that didn't mean that there weren't certain comments to be made about the usage of memoirs and their usability for academic researches. Academics and scholars could argue that the use of memoirs is debatable as a source for historical research. Such remarks and considerations have been made by numerous scholars and academics and they are there for a reason. In her recently published book, emeritus professor Penny Summerfield discussed the debate about the use of personal stories by historians, which was also relevant for this thesis. According to Summerfield, there are four reasons why restraint is needed when using, for example, memoirs; these sources are often perceived as (completely) "true" by the people who deal with the sources, the story written down being the embodiment of subjectivity, that it used to call it representative for explaining present day phenomena without placing it in context, and the problem could arise of not being able to verify sources, because only the author has or had access to that information.¹⁵

This research acknowledges the previously mentioned defects and considerations scholars need to have when using memoirs or autobiographies for historical research. On the other side, it offered an opportunity for this research. This research thrived on subjectivity, because it wants to know how these people/class responded and acted to the very rapid changes that Imperial Russia experienced in the beginning of the 20th century. This is perfectly summed up in the following remark made by Summerfield: "There is also, however, widespread and growing acceptance among historians of the essentially literary quality of the memoir, and its value as a source of perceptions, attitudes and emotions. Taking this approach is to accept that these personal narratives compose the subject, in other words that subjectivity, constituted through the writing on the page, is a major part of what they have to offer."¹⁶ Without saying that everything is believed at face value, or without scrutinizing what has been written down or said in the four memoirs, it compared and cross-examined this to the primary or secondary sources, this research does intend to let the four characters chronologically "dictate" the story. Precisely because of the reason of subjectivity, which is central in this research. But, restraint

¹³ F. Yusupov, *Lost Splendor: The amazing memoirs of the man who killed Rasputin* (New York 1954).

¹⁴ S. Obolensky, *One man in his time: the memoirs of Serge Obolensky* (New York 1958).

¹⁵ P. Summerfield, *Histories of the self: personal narratives and historical practice* (New York 2019).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 98.

has also been applied to prevent calling everything a part of the subject, or as a sign of their belonging to their group of aristocrats/noblemen. It is evident that all four characters also made individual choices.

Another important consideration can be made about the four memoirs. Some could argue that the legitimacy of the writings was at stake when looking at the time the memoirs were published, because three out of the four memoirs were published shortly after 1953. Respectively in 1954, 1954, and 1958. Only the memoirs of Count Pavel Rodzianko fell out of order, which were already published in 1939. But, the importance here is that the publishing of the three memoirs seemed linked with the year Joseph Stalin died. Stalin, in many eyes a dictatorial leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) with his Great Purge (1936-1939), but also in other eyes a great hero for being one of the victors of the Second World War (1939-1945). Comparing this to other published memoirs, it seems that many exiled Russians were (still) reluctant to publish their memoirs when Stalin was still alive. Because Stalin's influence also reached into foreign countries where "counter-revolutionaries", as the (aristocratic) émigrés were called, were considered enemies of the state and were treated as such. This fear was one of the reasons why the main characters published their memoirs also after 1953, because of a higher perception of being safe when Stalin wasn't alive anymore.

But, a consequence and justifiable argument that could be made, is that downside of this trend was that the memoirs were being produced very quickly, and sensation became more important than a factual representation of their story when people wrote them down. When this is applied to the four characters in this research, this caution was also required in this research, because three of the four already left Russia twenty years ago before their memoirs were published. On the other hand, the question whether the observations of all four characters were correct or incorrect wasn't really the case here. Their perspective on all the events they experienced in the period as part of the Russian nobility were. In addition, scholars should ask themselves the question what has been written down in a persons' memoirs, but equally important is that they ask themselves what hasn't been written down.

Historiography

Within the topic of the aristocracy/nobility in Russia and their relation to the Revolution of 1917, the debate evolves around the role and contribution the nobility did or didn't have in their own downfall and that of the "old order" in Russia. Within this debate there are two distinctive schools to be found about the role of the nobility in the events that were crucial for their own fate. The stances and views of both schools will be briefly and generally discussed hereafter.

The first school, the orthodox school, argues that the nobility didn't play a major role in its own decline and that of Imperial Russia. This school sees the aristocracy/nobility (mostly) willing and able to make changes for the desires of different groups in the Russian society, but were held back due to external factors. For instance, they were held back by the state, the autocracy, the anger of the peasants and (urban) workers. This school tends to focus more on the external parts of the explanation. Another characteristic of this school, is that the emphasis of the explanation rests in and on the Revolution of 1905. Because it showed that the nobility was forced, by other groups like the peasants, to yield to their demands following the Revolution of 1905 and the peasant uprisings between 1905-1907. Two examples of leading historians of this school were/are Roberta Manning and Douglas Smith. Manning argued that the ancient relationship between (noble) landowner and serf/peasant came under significant pressure due to changes made in 1861 when the serfs were emancipated by Tsar Alexander II. According to her, the nobility was also trying to adapt to the new situation they found themselves in, because they were also affected by other events like an economic recession in the years of 1875-1895.¹⁷ Or, a “fake” smile the peasantry had given them in past when the 1905 Revolution happened.¹⁸ Smith added to the debate that he saw the members of the nobility as (helpless) victims of the anger of certain groups. He argued that the nobility was able and prepared to change, but weren't given the time, due to external circumstances such as illegal actions of the Bolsheviks like the unlawful coup d'état by Vladimir Ulyanov, commonly referred to as “Vladimir Lenin”, and his Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP).¹⁹ But it has to be noted that because of the angle/approach Smith took, a more romanticized one, it pushed his arguments and story into this school.

The second and more recent school, the revisionist school, argues that the role of the nobility was much more complex and nuanced than argued by the orthodox school. According to them the explanation isn't solely linked to 1905 or external factors. Meaning, that the social unrest wasn't (only) instigated because of the feudal relationships between the land owners and the serfs/peasants, or the urban workers that were attracted to the Bolshevik ideals and their hatred towards the higher classes. In the view of this school, the nobility definitely contributed to their own dissolution and that of Imperial Russia and tends to nuance the orthodox school by also focussing on internal factors. This school also recognizes the Revolution of 1905 as important for the nobility, but also takes the equally important period between the 1905 and

¹⁷ R. Manning, *The Crisis of the Old Order in Russia – Gentry and Government* (New Jersey 1982) 9.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 147.

¹⁹ D. Smith, *Verloren Adel: de laatste dagen van de Russische aristocratie* (Amsterdam 2017) 157.

1917 Revolution into account. Two examples of leading historians of this school were/are Seymour Becker and Dominic Lieven. For instance, Becker argued that the nobility knew that they would lose the fight of popular demands (in absolute numbers), so the landowning nobility had started to form and organize themselves into the *United Nobility* in response to the peasant rebellions, instead of accepting the demands or granting certain rights to the serfs. He also argued that a certain faction of the nobility deliberately knew, acted and formed a counter group to maintain their current social and economic position.²⁰ Lieven added to the debate that the nobility's own doings also contributed a great part to the explanation for their demise, rather than sole external circumstances, like the anger of the workers or the peasants. He argued that the nobility didn't understand and alienated themselves from the rest of the society and its problems. According to him, the nobility can also be seen as victims of their own values such as; the nobility's despise of the lower classes or holding firm to those own values, morals, appearances which sparked the anger of the other groups who were suffering.²¹

This research doesn't place itself in one of the two schools. While it does tend more towards the revisionist school, it also contains elements of the orthodox school. Two examples why this research positions itself as a "mix" of both schools. First, internal factors showed that the Russian aristocracy's habits, customs and lifestyle wasn't in correspondence with the rest of the (changing) society. They were completely oblivious to other groups and their wishes and demands. Second, external factors such as fanaticism of other groups, like the Bolsheviks, made the aristocrats into the victims because the aristocracy was part of an image that represented the old order that had to be destroyed. Further elaboration on the stance of this research within the debate will be understood throughout story.

Methodology and structure

This research provides a new view to understand the four aristocrats' development and actions towards the Russian Revolution of 1917 in the broader context of the Russian nobility and their final days with the help of the secondary sources. This was done by comparing their actions with the other aristocrats in this research, as well as comparing their written opinions, actions, etc. in their memoirs with available secondary sources. Furthermore, this research has chosen to solely focus on the available English written literature. This meant that Russian/French/German sources weren't be used. Due to the nature of this research and to provide more

²⁰ S. Becker, *Nobility and privilege in late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb 1985) 14.

²¹ D. Lieven, *Russia's Rulers under the Old Regime* (New Haven 1989) 277.

context, some parts will appear to be more descriptive and others more analytical. This was done to give a clear overview and understanding of this group of aristocrats and their evolving till their end. The implication of this decision meant that the thesis is more extensive qua words used.

To answer the main research question, this research is divided into three different chapters of the lives of the four aristocrats according to common experienced events/periods. Because of this, the first chapter focussed on the historical background of the nobility and growing up as a Russian aristocrat. In other words, this part examined the backgrounds of the different families and how the Russian nobility was organized, and gives an overview of their youth experiences so we can understand the position them (and their families) during the Revolution later on. The second chapter focussed on the period building up to the Russian Revolution of 1917, such as the Revolution of 1905 and the land- and peasant problems. It investigates how their lives were, while still being under tsarist rule and their experiences towards the revolution, while society gave a clear indication that it was already changing, and wanted changes from that moment on. The third and final chapter focussed on the reaction of the quartet on the Revolution of 1917 and its aftermath such as the Civil War. This chapter tried to find out how these aristocrats experienced and adapted to the new situation when the Bolsheviks took over control after 1917 and what made them leave when eventually the Bolsheviks became the sole rulers of Russia, or later to be, the Soviet-Union. Lastly, it investigated how they looked back on their time in Russia and looked towards the new Soviet-Union.

Concluding, this research dived into the understudied topic that exists in the historiography about the experiences of the higher classes, in this case the Russian aristocracy, in relation to the Russian Revolution of 1917. The experiences of the four aristocrats can shed another light on how the Russian society developed towards a new society with different ideals in 1923. Thus, the goal of this thesis was to contribute to a better understanding on how the Russian elite, via the four aristocrats, reacted and adapted to a changing society of Imperial Russia to the Soviet-Union.

N.B.

Some remarks before reading this research. First, the hereditary titles of the four characters, will appear in; Prince, Count, or Baron due to English being the language used in this research. Second, the first time someone of noble descent's name will appear in the text, he or she will appear with their title as followed. For example, "Prince Serge Obolensky". The second time

they will be referred to as “Obolensky”. Third, most of the Russian to English translations are my own, or otherwise borrowed from fellow scholars and academics. I have given my best efforts to transliterate the Russian names as best I could. For any mistakes, I apologize in advance. Lastly, difficult words, terms, acronyms, etc. that appear in italics are (mostly) explained in the glossary at the end of this research.

1. THE RUSSIAN ARISTOCRACY

1880 – 1905

To understand where the four main characters were coming from, it is foremost important to give some historical background of the Russian nobility, and their relationship with the four aristocrats who were central in this research. This chapter will highlight certain important historic events, after which the aristocratic families they belonged to will be introduced. Furthermore, the growing up of these aristocrats will be examined, because it showed that the day they were born, they more or less had a carefree life. Being part of an aristocratic family also required to be and act like a nobleman. When reading this research, it is important to keep in mind that the main characters derived their legitimacy from their family (names) and backgrounds. This doesn't mean that their actions, perceptions and behaviours can (or must) be seen as a continuation from the family's history, values, morals and habits. Nor did it reflect the whole aristocracy/nobility, because they were also people who made individual choices.

Historical background of the Russian nobility

The first important event in the history of the Russian nobility happened in 1722, when Tsar Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725) introduced a new system called the "Table of Ranks". This table was in essence a first step in an attempt for classification and stratification of the Russian society, or a new social ladder who people could climb. With this system, Peter tended to classify and codify the different ranks that existed within the different branches of service/bureaucratic government. But the more important underlying reason for this was to create motivated Russians who wished to serve Russia. According to deceased historian Brenda Meehan-Waters, Peter tended to achieve three goals with the implementation of the Table of Ranks in 1722.

First, he wanted to transform the Russian service nobility into a Western style, educated and oriented group of full-time state servitors. Second, via this system he wanted to reward someone's merit for Russia (even for foreigners and low-born natives). Third, he hoped to create a noble estate which could be used as an "instrument" and as support for the "absolute state". Meehan-Waters argued that with the last two points of the Table of Ranks Peter very much succeeded.²² She showed that under Peter, the relationship between the Tsar and the nobility was more clear after the introduction of the Table of Ranks, because it made clear what was expected from the (service) nobility and what the penalties would be if someone, or some

²² B. Meehan-Waters, *Autocracy & Aristocracy – The Russian Service Elite of 1730* (New Brunswick 1982) 20.

family, didn't abide by the new laws. For instance, if someone would lower himself to a another rank, the penalty could be that that person would be stripped from (parts) of his land and he could be sentenced to pay a fine.²³

With this system, these “low-born natives” could be rewarded with a higher step, or rank (*chin*) in the social ladder. For people of non-noble descent, this made it possible for them to work themselves up via this system where someone would be granted hereditary nobility. A perfect, but also ironic, example of this system was the father of Vladimir Lenin, Ilya Ulyanov, who achieved the rank of (lower) hereditary nobility. This also meant the nobility was the highest category someone could achieve in his Russian life.²⁴ With the introduction of this system, where ordinary people could achieve a higher status, there also changed something for the already existing Russian nobility. Until then, the nobility only comprised of the so-called *boyars*, (princely, or noble) descendants of the old founding families of Rurik. An example of such a boyar family was the Obolensky family. With the introduction of this system, they lost their title of boyar, but in return received new (Western) stylized forms of noble titles. For the main characters' families, it meant that they received new titles as hereditary aristocrats. The old title of boyar disappeared and were changed to Prince, Count, or Baron, which became the new styles of address.

According to professor Geoffrey Hosking, another important event took place in that same period, which influenced the position of the nobility in Russia. The nobility received a new place in the Russian society following the introduction of the laws that created four different (social) estates: “Peter the Great introduced a new system where the Russian nobility were moulded into a new social estate (*soslovie*) and were called the *dvorianstvo* within this system”. These estates consisted of the most important social groups within Russia's society: 1) the nobility, 2) the clergy, 3) the urban workers, and 4) the rural workers (the peasantry).²⁵ These laws emphasized and consolidated the nobility' special and highest position within the Russian society, which were based on the example of the French Ancien Régime where they used three estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the people. Following this taxonomy of the Russian society, it is required to address the use of “estate”, “class”, and “group” while referring to the aristocracy and the nobility. The reason why this is important to address, is because it influenced the way historians saw, but also how contemporaries should see the Russian society and its social differences in those times, that are important to explain the position of the Russian

²³ Meehan-Waters, *Autocracy & Aristocracy*, 21.

²⁴ G. Hosking, *Russia and the Russians – A History* (Cambridge 2001) 204.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 204.

aristocracy towards their end in 1917. Because when researches about the nobility gained popularity between 1960's and 1980's, they were also influenced by historians who had the tendency to label the aristocracy/nobility as a class. This was a consequence of thinking in the (Marxist) "class struggle" paradigm. An example of such influence can be seen by deceased historian Jerome Blum. He argued: "The dvorianstvo was divided into six classes: nobles by patent, nobles by military service, nobles by civil service, foreign nobles, titled nobles, and finally, the old aristocratic families."²⁶ Implicating that: 1) the Russian society already consisted of many different classes like the nobility, the workers, peasants, etc. and 2) that within the class of the nobility there were even subclasses which were generated by more differences between members of this class.

The views of Blum contradicted the arguments of professor Gregory Freeze, who also investigated the history and its terminology of the term *soslovie*. Freeze argued that term can be seen as comparable form of the French *état*, or the German *Stand*, but wasn't 100% equal. Because from the moment it was introduced, it was subject to frequent change due to; changing terminologies, changing composition of groups, and (up- and downwards) social mobility.²⁷ Moreover, Freeze argued that he saw a growing of the estate system rather than a class system, and a system which allowed groups with a mixture of people like the *intelligentsia* to become part of it. Summarizing, Freeze argued that "these sosloviia did not inexorably dissolve into classes in the postreform era, as traditionally posited in the estate-class paradigm. Although some new groups, like workers, did tend to develop "class" identities and others, like the professions, endured an undefined "supra-estate" status, much of society still continued to think in terms of the prereform soslovie system."²⁸

Furthermore, the difference in the Russian system between the estate and the sosloviia, was that the estate existed because of the privileges they were entitled to, due to their background/heritage. On the other hand, the sosloviia existed because people were given certain rights by the autocrat. For example, the right to carry a title, or that he was given a piece of land. In return, this also required the same persons to do duties and have certain responsibilities, which were also delegated from the autocrat. In other words, the sosloviia existed because of the grace of the autocrat. If someone didn't fulfil its duties, or tasks, the privileges this person had acquired could be taken away. Whereas the estate existed without the approval and

²⁶ J. Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia – from the ninth century to the nineteenth century* (Princeton 1961) 349.

²⁷ G. Freeze, 'The Soslovie (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History', in: *The American Historical Review* 91:1 (1986) 11-36, there 19-21.

²⁸ Freeze, 'The Soslovie (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History', there 36.

interference of the autocrat. The (noble) estate was bound together via the “esprit de corps”, the (morale) members of the aristocracy had and who shared the same beliefs, which made them belong to that specific estate. Thus, this research disagrees with the point of view of Blum and follows that of Freeze. Being part of a certain class was based on someone’s (material and immaterial) wealth. Being part of an estate, was based on someone’s ancestry and common/shared values and characteristics. The consequence was that an “estate” was bound more together, and more homogenous than people from a certain class. Members from a class are, internally, more divided because of they were only “bound” together because they belonged to a certain level of wealth they had. However, the nobility as a whole can be seen as an estate because it can be divided in different sub-groups or categories. So, in this research the aristocracy is seen as “category” or “group” within the estate of the nobility.

In 1785, Tsarina Catherina the Great (r. 1762-1796) issued the “Charter to the Nobility”. A charter which gave the Russian nobility, and especially the aristocracy, more privileges than before. For example, they were excluded from paying taxes, they were freed from obligatory service to the Tsar or Tsarina, and they were allowed to sentence the serfs as they saw fit.²⁹ Professor Leonid Heretz showed that the reference of “lord” also became a synonym for aristocratic/noble land owners. They saw everything that was alien (e.g. even simple things as European clothing) or something that was perceived as cruel and evil, as a sign that that person was a “lord”. Eventually, this term and usage became widespread and received a negative connotation.³⁰ A reason and explanation for this comment is provided by Hosking who elaborated: “Lords had judicial and police powers over their serfs, as well as economic ones, which meant that they could punish serfs in any way they saw fit: they could flog them, send them to the army or exile them to Siberia. Theoretically, they were not permitted to kill a serf [...]”³¹

A result of this “freedom” for the nobles meant that it influenced the perception of the peasants if their landowners/lords weren’t the most righteous ones as we saw in the introduction. Although such practices were illegal after the 1861, the year when the serfs were emancipated by Tsar Alexander II (r. 1855-1881), which meant that they were free, unbound from the “chains” of their landlord, and that the peasants were able to own their own land, it was still in their minds. Moreover, this “freedom” came at a price. Meaning, that the peasants had to loan money

²⁹ Britannica Academic, ‘Charter to the Nobility’, <<https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Charter-to-the-Gentry/36441>> (Retrieved on: 09-01-20).

³⁰ L. Heretz, *Russia on the eve of modernity: popular religion and traditional culture under the last tsars* (Cambridge 2008) 133-134.

³¹ G. Hosking, *Russia: People and empire 1552-1917* (London 1997) 158.

from the state (or again, the landlord) to compensate the landlord for his losses in income, due to the emancipation. So in reality, it made sure that the former serfs were still bound to the landlord's grounds, because they were directly or indirectly in debt to him. In the end, this reform can be seen as a pyrrhic victory for both sides, which caused an underlying problem to keep slumbering through times, and which would erupt in 1905.

Benckendorff, Rodzianko, Yusupov, Obolensky

Nineteen years after the emancipation, the first main character was born. In this case, Constantine Benckendorff. Before going into how the aristocrats perceived the period towards the Russian Revolution of 1917, it is important to introduce the main characters and get acquainted with their families from which they descended. The four characters in this research all came from the upper echelon of the Russian aristocracy, but even between them there were differences to be noted. This is based on two of the characteristics. First, on the "seniority" of the family within the aristocracy (e.g. the date of incorporation, and of Russian or foreign descent). Second, on how "close" these families stood in favour of the rulers of Russia (e.g. also having a home in Tsarskoye Selo, the village where the summer residence of the Romanovs was, or having the ability to have audiences with Tsar).

Benckendorff family

Count Constantine Alexandrovich Benckendorff was born in 1880 on the 15th of September in Sosnovka as the son of Alexander Benckendorff, the last ambassador of Imperial Russia in London, and Sophie Benckendorff (née Shuvalov), who was a descendent of the old aristocratic Shuvalov family. Benckendorff descended from his father's side from a noble Baltic-German family, which was incorporated within the Russian nobility via the Treaty of Nystad when the Baltic countries were obtained in 1721 by Tsar Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725). In 1775, under Tsar Paul I, the Benckendorff family was granted two estates. One estate in Keila-Joa (modern-day Estonia) and the second, the Sosnovka estate in the Tambov region.³² Although the Benckendorffs were already of noble descent, they evolved acquired "fame" into the Russian aristocracy due to their services to the different tsars. In their case, the military service, which made them a typical example of the (military) nobility. For example, Benckendorff's grandfathers Aleksandr Benckendorff and Konstantin Benckendorff held important positions during the wars against Napoleon Bonaparte when he invaded Russia in 1812. Under Tsar

³² Benckendorff, *Half A Life*, 16.

Nicholas I he was awarded for his military services with the title of Count which passed on to Constantine Benckendorff. Another famous Benckendorff was his father, Aleksandr Benckendorff, who became the last ambassador of Imperial Russia, and due to this position he would be immensely valuable for Constantine's life.³³

Rodzianko family

Count Pavel Pavlovich Rodzianko, or commonly referred to as "Paul", was born in 1880 on the 11th of December in St. Petersburg as the son of Pavel Vladimirovich Rodzianko, who was a general in the Imperial Army, and Princess Marie Rodzianko (née Golitsyn) who was a lady-in-waiting of Empress Maria Alexandrovna, and a descendent of the wealthy and aristocratic Golitsyn family. The Rodzianko/Rodzyanko family originated from the Poltava region located in the Cossack Hetmanate [part of modern-day Ukraine], which existed between the 17th and 18th century. Within this Hetmanate, members of the Rodzianko family were part of the nobility due to their contributions as military *starshyna* (officers) in the army. As we saw with Benckendorff family, and as we will see with the Yusupov family, the Rodziankos were incorporated within the Russian nobility when the Hetmanate was conquered and was Russified under Tsarina Catherine II. Another well-known member of this family was Mikhail Vladimirovich Rodzianko. He was the leader/chairman of the Fourth Duma, which convened between November 1912 and October 1917. During this period, which was building up towards a time of immense internally and externally turmoil, but where his advices were ignored by Tsar Nicholas II.³⁴

Yusupov family

Prince Felix Felixovich Yusupov was born in 1887 on the 24th of March in St. Petersburg as the son of Count Felix Sumarokov-Elston, who was a general in the Imperial Army, and Princess Zinaida Nikolayevna Yusupova, who was the last descendant of the extremely wealthy Yusupov family. Due to their wealth and his mother, their family seemed set the tone and came to be known for the Russian hospitality and lavishness, which behaviour also passed on to their son. Felix Yusupov also had different (i.e. foreign) family heritage like Benckendorff and Rodzianko, this in comparison with Obolensky. He was, via his mother's side, of (princely)

³³ M. Soroka, *Britain, Russia and the road to the First World War: the fateful embassy of Count Aleksandr Benckendorff (1903-16)* (Farnham 2011) 14.

³⁴ Encyclopedia of Ukraine, 'Rodzianko',
<<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CR%5CO%5CRodzianko.htm>>
(Retrieved on: 31-01-20).

Tartar descent. Where in earlier years Russia was ruled by the Tartars, only both parties eventually switched places due to the collapse and defeat of the Mongol Empire and its Golden Horde Khanate. After the defeat of the Khanate, the Yusupov family (and other noble Tartar families) were given a choice by the Russian tsar, Ivan the Terrible (r. 1547-1584). They could choose between; subject to their new master, or to decline it. If they chose to accept, they would be incorporated and acknowledged in the same Russian nobility if they converted to the Russian Orthodox faith and pledged allegiance to the Tsar. The latter choice stripped them of their original titles and claims, and they would become “normal” citizens of the Russian Empire. The Yusupov family wisely chose the former one.

Obolensky family

Prince Serge Platonovich Obolensky (Neledinsky-Meletsky) was born in 1890 on the 3rd of November in Tsarskoye Selo as the son of Platon Sergeyevich Obolensky, who was a Colonel in the Imperial Army and aide-de-camp to Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich Romanov, and Maria Konstantinovna Obolensky (née Naryshkin). Compared to the previous three aristocrats, the Obolensky family tree was the only “native and authentic” noble Russian family that wasn’t incorporated or accepted, within the evolving Russian nobility when it was created. The family tree can be traced back to the founders of Russia. More specific, to the time of Viking chieftain Rurik, who founded Kievan Rus’ and started the Rurikid dynasty in 862 (A.D.), which was the predecessor of Imperial Russia under the Romanov dynasty after its dissolution in 1610. During those founding days, the Obolensky family arose from the (princely) Chernigov sub branch, that evolved from the ruling Rurikid dynasty. Despite their contributions, and being one of the oldest families in Russia, being in the graces of the Tsar was in the past also very important. In their case, Tsar Ivan the Terrible almost extinguished their family when he tried to united the loose principalities under the reign of Moscow.

Youth and growing up

One thing is certain to be said about the Russian aristocrats, the four characters didn’t live the “ordinary” Russian life. They had the privilege of spending the time when they grew up, living divided between their urban palaces and apartments and their (multiple) rural estates, or foreign residences and didn’t have any social, financial or other problems. From these privileges, a common trait all four of the aristocrats had, was that they all started their memoirs with a mixture of: their family’s history, a brief introduction of their families, or their youth and

growing up on the estate(s) their families owned. That they started with this didn't seem an accident or coincidence.

Although historian Priscilla Roosevelt investigated a different period (1780-1860) with her research on the Russian country estate, compared to the time period in this research, she nevertheless showed the importance and influencing role the landed estate in that period had. It seemed that this influence was still noticeable in the period that was of importance in this research, although slightly altered. Meaning, that the rural estates also played a key role in the childhood of the four aristocrats. Moreover, Roosevelt argued that in the period she researched, via the memoirs of the aristocrats, their childhood on the estate was “represented as a golden age and mothers as saintly beings”.³⁵ Comparing the previous comment to the memoirs of the four characters, the former aspect definitely also applied for all four in this case. They all recollected the joy they had on discovering all the things the Russian life on the estate had to offer. Their youths seemed the most golden times of their lives, compared to other parts in their memoirs.³⁶ The first aspect that appeared in the beginnings of the all the memoirs, were the recollections of the discovering and exploring of the vast Russian territories that belonged to the families' estates. This discovering happened via; the trip they had to make to the estates, their contact with the villagers and the lands, or hunting parties. But a strange paradox seemed to be occurring within these specific reminiscences about their youths.

The four characters all put very much emphasis on the “Russianness” of certain elements. For instance, the enjoying of the landscape, the attitudes of the peasants/villagers, and all the life that occurred around the estate. All four characters explicitly stated they enjoyed the Russian lands, but it also gives the idea, because he said it so many times, that they understood the contrast that came with it when they left their urban residences, or bubble, in St. Petersburg or Moscow. In other words, life on and around the estate made them come back to earth in their own country. One who perfectly demonstrated this contrast was Obolensky. Stating the following about his relationship with the local peasant boys at their estate in Krasnaya Gorka:

*In St. Petersburg and Czarskoe Selo, when I wasn't called Paponka or Horse Blanket I was called Your Excellency. Here the boys called me Serge. Out in those great woods and rolling field there were no absurdities, and if there are moments in men's lives that can be remembered as sheer peace, this was one of mine.*³⁷

³⁵ P. Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian country estate: a social and cultural history* (New Haven 1995) 180.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 122.

³⁷ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part One-Horse Blanket, Section 1.

This quote confirmed what has been said by Hosking, who stated that: "...that in any case many of them retained strong and affectionate memories of their village childhoods often brought up by serf nurses among serf children".³⁸ But, the aforementioned quote gives the feeling, that the members of this generation of aristocrats definitely knew that they were (immensely) privileged compared to others in society. As we will see later on, in some cases this "struggle of identity" will positively affect their case, but in other cases also negatively. It gives the idea that the aristocrats in some way struggled with their own identity, or their place in the Russian society. The most striking feature here, is that their rural estate(s) also represented something where the "real" Russians were, who held totally different values compared to the aristocrats.

Coming back to the latter part of the statement of Roosevelt, about the importance of the mother in their growing up as "saintly beings", this seemed diminished in the time the four characters were raised. This doesn't mean the mother didn't play a role at all, but it seemed that raising of the four characters primarily happened via nannies and/or servants. One aspect on which their help differed, was on the size of their entourage. For instance, a nanny called Martha Doulina took care of Benckendorff, whereas Emma Potter was the nanny of Rodzianko while growing up. A step higher can be seen at Obolensky, who was also raised by a nanny called Lizzie Arthur, but was provided and guided by a *diadka*, a male guardian. The most extraordinary and lavish help was seen at Yusupov, who always had an (small) entourage of servants with him, even when he went to the United-Kingdom.³⁹ When he grew up, at his Moika Palace in St. Petersburg, Yusupov stated:

*Our personnel was recruited from all parts of the world: Arabs, Tartars and Kalmucks brightened the house with their multi-colored costumes.*⁴⁰

In the end, about the two cases noted by Roosevelt while comparing these to the memoirs of the four, this showed that the attitudes and customs of the aristocracy didn't really change, but still showed a degree of segregation from the rest of society. Explanations of this behaviour can also be seen in other things that evolved around the aristocrats and their estates, because this differed with their leisure activities when they were in cities like St. Petersburg or Moscow.

³⁸ Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 159.

³⁹ Benckendorff, *Half A Life*, 19; Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 2; Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part One-Horse Blanket, Section 1; Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 143.

⁴⁰ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 60.

The estate also had more functions than only hunting, or collecting their earnings of the lands they possessed. The estate was and became a central place for every kind of things for the landowning nobility, but also in a major sense for the villagers around the estate. For instance, as a place for the arts (paintings, acting, and theatre), knowledge (libraries), educating and caring for the villagers, receiving other noble/high class guests (dinners, balls), and praying and in the church. Only to note that these were the things and activities the aristocracy primarily cared about and benefited from.⁴¹ This was totally the opposite of the peasants who worked the lands, the servants in and around the house, and other people who were in any way related (or bound) to the estate. The estate wasn't a place where only positive things happened. It also was a place, where the lines between the aristocrats and the villagers were heavily demarcated, where strict rules applied what the servants/villagers were or weren't allowed to do, where the housing was very much below standard, and the villagers had to struggle to make ends meet.⁴² When in 1861 the emancipation happened, it depended how their relationship was with members of the family, and evolved over the years. Because this would become important for the relationship between the two groups in 1905, as we will see later on.

Noblesse oblige

Being born and raised as an aristocrat or nobleman was one thing, acting like one was something different. The reason why this was important, is because it can explain certain divergent habits, or attitudes compared to the peasantry and toiling classes of Russia at that time. Being an aristocrat also differed between societies/countries across Europe. Some could argue that this previous comment speaks for itself, but it has to be emphasized when scholars are reviewing their actions in the light of a changing society, which are central in this research. This "being and acting like an aristocrat", or the higher level of being part of another class within a society in Europe, was perfectly summarized by Wasson. He mentioned three important aspects, regarding the European aristocracy, about what was important for them.

First, "Most aristocrats were landed proprietors. In earlier eras urban patriciates functioned very much like aristocracies and even gained titles without owning much acreage. Over time, however, land was usually purchased or inherited by all titled families. A grand residence, supported at least partly by landed wealth, either in the city or countryside, was a sine qua non. Mere purchase of land, however, did not itself gain admission to the elite. Living

⁴¹ Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian country estate*, 173.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 220.

nobly was generally seen as an essential aspect of aristocracy. This involved lavish hospitality, education, rural recreations, carriages, dress and culture”.⁴³ This is something where the Yusupov family, and especially his mother Princess Zenaida Nikolayevna Yusupov, in excelled. As Yusupov recalled the lavish hospitality created by his mother during the coronation of the new Tsar Nicholas II Romanov in 1896:

*For the festivities we opened our private theatre. My parents send to St. Petersburg for the Italian Opera, with Mazzini, Madame Arnoldson and the corps de ballet [...] I shall never forget another performance at our theatre: all the guest were seated in boxes, the stalls were removed, and in their place was a garden of tea roses whose fragrance filled the air.*⁴⁴

Second, “Service to the state was a powerful ingredient in the aristocratic character, more evident, perhaps, in Russia and Prussia than in Spain or Denmark but existing nearly everywhere”. Third, next to owning a landed residence or estate and being in service to the monarch, were the values that these aristocrats propagated were equally essential to their existence. Moreover, these aristocrats also shared a collective set of values: “a sense of exclusivity, peculiar notions of honour, of being the sole bearers of high culture and civilization, of being the guardians of the general interest”.⁴⁵

As pointed out above, acting and behaving as aristocrats with required elements, also applied to the Russian equivalent which is central here. But, whereas Wasson only noted the “required” and most obvious aspects, other elements can also be found in different places among the four characters. For example, another frequent returning aspect in the memoirs was the use of language, which also played an important part in acting as an aristocrat. All four acknowledged that language of the Russian elite was also of great importance. They all seemed to be, at least, educated as bilingual, or even trilingual. They spoke French with other members of the aristocracy/elite and as the first lingua franca, English as the second lingua franca, and in the last place Russian when they needed to speak to other groups in the society. For instance, the villagers who lived around their estates. This combination of usage, seemed already to be fully integrated from the 1750’s under Catherine the Great when France was seen as the example of high culture.⁴⁶ This didn’t mean everyone was in favour of this starch order of

⁴³ E. Wasson, *Aristocracy and the modern world* (Basingstoke 2006) 10

⁴⁴ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 34-35.

⁴⁵ Wasson, *Aristocracy and the modern world*, 10.

⁴⁶ D. Offord, G. Argent, and V. Rjéoutski, ‘French and Russian in Catherine’s Russia’, in: D. Offord, L. Ryazanova-Clarke, V. Rjeoutski, G. Argent (eds.), *French and Russian in Imperial Russia - Language Use among the Russian Elite* (Edinburgh 2015) 25-44, there 27-28.

languages. Yusupov addressed this cosmopolitan, but also extremely flamboyant character of the Russian aristocracy:

*With the exception of a few families that kept up the traditions of old Russia, most of the aristocracy who lived there [St. Petersburg, ed.] were very cosmopolitan. They had a snobbish infatuation for foreign countries, and loved to visit them. It was considered good form to have one's laundry done in London or Paris. Most of my mother's contemporaries affected to speak French only, and spoke Russian with a foreign accent. My brother and I found this most irritating, and always answered old ladies in Russian when they addressed us in French.*⁴⁷

This didn't mean Yusupov, or the other three, were the complete opposite of what is mentioned here. On the contrary, and especially Yusupov (and his family), can be regarded as an extension of the very same behaviour he mocks here. Yusupov became one of the richest heirs in Russia, and also lived up to that notion. As someone stated about him; "Everything about Felix was always sort of Grandiflora, though I am not sure quite that he realized it. There was never any sort of display – merely luxurious comfort. Expense did not enter into account at all. He was not extravagant; it was only that he seemed not to be able to think in small quantities".⁴⁸ Another example of this mentioned behaviour was when he randomly bought a bull, cows, and several other animals in the United-Kingdom for their estate in Russia.⁴⁹ On the other hand, this quote showed that the older generations already gave, or set a certain standard for the generation of the four aristocrats to act and live up to their status. This didn't mean everyone followed and copied this behaviour, but it gives an idea of what some of them perceived as normal.

Other elements, which also played a great part in the Russian nobility, was the aspect of receiving privileges. When someone was a member of the Russian aristocracy, or achieved nobility via service to the state/Tsar, that person/family would get certain privileges in return. One of them was that persons of the aristocracy (or the nobility) were allowed admittance to several exclusive universities and schools in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Attending one of these prestigious schools also became a mandatory aspect of an aristocrats' education, and thus their acting as aristocrats. All four characters were educated at the most privileged schools in St. Petersburg, and those in foreign countries like the United-Kingdom. This is something that also

⁴⁷ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 57.

⁴⁸ New York Times, 'Prince Yusupoff Defended in Rasputin Case', <<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1917/01/14/102309358.pdf>> (Retrieved on: 12-03-20).

⁴⁹ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 138.

noted by other historians like Lieven. He showed that members of the nobility, but especially the aristocracy, congregated mostly around the same schools in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Lieven showed that for military service, the Corps des Pages was the chosen place. This happened to be the case for Rodzianko and Yususpov. Aristocrats' sons who joined were placed in the same regiments of the military as other aristocrats. For example, regiments that contained a lot of aristocrats were; the Chevaliers Garde, the Horse Guards, and the Preobrazhensky Regiment. This separation made sure that the aristocracy primarily filled the mentioned regiments, instead of "normal" individuals.⁵⁰ The civil counterpart, which prepared aristocrats for civil service, were the Alexander Lycée and the University of Jurisprudence/Law (name varies due to different translations) in St. Petersburg.⁵¹ The eventual choice of the aristocrats of choosing their career was perfectly summarized by former Canadian politician, historian but also noble descendant Michael Ignatieff. He researched his own family history and stated the following; "When my Russian grandfather [Count Pavel Ignatieff, ed.] was nineteen and choosing a career, the tramlines of his past ran straight into the future: he would enter a Guards regiment like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather before him. He could then make a career in the army or return to the family estates and live as a gentlemen farmer. At some point in his life he would be expected to leave the estate and serve the Tsar, as his grandfather and father had done. He would 'shoulder the chains of service'."⁵²

There were also other options, were the parents of Benckendorff had the civil road in mind for him. This road seemed logical, because his father also followed this road of the civil service, where he ended up as the ambassador of Russia in the United-Kingdom. In the end, Benckendorff decided to switch to the Imperial Navy instead.⁵³ Another example was Obolensky, who in 1910, was sent to the University of St. Petersburg to specialize in agriculture, due to his father's plans to make him understand, and give him knowledge on running the family's estates in the future.⁵⁴ His father's reasoning seemed logical, because in the final years of Imperial Russia, a lot of noblemen were losing money a lot of money via their (landed) estates. This problem was also addressed by Rodzianko:

Most estates were run by efficient German agents and everything lay in their hands. They dealt with all business, wrote us long letters about sales and matters we could not understand and

⁵⁰ Lieven, *Russia's Rulers*, 94.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 108.

⁵² Ignatieff, *The Russian Album*, 9.

⁵³ Benckendorff, *Half a Life*, 37.

⁵⁴ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part One-Horse Blanket, Section 2.

*reproved extravagant members of the family [...] But they [Pavel's parents, ed.] were incapable of taking charge from the financial point of view [...] I suppose they regarded us as a race apart, as inexplicable cases of intelligent people with whom one could discuss anything but finance.*⁵⁵

Even though members of the aristocracy were educated at the finest universities, it seemed that this problem was of a different nature. The problem mentioned above, was supplemented by historian Gary Hamburg who noticed that in this period these noblemen were losing a lot of money, due to the transition from having serfs to “free” peasants, and falling grain prices.⁵⁶ Between the four aristocrats a nuance can be made. Where Yusupov's family was so extremely wealthy, they probably didn't even notice, or were affected by the crisis/transition. This differed with the case of Benckendorff's family. Historian Marina Soroka showed that this crisis made sure his father needed to sell their French villa to compensate for the losses.⁵⁷ Despite (financial) mismanagement, neglect of their estates, making the transition to a serf-free situation, and an agricultural crisis, it seemed that the landowners didn't want to be disturbed with their financial status, even when they were near bankruptcy. Most of them just wanted to keep up their aristocratic lifestyle, which seemed more important. On the other hand, it also showed that there were differences between the aristocrats on how they were affected by the problems of the new century.

A final aspect worth mentioning, was the importance of marriage. The objective was to marry someone of the same, or preferably, a higher level of status. As we saw in the introduction of the main characters' families, most members of the families were connected through marriage and friendship with other noble families. This is also the way how they closed themselves of other groups from marrying into nobility. For instance, the father of Pavel Rodzianko, Pavel Vladimirovich Rodzianko, married to Princess Maria Pavlovna Golitsyna, a descendant of the wealthy Golitsyn family. A so-called *morganatic* marriage, the man marrying a woman of a lower status) was to be avoided, as Yusupov explained why:

Morganatic marriages such as this [referring to the marriage of Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich and Natalia Sheremetyevskaya, ed.] did great harm to the prestige of the

⁵⁵ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 3.

⁵⁶ G. Hamburg, 'The Russian Nobility on the Eve of the 1905 Revolution', in: *The Russian Review* 38:3 (1979) 323-338, there 328.

⁵⁷ Soroka, *Britain, Russia and the road to the First World War*, 27.

*Imperial family. The private lives of those who may be called upon to reign should be governed by the interests of their country and by the duties incumbent upon their rank. Noblesse oblige.*⁵⁸

Some could argue that this “noblesse oblige” can also be seen as an accelerator for internal “radicalization” within the Russian aristocracy, because as Yusupov had shown, status had to be maintained/preserved. Ultimately, their behaviour affected the perception of other groups people when they looked at the aristocracy, in a time where there were also enormous differences between the different groups who lived within the Russian society. Given the examples that are mentioned above, it seemed that fair to assume that the four aristocrats also lived in a totally different world, where they thought they were untouchable.

This chapter has demonstrated that the Russian nobility/aristocracy was from the 18th century obtained a further privileged position due to certain decisions made by the Tsars and Tsarina’s. This meant the start for evolving into a totally different world than other groups in Russia’s society. Although the generation of the four aristocrats belonged to the upper echelon of the Russian aristocracy, they would encounter the contrast of “different worlds” from an early age when they visited their rural estates. There, they would encounter a divergent opinion or lifestyle, because in the cities such as St. Petersburg, Moscow, or Tsarskoye Selo they only congregated around the same people with the same lavish lifestyle they had. Due to this, all four enjoyed the privileges of being born an aristocrat; attending balls, studying at exclusive schools, seeking for a wife of equal status, and living without any sorrows. No relations of any kind with members of other groups than maybe servants, was established due to their focus on living nobly. This meant that even financial income didn’t interest them and wasn’t important, because the noble status had to be uphold.

⁵⁸ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 162.

2. DESIRED CHANGE, REVOLUTION, AND RADICALIZATION *1905 - 1914*

In the previous chapter we looked at the main characters' family histories and what they experienced during their childhood and growing up in and outside Russia. Moreover, we looked at what it meant and what was required of being part of the Russian aristocracy. Behaving like an aristocratic person was seen as very important aspect of being part of the Russian higher classes. This "noblesse oblige" required Russian aristocrats to live up to certain standards that were set by older generations. Compared to the previous chapter, this chapter will focus on the next chronological period, beginning with the period leading up to the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 till the start of the First World War in 1914. Within this period, the development of the four aristocrats and their actions and opinions towards the first social problems are central.

The eternal land problem

A small recapitalization on what kind of relationship there was the with the Russian serfs/peasants, and how they were treated and seen by their owners before the emancipation in 1861. An important aspect was the role the noble landowner could assume because of the rights he would receive in that period as an owner of serfs. As stated earlier by Hosking, who argued that before 1861 lords were in fact judge, jury, and executioner regarding their serfs and could treat them the way they wanted. Moreover, Roosevelt argued that "Russians measured their wealth in the number of *dushi* (literally "souls", used to refer to adult male serfs) they owned".⁵⁹ This is also argued by historian Orlando Figes; "Owning lots of servants was a peculiar weakness of the Russian aristocracy – and perhaps a reason for their ultimate demise".⁶⁰ This showed that owning serfs also seemed a common practice among small noblemen around their properties. This also indicated that serfs were viewed as a status symbol by the owners, because it meant you were definitely a member of the nobility.

But, a nuance must be made here; the practice of having serfs wasn't reserved for only the most well-known aristocratic families, but the percentage of aristocrats who owned enormous amounts of serfs (10.000+) was very small and only in the hands of a few. For example, of the four, only Yusupov's grandfather Nikolai Borisovich Yusupov owned a lot of

⁵⁹ Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian country estate*, xiii.

⁶⁰ O. Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York 2002) 21.

serfs (± 30.809).⁶¹ This doesn't change the fact, and makes it fair to assume, that some of the noble land owners saw the former serfs merely as property, or just as entities which they possessed who were there only to generate income. So when the serfs were eventually emancipated in 1861 by Tsar Alexander II, the new "free" peasants wanted to own their own land. But, this wish remained to be fulfilled in the following forty-four years, which also influenced the anger of the peasants because they weren't financially capable of buying the land, which meant they had to borrow money from the state, or the landowner. This "land problem" remained a serious issue for the Russian peasants because they wanted change. Eventual change in the form of a piece of land that a peasant would own himself, without being in debt to the respectively landowner, and living within the ancient communal life. Of the four characters, it became clear that at an earlier age, most of them already realised, and understood what the problem was that the Russian peasants. They experienced this problem due to their (frequent) visits of their estates. One who perfectly described this feeling, was Obolensky:

*When I looked at the black Ukrainian earth, I could understand how the peasants felt when they looked at the land owned by the landed gentry of Russia. They coveted it, and their covetousness was inherent in the age-old Russian feeling about the Russian earth.*⁶²

It also becomes clear why the understanding of the peasants' problem, and having a good relationship with the peasants was vital for the landowners, due to unrest that would evolve later on. In the period before 1905, historian Seymour Becker had also shown that a lot of (noble) land owners had already sold a lot of their lands to the local peasants, because it was very profitable.⁶³ This act showed that there was also a different tendency, which showed that the nobility wasn't only holding on to their lands. Without saying that the landowners sold their lands due to altruistic reasons, but rather that they sold them because it was lucrative. This indicated that the nobility maybe knew that their traditional role as landowners was more or less coming to an end, because they were diversifying their (financial) interests as we will see later on.

⁶¹ Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe 1815-1914*, 43.

⁶² Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Two-Land Hunger, Section 1.

⁶³ Becker, *Nobility and privilege in late Imperial Russia*, 53.

Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905)

This land problem was postponed due to other problems Russia faced. Shortly after coming into the 20th century, Russia was heading into war. This also brings us to another important aspect in the memoirs. Which were the wars that were fought by Russia when the aristocrats lived. The first war they experienced was the Russo-Japanese War between 1904 and 1905. This war started because Russia saw itself being provoked by Japan, due to its aggressive military expansion in the East of the empire. When Japan declared war on Russia, Rodzianko addressed how he perceived the war declaration of Japan:

*We did not take it seriously. Most people laughed at the idea of little cheeky Japan daring to stand up to invincible Russia.*⁶⁴

One of the reasons, why the revolution eventually came about, was also because the war with Japan was going very badly, which Russia eventually even lost. Rodzianko didn't dedicated the loss against Japan on underestimation, but reckless decisions of the Russian high command with, wrong tactics, old fashioned gun designs and uniforms, and incompetent officers.⁶⁵ After the battle of Tshushima, which resulted in a disaster for Russia, Rodzianko saw the loss (and the approaching defeat) of the war against Japan, as the final step that drove Russia's society into the Revolution of 1905:

*The defeat at Tsu-Shima caused resentment among all classes in Western Russia. The ground being ploughed for trouble, revolutionary propaganda sprang up, discontent not being confined to the lower classes. This was the moment that subversive powers had waited for. From factories and universities, wherever propaganda could be easily distributed, revolutionary doctrines spread all over Russia. Disturbances in Petrograd were led by the unsavoury priest Gapon (an ex-secret-agent who had become a Revolutionary Socialist and ended by being hanged by the revolutionaries themselves as a traitor).*⁶⁶

This war became a huge humiliation for the Russians and for the aristocrats, such as Benckendorff who served in the army, because they were the first Western/European country to lose against the expected "less developed" Asiatic Japanese. That Russia didn't take this war

⁶⁴ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 7.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, Chapter 7.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, Chapter 7.

seriously, could explain why this loss contributed immensely to society's dissatisfaction, as Obolensky also confirmed:

*With Russia's defeat in the Japanese War the authority and prestige of the government had suffered disastrously.*⁶⁷

At the end of the war, while there still was social turmoil in Russia, it was forced to sign the Peace Treaty of Portsmouth (United States), which declared Japan as the victor. Despite the loss of the war against the Japanese, this loss wasn't the sole reason why the Revolution of 1905 took place.

Revolution of 1905

Other gradual developments had taken place, which also influenced the course of Russia's history. It seemed that perception and changing of the composition of the society became major factors in the revolutionary spirit in the country, which was also permeated itself in other groups than the peasants. Following this, historians have argued that Russia was drifting towards a new more class consciousness society. One of them was late professor Leopold Haimson, who was one of the first to argue that, at the beginning of the 20th century, as a reaction towards to moving of an estates society to a class society, "[...] they [the nobility, ed.] sought to defend their identity and values, their particular way of life, in this generally moving and evolving society". According to Haimson, this group turned itself into a more distinguished "socioeconomic" group, instead of an estate, which is used to be.⁶⁸ More recent studies have also shown that the arguments made by Haimson can be extended with other arguments, which elaborate on his writings. Where he focussed on the rural relations of the nobility and the peasants, other historians added to the changing composition of the old order and a drift towards a more consciousness society.

First, the changing composition of the Russian society. Building up to the year of 1905, the nobility wasn't the only "elite" anymore in Russia. Another group had entered, in this particular case; the group of new rich (urban) industrial businessmen, who profited from final years of the 19th century when Russia was experienced rapid industrialization, under the influence of politicians like Minister Sergei Witte. With this rapid industrialization, Russia gained new social and economic groups in its society; the industrial businessmen, but also a

⁶⁷ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Two-Land Hunger, Section 4.

⁶⁸ L. Haimson (ed.), *The Politics of Rural Russia, 1905-1914* (Bloomington 1979) 276.

class of toiling (urban) workers. These people, who were driven to the cities by the search for work, but couldn't cope with the immense influx of people. This led to problems like poor housing, unemployment, striking for better wages, and closing of the factories, etc. which also fed the discontent among both groups.⁶⁹ The emergence of a new class of wealthy businessmen also made sure that certain boundaries, or elements that were perceived to be solely applicable to the aristocracy/nobility became more fluid, which made certain groups less distinguishing from each other. Historians like Djurdja Bartlett showed that "exclusiveness" of even simple things for the aristocracy like clothing, were also adopted by other groups in society. Who also started adopting new fancy clothes, with which they distinguished themselves from the lower classes of society.⁷⁰

Second, traditional modes of (financial) income and the careers of the aristocracy were changing. It was generally assumed that the (landowning) nobility only received income from their lands via rent, or mines that contained minerals. But, Lieven showed that the aristocracy was also diversifying their financial stakes in new ways. One of those ways was putting their money into securities such as bonds or loans. This meant that their former primary income, derived from the income that the estates generated, were on the demise. This, diversifying of the family's interests, is also mentioned by Obolensky:

I have said that almost all the Obolensky property was in land, and so it was, but gradually over the years we acquired interests in other businesses, some of which were important for one reason or another. For example, one of my great uncles, years before, after a visit to Venice, tried to introduce Venetian glass blowers into Russia. He hired some skilled artisans to come to Russia. The local sand was inferior, so the project failed. But subsequently a prosperous business grew out of it, manufacturing windowpanes. In much the same fashion we acquired control of a textile factory.⁷¹

Moreover, according to Lieven; "in the 1880s the social spheres of the nobility and industry were still separate...By 1914 much had changed and the two worlds were far more mixed."⁷² The reason for this was that members of the nobility were specifically choosing for new career paths than they did before. Where in the past, joining and serving in the military gave a lot of prestige, more aristocrats from this generation sought their luck in a service/bureaucratic career.

⁶⁹ R. Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York 1995) 35.

⁷⁰ D. Bartlett, 'Nadezhda Lamanova: Couturier to the Nobility, Tailor to the Masses', in: *Experiment* 22:1 (2016) 117-138, there 120.

⁷¹ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Four-Horses in War, Section 3.

⁷² Lieven, *Aristocracy in Europe 1815-1914*, 139.

According to Becker, around 1900, members of the nobility who chose for the civil career path was also in decline. This meant that (a generally assumed) perception of the aristocracy/nobility as lazy landlords who only dedicated their lives to the estate, exploited their peasants, and collected money, wasn't entirely correct. But, this perception remained in the minds of the people. This development indicated a further amalgamation of society's changing (predestined) jobs and of the composition that followed from this.⁷³

In January 1905, even despite the nuances mentioned above, Russia faced the anger of different groups in its society. Peasants, workers, soldiers, and other groups joined the upheaval to protest for certain reforms. One of the main reasons why people joined the revolution was their longing for more (civil) rights via new political institutions, like a (legislative) Duma. But, there seemed to be a discrepancy between what the aristocrats told us about the nature and results of the 1905 Revolution, and what historians have said about this event. One discrepancy laid in the support of the revolution. During those days Benckendorff noted that the revolutionary character wasn't as big as people tended to claim. The following about the revolutionary character in Russia when he travelled back from the East towards St. Petersburg/Moscow, when he was finished with his duty in the war:

*The last days of my journey with the echelon [his naval companions, ed.], together with the telegram from my uncle, had proved me that all the news along the route had been grossly exaggerated, and yet I was not quite prepared for the fact that my journey from Ufa would be so normal, with all the life along the line the same. Not only was the train on time but newspapers reached us from the capitals and did not show that anything was particularly amiss.*⁷⁴

Another discrepancy can be found in the results of the revolution. When the 1905 Revolution did happen, it seemed that this revolution didn't fully have the attention, or importance, of all the aristocrats. The event gave mixed reactions in memoirs on how they saw the revolution unfold, or even mentioned it. For example, Yusupov didn't even mention the events of 1905. According to Obolensky, the effects of the 1905 Revolution weren't that noticeable, but he also stressed the importance of the relationship between peasant and landlord:

⁷³ Becker, *Nobility and privilege in late Imperial Russia*, 109-111.

⁷⁴ Benckendorff, *Half A Life*, 85.

*When the Revolution of 1905 began, one of the great fears was that the peasants would seize the land of the estates [...] The land hunger of the farmers could explode overnight. Houses might be looted and burned as they had been during Pugachev's rebellion more than a century before. In the spring some estates actually were seized and some landowners were killed. It was not an organized unrest, but was spasmodic and depended on local relations between the peasants and the owners of the landed estates. Where these relations were poor there was looting and burning of houses. Not many were burned. Though there was some slight unrest in the area, our property was not touched.*⁷⁵

Where Benckendorff, and Obolensky downplay the importance of the events of 1905, some historians tend to have different views, or disagree with these aristocrats' views. Historians like Andrew Verner have argued that the 1905 Revolution became the "dress rehearsal" for Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks, meaning they were allowed and got to practice for the decisive events of 1917, which showed the weaknesses of the Tsar and his authority. In the light of this research, 1905 was an important year, because of the relationship the aristocrats naturally had with the peasants/villagers around their estates. But, where it differed was that the four aristocrats were also part of the same category of people the Tsar didn't listen to, as has been showed how much effort was needed to persuade him of even signing the Manifesto.⁷⁶

Where the importance of the events of 1905 are debateable, the outcomes aren't, because the Revolution of 1905 resulted in several tangible things. The most important was that certain reforms were allowed by Nicholas II. The two most important aspects that were granted via the October Manifesto to the Russian people, were; 1) more civil rights like freedom of speech, assembly, association, and 2) the creation of the Duma, a legislative body which intended to limit the power of the autocrat. Verner argued that the events in that year were the most crucial in the downfall of the tsarist autocracy in Russia in 1917. He argued this, because after the events in 1905, the autocracy proved it wasn't capable or even willing, of reforming itself and the political system. Verner argued that reforms, like the October Manifesto, were only a momentarily reprieve of their eventual fate in 1917, as he stated: "Consciously or not, October 17 thus marked a superficial compromise between conflicting conceptions, which was to be sorely tested in the days and months to come-with far-reaching political and personal consequences".⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Two-Land Hunger, Section 4.

⁷⁶ A. Verner, *The Crisis of Russian Autocracy: Nicholas II and the 1905 Revolution* (Princeton 1990) 242-244.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 245.

Someone who didn't downplay the importance of 1905 was Rodzianko. When looking at his reminiscences about this time, he appeared to show his "true colour". Meaning, he was showing his support for the monarchy/autocracy, and in favour of the old order where peasants should hold the same role as before 1861. For instance, in the eyes of Rodzianko the October Manifesto proved to be of good use:

*The Tzar issued his famous manifesto establishing an Imperial Parliament; in other words, it was the first step to granting a Constitution to the people of Russia [...] All over Russia fresh country was being opened up and under the new reforms the peasants thrived.*⁷⁸

In reality, the proposed reforms of the October Manifesto didn't come in full effect, because Nicholas II either ignored, vetoed, or dissolved the Duma. In the end, for many people of the lower classes the results of the revolution felt like a waste of time and energy.⁷⁹ For the time being, the reforms proved useful to the Tsar to (partially) ease the anger of society, and make the revolutionary parties like the RSDLP leave Russia (abbreviation of "Russian Social Democratic Labour Party", from which the *Bolshevik* faction had split in 1903). Still, this differed with the perception of Rodzianko. He argued that the Russian peasantry was given a perfect solution with the reforms, but they refused to seize the opportunities which had been given to them:

*Peasants were given equal privileges with other classes in entering Government services and educational establishments, but owing to their great dullness once they got off the land these privileges affected few. Other countries seldom realize the happy, animal-like stupidity of the Russian peasant, who sleeps on his stove all winter like a bear.*⁸⁰

Again, the perception of Rodzianko disagreed with the actual results of the October Manifesto. The results disappointed a lot of people of the lower classes, because they didn't really get what they wanted, which was real and tangible change. Whereas Rodzianko saw it as a "gift" for the stupid Russian peasant.

⁷⁸ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 7.

⁷⁹ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 215.

⁸⁰ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 8.

Radicalization of the political landscape

One of the groups that grew impatient was the “stupid” peasantry. After the revolution they still weren’t satisfied with the results, because they also saw the efforts of the revolution proved futile. In relation to this, historian Walter Moss showed that in 1897 about 1.5% of that same population were nobles, and of that percentage, 66% were hereditary nobles. Meaning, a relatively small percentage in comparison to the peasantry in Russia. Still, the land owning nobility were about to face large difficulties. Figes showed that after the October Manifesto, the peasants were still not pleased with its outcomes and that the noble landowners saw a different peasant living around the estate. “The revolution luridly exposed the peasants’ deep hatred of the gentry”.⁸¹ Even though the Manifesto was issued, people were still stripped of their rights, and the Duma was already dissolved after two and a half months, because the Tsar disagreed with the Duma and vetoed the convention of it. These results led to more anger and further radicalization of groups of the lower classes. A nuance was that even more landowners saw the 1905 Revolution as a clear warning and sold their land to the peasants and went to the cities, but also a great part of the land owners radicalized and formed the *United Nobility* to defend their interests because they were still very dependent on them and their labour.⁸²

Two aspects seemed to be of importance if the landed estate was affected or even inspired by the peasant rebellions. First, the relationship of the villagers with the noble family was of great importance. Second, the reaction of the nobleman in question, towards the land problem in his locality. More specific, if that person opposed the peasants’ wishes, and also joined the counter movement of the nobility as we will see later on. Of the four aristocrats, the one who put a lot of emphasis in his memoirs on the peasants and their land problem, was Benckendorff. He seemed to understand, and realize the seriousness of the Russian land problem. Moreover, he also stressed that the world of the peasant was totally different than scholars had argued. According to Benckendorff, the peasant life revolved around the so-called *mir*. This meant: being autarkic, being self-sufficient, combined with the peasant community and having collective duties:

Between 1905-1914 the political changes in Russia went at a fast and furious tempo: a constitution was granted, and twice radically altered both with regard to powers and privileges of the representative institution, the Duma, and the electoral laws governing its membership; and still the peasantry, in spite of the fact that its material prosperity for at least a quarter of a

⁸¹ Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 206.

⁸² *Ibidem*, 206.

*century had been growing at a surprising rate, continued to be concerned only with the question of their fundamental security. This to them meant one thing, and one thing only: the unalienable right to cultivate a piece of land owned and equally shared by all the members of a community.*⁸³

This indicated that Benckendorff thought that other people like members of the aristocracy didn't understand the Russian peasant, although their lives seemed connected. He especially addressed the peasant uprisings that followed the revolution, which was totally contradicting with what Rodzianko has previously said, as Benckendorff stated:

*Nevertheless, the peasantry, having decided to get hold of this last reserve of arable and to make an attempt to oblige the landowners to abandon it, took matters in their own hands, with agrarian riots all over the country as the outcome. We at Sosnofka did not have to suffer from any breaches of peace at all, and the relations between the estate and the village were not disturbed and continued to be good all through that troubled period.*⁸⁴

As seen above, the relationship between the landowner and the village was of great importance. Moreover, Benckendorff argued why the nobility also radicalised in that period. For this context it is wise to take a step back in earlier years. Alongside the introduction of the *zemstvo* structure in Russia, which provided the local communities more autonomy, *Marshalls of Nobility* were introduced. As professor Gary Hamburg showed, these were members of the nobility who had an education, and due to their education were given the tasks of; applying the law regarding legal disputes between villagers, or doing administrative tasks such as registering the lands of each individual in the community.⁸⁵ During this development, it seemed that in the years before the peasant rebellions of 1905-1907 that some sort of a "gentlemen's agreement" was constructed between the land owning nobility, and the peasantry. This is summed up by Benckendorff in the following quote:

Politically speaking, the general trend was for the elected members of the Zemstvo and their executive boards to be fairly Conservative to Progressive, with the Marshals on the extreme right wing. But there did exist a minority among us, who, with the final intention of devoting our lives to political activity through the new Duma, took up the cause of the radical opposition,

⁸³ Benckendorff, *Half a Life*, 140.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 141.

⁸⁵ G. Hamburg, 'Portrait of an Elite: Russian Marshals of the Nobility, 1861-1917', in: *Slavic Review* 40:1 (1984) 585-602, there, 587.

*often much more so even than the body of the Zemstvo's paid servants, who at that time formed the backbone of all the reform movements.*⁸⁶

As stated by Benckendorff, the Marshalls were often on the right wing of the political scope. This also made it more understandable that the peasant rebellions also sparked a counter movement of the nobility. They too, but especially the landed nobility, radicalized with the goal of defending their landed interests and traditional ways of living. This resulted in the creation of the *United Nobility* during the uprisings in 1905-1907. According to Hosking and Manning, there were three reasons why this group was created: 1) keeping conservative noble landowners “in and out of government” to diminish the liberals and their solutions, 2) the landowners wanted more protection from the government (due to the rebellions), and 3) appeal for the reintroduction of the “semiofficial gatherings of the provincial marshals of nobility”. In general, the main purpose of defending the interests of the land owners, who saw their lands being confiscated by the angry peasants.⁸⁷

An aspect of why the (aristocrat) landowners defended their previous position so heavily, can be seen on a more meta level. As mentioned before, the aristocrats definitely recognized and addressed the problems farmers serfs and peasants encountered, but also something else can be seen the memoirs. This was a type of paternalistic behaviour with the aristocrats/noblemen. They acted, metaphorically, as they were a “shepherd”, and the peasants were its herd, who they had to guide. Thus, an aspect of the explanation on how the people were affected and treated by the aristocrats, laid in the way they were seen by them. An explanation has been given by Roosevelt, who argued that the nobility saw itself as a “paternalistic guardian” for the people that lived with them on and around the estate. Moreover, because the Tsar was seen as the father of the Russian people, the consequence was that “many owners of estates both large and small considered themselves “little fathers” to their peasants”. With other words, they saw themselves as an extension of the Tsar’s role, because they granted the right of owning a piece of land by the Tsars, which historically and previously was accompanied with serfs.⁸⁸

In 1906, amidst the peasant rebellions, there was also the first Duma election. As a part of the explanation why a lot of noblemen chose to sell their land, can also be found in the results of the first Duma elections, which were held in 1906 during the peasant upheavals. The result was that the Russian people were able, for the first time, to show their political colour. Showing

⁸⁶ Benckendorff, *Half a Life*, 124.

⁸⁷ G. Hosking and R. Manning, ‘What was the United Nobility’, in: L. Haimson (ed.), *The Politics of Rural Russia, 1905-1914* (Bloomington 1979) 142-183, there 145.

⁸⁸ P. Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian country estate: a social and cultural history* (New Haven 1995) xiii.

their political colour also happened with some of the aristocrats. For instance, Obolensky stated he favoured the Kadet party (Constitutional Democrats, centrist/centrist-left party):

*The first elections in Russian history were held in the spring of 1906. At the age of fifteen I more or less supported the Constitutional Democrats, who favored a government on the American model, a federal system, with a limited monarchy, whilst Father was a good deal to the right of this. He was one of the people who supported the Emperor unequivocally in the October Manifesto, which granted a constitution with a parliament of limited powers. I was pleased when the Constitutional Democrats won the election [...].*⁸⁹

Relating Obolensky's political stances with the other aristocrats, only Benckendorff really named his political party. In his case, Benckendorff stated he supported Vladimir Kuzmin-Karavayev who led the Party of Democratic Reform (left-progressive).⁹⁰ Rodzianko didn't note his political party in this period (or later) as clearly as Obolensky and Benckendorff had done. But, his statements mentioned earlier about the reforms of the October Manifesto, indicated that he was more on the right side of the political spectrum. Lastly, Yusupov didn't note any political favouritism, and showed he was more or less a-political. But, the general thread in Yusupov's memoirs indicated a more conservative way where he would have retained his carefree and could continue his splendid life. Summarizing, as Obolensky noted about his father (and thus his family) and also argued by Smith, that different political views were possible within the aristocracy. Even within this group of four aristocrats, differences were observable ranging from more leftist (Benckendorff), to moderates (Obolensky) and more rightists (Rodzianko, Yusupov).⁹¹

Despite the creation of the *United Nobility*, or the feeling of being a pater familias of the peasants around the noblemen's estates, they were faced with the question of keeping or selling their lands to the peasants. Historian Walter Moss showed that the latter option was perceived as the most favourable one for a large portion of the noblemen; "The peasant disturbances of 1905-1907 prodded more nobles to sell their land. By 1914, they possessed only about half the land they had kept after the 1861 settlement ...".⁹² After 1907, there weren't any great upheavals, or rebellions in Russia. This meant that it was a more or less relaxed time, and

⁸⁹ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Two Land Hunger – Section 4.

⁹⁰ Benckendorff, *Half a Life*, 191.

⁹¹ Smith, *Verloren Adel*, 117.

⁹² W. Moss, *A History of Russia – Volume II: Since 1855* (New York 1997 124-125).

there was time do other things. This time also showed that these aristocrats were occupied with totally different things than other groups in society.

An example of why the aristocracy was on a totally different level than the rest of society, was the aristocratic behaviour of the right to duel. This duelling allowed noble members to challenge each other on the base of several reasons. One of them could also be the loss of honour, or because of an argument. This loss of honour was the cause of the duel of the brother of Yusupov, Nicolas Yusupov. In 1908 he was challenged by another noble officer from the Horse Guards Regiment, Baron von Manteuffel, who claimed that his wife, Marina von Heyden, committed adultery because of the actions of Yusupov's brother. Eventually, when the duel happened, Nicholas was shot, and died from his injuries.⁹³ Indeed, the revolution and the peasant rebellions were finished, but everyday problems were still there and it showed how far away the sorrows for the aristocrats were, because they were more preoccupied with defending their honour.⁹⁴ That these aristocrats were on a different level where duelling had priority, was also confirmed by Rodzianko:

*Duels had to be fought seriously. Owing to very strict ideas of regimental honour, duels among officers were frequent and often fatal. All kinds of disputes were settled in this manner, but women were the most usual cause, as ladies always had to be extricated from any foolish scandal they had got themselves into, which was not always quite fair on the men who had to go out and fight.*⁹⁵

Besides duelling, it was also a relatively quiet period to study at the universities, because there weren't any great (social) upheavals or wars. In this period, it is also interesting to see how Obolensky reasoned why Russia was driven into revolution, and what he saw as the underlying problem. Around the year of 1910, in his perception all students, varying from rich to poor, and from noble to non-noble descent, were all studying law when Russia needed technicians. According to Obolensky, the problem of the educational system "forged" those students into becoming revolutionaries of 1917 because of several reasons:

There was no work for them. At best they might get a small government post at a salary. They resented anyone having money; they resented every injustice and inequality; they resented everything. But they chiefly resented the system that gave them an inadequate means of earning

⁹³ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 112-114.

⁹⁴ Wasson, *Aristocracy and the Modern World*, 74.

⁹⁵ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 7.

*their living after having provided them with the intellectual resources that led them to aspire to a better life. The system made socialists, made revolutionaries. It was the fault of the government, which should have encouraged technical training and fitted them for the work that Russia needed.*⁹⁶

In 1912, after his study in Russia, Obolensky arrived in Oxford where he joined certain elite clubs like the Bullingdon Club. But, the most interesting thing Obolensky noted about this time in the United-Kingdom, was something that can be related to the situation in Russia. It showed how he gained new experiences on; how people in the UK were engaged with politics and how a country can be government and structured, compared to how Imperial Russia was organized:

*I must say that I had come to admire the esprit de corps, the unity, of the British people. Everyone was interested in politics, everyone had strong opinions one way or the other on public issues, and yet their differences did not really divide the country. The parliamentary system worked exceedingly well [...] The party in power and the opposition created a satisfactory condition where the ills of the country were freely ventilated and steps taken to correct them. The people felt they had a part in the government. They could voice their feelings at will. I rather envied that condition in England.*⁹⁷

The reason why the Russian political system didn't provide a "satisfactory condition" at that time, can be sought in how Russia was structured. After 1905, all the problems Russia faced, and the way Tsar Nicholas II (didn't) handle those very same problems, a growing gap started to appear even between the autocracy and the nobility, but especially the other social groups. Where other countries like the German Empire, and the United Kingdom had established parliaments with different chambers, Russia was still being ruled by one autocrat who dissolved the Duma at his will. Although the aristocracy/nobility could to influence the Tsar via court visits, requesting direct and indirect audiences with him, it was still inefficient. As Lieven argued, "Russia's social elites had no representative institutions through which they could exercise some degree of supervision over the bureaucratic state".⁹⁸ Following this statement by Lieven, it is interesting to see that he argued that the social elites didn't have any representative institutions, but with this argument totally ignoring the lower classes and their desire for a voice

⁹⁶ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Two Land Hunger – Section 6.

⁹⁷ Ibidem, Part Three – A Russian in England, Section 2.

⁹⁸ D. Lieven, 'The elites', in: D. Lieven, (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russia. Vol. II: Imperial Russia, 1689-1917* (Cambridge 2006) 227-244, there 240.

and thus influence in Russia. All this would change when Russia got involved into the First World War in 1914. From that moment on, the political landscape was going to change drastically for a second time.

This chapter showed that, again, it was the rural estate who acted as the link that made the aristocrats familiar with the land problem of the peasantry as one of the many problems it faced. The 1905 Revolution and the 1906 election that followed, highlighted the problems and opinions of other groups in Russia's society, such as the exploitation of the workers in the factories. These were previously unknown to the aristocracy. Although the aristocrats definitely didn't see the revolution as a dress rehearsal and even downplayed its events. Others had already realised their position was changing and needed to start diversifying their stakes, such as Obolensky. This is also reflected in the varied political stances of the aristocrats, which didn't indicate some unanimity on particular topics. The general trend after 1905 was that every group in the political landscape was radicalizing in their own way. This can be explained through a society that was changing, which became more "class consciousness" due to less sharply defined boundaries. But, the biggest flaw of the aristocracy (among other groups of the upper classes) didn't actively seek solution to either secure their position, or seek a getaway. After 1907, a relatively relaxed period appeared where they could have pressed for reforms, but they didn't. In seven years nothing happened, which meant they signed their own death warrants when the time for solutions was up when the First World War came knocking on Russia's door.

3. THE BEGINNING OF THE END

1914 - 1923

The 1905 revolutionary spirits had faded away and were kept at bay with several “reforms”. Only, this was a slumbering time bomb, because society was pleased with pseudo-solutions for the problems that several groups in Russia’s society wished for. The peasant rebellions were put down, but different groups radicalized in their opinions and beliefs, and old exiled political groups came out of their hiding. That the Russian society entered a new stage, after the peasant uprisings between 1905 and 1907, is certain. In 1914, Imperial Russia would enter a new stage, which, retrospectively, turned out to be the starting point of its demise. Starting with the year the First World War began, this chapter will focus on how the four characters experienced the final years of Imperial Russia and their own end in Russia till 1923, when the last of them escaped the Soviet Union, and how they looked back, or acted, after they fled from the Soviet-Union.

First World War 1914-1918

The real downfall of Imperial Russia under Tsar Nicholas II began in 1914 when the First World War broke out. In that year Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was shot in Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina). Obolensky, who happened to study in Oxford with the nephew of the king of Serbia, Prince Paul of Serbia, responded to the news of the assassination which he related to Russia’s situation in that period as followed:

In Russia my idealism was visionary and impractical, as was that of the reformers among my friends. We had an emotional desire to do something in the great cause of humanity, but we did not have a concrete image in our minds of the society we lived in, and so we lacked a confident knowledge of what could be done or how it might be done. Consequently many of the reformers in Russia turned toward thoughts of revolution, a sweeping and violent overturn, or they became disillusioned and cynical about progress of any kind.⁹⁹

This quote showed that Obolensky couldn’t think of a solution, because he didn’t understand what the real problems of Russia’s other groups were, because he lived in a totally different world. Eventually, Russia was also dragged into the First World War when Germany declared

⁹⁹ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Three – A Russian in England.

war to it. During this war, all four characters contributed via their own roles to the war effort. Of the four aristocrats, the one who saw the downfall of Imperial Russia starting in the First World War, was Rodzianko. He argued that the imminent fall of the old order laid in the way Russia was fighting the First World War. In his eyes, as the Russo-Japanese War had done, this war created the perfect soil for revolutionary spirits:

*It was not the debauchery of the upper classes that led to the downfall of the Russian Empire, nor were the workers abused or the peasants bullied, nor was the Government retrograde; it made enormous strides in the new century. It was simply that Russia was too huge, too childish, too poorly organized to be able to go to war outside her borders. The very vastness that saved her from invasion and defeated Napoleon, proved her own destruction. Enormous fronts, loosely hung together, sapped her best men and prepared the way for a revolution.*¹⁰⁰

At first, it didn't appear as Russia was completely losing the war, because it had some initial success in the war against Germany due to its quick mobilizing. Only after a while, the Russian war machine and its successes stopped, because of certain reasons: not enough ammunition seemed to be available, wrong tactical decisions were made, and even winter clothes weren't available. This resulted in scenarios where soldiers died by the thousands. Due to this, it seems plausible to assume that the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 repeated itself, because the Russian high command was making the same mistakes as ten years earlier.¹⁰¹ This created a sentiment where different groups within the society, especially among the soldiers but also other groups, started looking for explanations for these misères. According to Rodzianko, when this news also reached the major cities, society's support for the war was crumbling down:

*In June [1915, ed.] there were riots in Moscow as a result of discontent. My uncle, Michael Rodzianko, President of the Duma, maintained that the riots were the result of German intrigue which made use of popular dissatisfaction at Government inefficiency. The peasants were getting good prices and had no cause for discontent, but in the towns food prices soared and Russia began to be definitely bored with the war. Men on leave spread stories of slaughter and suffering and people began to wonder what they were fighting for anyway.*¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 6.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Verloren Adel*, 99.

¹⁰² Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 15.

Generally accepted by historians that there were multiple main points of criticism towards the Tsar and events that contributed to the decline of Imperial Russia. First, the decision made by Nicholas II to take over the military command himself turned out to be disastrous and devastated the army even more in its fighting capabilities.¹⁰³ According to Rodzianko, the Tsar's decision to take over command was perceived as very odd and foolish:

*In September 1915 our Chief-in-Command, the Grand Duke Nicolas, was dismissed, and against the advice of his ministers the Tzar took personal command of the Armies... We all knew she governed the interior and, influenced by Rasputin, appointed all kinds of men to ministerial posts. Backed by his beloved wife, the Tzar was convinced that all he did was right. The Tzarina is often blamed for the fall of Russia, but the captain of a ship is responsible, not his wife.*¹⁰⁴

Second, the German background of Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna [née Princess Alix of Hesse and by Rhine] began to play a significant role, while Russia was at war with Germany. The Tsarina came into a negative daylight, because the people but also some of the aristocrats surrounding her, saw her as a puppet of Germany due to the war. More important, was that the soldiers also thought that they were fighting a lost cause, due to the “double agenda” of the Tsarina, which was noticed among the soldiers:

*Everywhere one heard: “What to expect? The Empress is a German.” In vain the Commanders-in-Chief warned the Tzar that soldiers' letters showed that they wrote constantly of the Empress and Rasputin; in vain they implored him to change his policy.*¹⁰⁵

Third, in addition to the second point that contributed to the decline, and most applicable to the aristocracy, was Grigory Rasputin's influence on the Tsar and Tsarina, which was reaching its peak. Because Rasputin, a self-proclaimed priest from Siberia, but in the eyes of the aristocrats a *muzhik* (a derogatory term for a Russian peasant), who came to St. Petersburg where he, from 1903 onwards, started his ascendancy towards gaining a lot of influence on the couple and especially the Tsarina. Moreover, due to Nicholas's distrust of his advisors, and his order of spying on aristocrat advisors surrounding him started to alter the faith of those same advisors in the Tsar, which created distrust and worry about his weakness, and incompetence.¹⁰⁶ Where

¹⁰³ Smith, *Verloren Adel*, 99-100.

¹⁰⁴ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 16.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, Chapter 17.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *Verloren Adel*, 100.

Benckendorff, Rodzianko, and Obolensky contributed to the Russian war effort via their military service, Yusupov contributed in a totally different way to protect the old order. He sought to kill Rasputin to restore the balance where people from the upper classes held a bigger influence on the Tsar, rather than a muzhik. But, while planning the murder, it is interesting to see how Yusupov tried to frame the murder of Rasputin as “the will of society”, as the corresponding quote showed:

*[...] for its seemed important that members of all classes should participate in this momentous affair. Dimitri belonged to the Imperial family, I was a member of the nobility, Soukhotin was an officer; I would have liked a politician, someone from the Duma, to join us.*¹⁰⁷

This quote showed something important. That Yusupov’s perception of the will of society was skewed, because other groups, like the peasantry didn’t have a vote, or played a part in the murder to save the Tsar and Russia. It showed that also in the eyes of Yusupov, the peasantry didn’t have, or shouldn’t have, any legitimacy in expressing their opinion about Russia’s future. Eventually, Yusupov succeeded in persuading a politician for this murder complot. This was Vladimir Purishkevich, an extreme right-wing politician, who saw the autocracy as the fundamental part of the life and society in Imperial Russia.¹⁰⁸ In correspondence with his family, it seemed that Yusupov was truly inspired by Purishkevich’s speech in the Duma about the preservation of the traditional Russia.¹⁰⁹ As a consequence, Yusupov summarized his motive why he needed to murder Rasputin as followed:

*[...] Our country had to be saved at all costs, even by doing violence to our most sacred feeling.*¹¹⁰

Meaning he had to kill a person, who was extremely liked by Tsar and Tsarina, but one who disrupted the relationship of Yusupov with the couple, from his family derived their fortunes, and by such action implying that the Tsar wasn’t able to reign Russia anymore. When the murder had taken place in the night of 29th of December 1916, it was failed to keep it under the radar, due to complications like the interference of some policemen who heard gunshots and

¹⁰⁷ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 225.

¹⁰⁸ Pipes, *A concise history of the Russian Revolution*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ Alexander Palace, ‘Diaries and Letters - Letters of Felix and Zenaïda Yussupov’, <<http://www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/lettersyussupov.html>> (Retrieved on: 25-02-20).

¹¹⁰ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 226.

ultimately discovered the body of Rasputin. Eventually, when the news about the murder spread through the country and the front, Yusupov stated the following about its result:

*The country was with us, full of confidence in the future. A wave of patriotism swept over Russia, particularly in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The papers published enthusiastic articles, in which they claimed that Rasputin's death meant the defeat of the powers of evil and held out golden hopes for the future. This corresponded with public opinion.*¹¹¹

Moreover, Yusupov stated that a wave of joy reigned among the soldiers at the front, when they heard that Rasputin was dead. They too believed that Rasputin held a negative influence over the Tsar and his military decisions, which was also expressed by Obolensky:

*The Emperor had been at the front most of the time, with the Empress making the political decisions, based on Rasputin's advice. With Rasputin's death even that sort of action ceased. Prime Minister Sturmer, who was Rasputin's puppet, was afraid to face the Duma.*¹¹²

In comparison with Yusupov and Obolensky, Rodzianko focussed more on the inability, or maybe unwillingness, of the Tsar to listen to the advice people around him gave him. Rodzianko's uncle, Mikhail Rodzianko, appealed to the Tsar, who didn't seem to understand why the Duma opposed him, as the following quote showed:

*My uncle said the Tzar could not understand that the Duma was not opposing him, but standing between him and revolution. At the end of February the Duma, refusing to be dissolved, formed a committee to be joined to the Government [...] In numberless telegrams my uncle implored the Tzar (who was all the time at headquarters) to make concessions, but he was not heeded—and what good indeed could a Constitution have done at that wild, disastrous moment?*¹¹³

Besides the politicians in the Duma, it seemed that the aristocracy's support was also beginning to shift towards a different direction, even though their position wasn't really affected till then. As historian and sociologist Sofia Tchouikina argued; "As difficult as the economic and political crises in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, the symbolic superiority attached to the representatives of noble estate and their own sense of distinction had

¹¹¹ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 261.

¹¹² Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Four-Horses in War, Section 4.

¹¹³ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 18.

not been seriously challenged before 1917".¹¹⁴ This showed two things; 1) that the aristocracy's solid belief in the monarchy would change when the February Revolution happened in 1917, 2) it also showed how weak the nobility, the politicians, and the intelligentsia were in influencing the Tsar to urge him to reform. As the example of Mikhail Rodzianko showed, the growing distrust of the Tsar was vice versa and would reach its zenith in that year.

The Revolutions of 1917

After a while, and even with Rasputin gone, the war brought Russia to its breaking point. As the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War had done, the First World War also added immensely to the growing dissatisfaction within Russia. This war was also going very badly for Russia, and the soldiers and the people became tired of it. The country reached its breaking point in February 1917, when the first revolution of that year broke out. Among the four aristocrats there also is division between the cause of the February Revolution. For instance, Obolensky saw (the lack of) food as the initial cause for unrest which led to the event, as he stated the following:

*But the real crux of the matter lay in the lack of transport and supply to the cities. When the food riots began in St. Petersburg on March 8, the police tried to suppress them; there was shooting, and the soldiers joined the mobs.*¹¹⁵

Rodzianko viewed the events of February differently than Obolensky. He saw the revolution as the final chapter of the higher classes in Russia, such as the aristocracy and the *intelligentsia*. As noted by late academic Richard Pipes, the Russian intelligentsia was a "closed educated caste of individuals, admission to which required commitment to materialism, socialism; and utilitarianism".¹¹⁶ In other words, an educated group of varied individuals who influenced the mode of thought in Russia via their thoughts and writings. Rodzianko appeared to insinuate that these two groups, as the most educated and sophisticated people of Russia, were the only ones who could save the country if the monarchy failed:

¹¹⁴ S. Tchouikina, 'Collective Memory and Reconversion of Elite: Former Nobles in Soviet Society after 1917', in: N. Packard (ed.), *Sociology of Memory: Papers from the Spectrum*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (Newcastle 2009) 62-89, there 65.

¹¹⁵ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Four-Horses in War, Section 4.

¹¹⁶ See for full description; R. Pipes, *A concise history of the Russian Revolution* (New York 1996) 26.

*Of the intelligentsia and aristocracy, though many had vision, none took up Russia's cudgel; impassive and mystic they stood by, while Revolution swept their world away.*¹¹⁷

This remark showed two noticeable things. First, it indicated that the aristocracy and the intelligentsia lacked, or couldn't organize any leadership, even though they were, in Rodzianko's view, the only two (educated) groups of people who could save the country. Second, the abdication of the Tsar made the aristocracy/nobility's position de facto illegitimate, because, the person who had granted the dvorianstvo's fundamental rights was gone. When the February Revolution of 1917 ended, the most important things it accomplished were: 1) the abdication of the Tsar, which turned Russia into a (short lived) republic, and 2) the formation of the Provisional Government which took over control of the Tsar and his government, and became the new governing organ.¹¹⁸

After February 1917, Rodzianko had joined the British army to fight the Bolsheviks, because some military expeditions were setup up by foreign countries to aid the White movement. This foreign help only happened on a small scale, which he saw as the biggest reason for the loss of the civil war by the Whites. Rodzianko, coming from a very military family, saw the "Bolshevik agitators" and Bolshevism itself, as the biggest threats for Russia and its war effort against Germany. These agitators, who tried to convince the soldiers not to obey their officers, negatively disrupted Russia's war effort.¹¹⁹ For the regular soldiers, "Peace, Land, and Bread" coined by Lenin in his "April Theses", were more important to follow than the continuation of the war. As a result, the Bolsheviks had an enormous following among the soldiers at the front, because they wanted peace, because they were tired of fighting.¹²⁰

Historians like Figes, in collaboration with historian Boris Kolonitskii, showed that during the First World War, even the little things became a point of anger of the soldiers that were commanded by people like Rodzianko. For instance, the military ranks and corresponding titles of addressing that person became part of the dissatisfaction. This can be linked to the part of the nobles and their ranks and places within the army. Generally, members of the nobility/higher classes within the army weren't the ordinary rank and file soldiers, but usually the officers who commanded them. Two examples, which demonstrated the, at this point general, aversion towards differences between people in the army. First, the form of addressing

¹¹⁷ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 18.

¹¹⁸ R. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge 2017) 46.

¹¹⁹ Rendle, *Defenders of the Motherland*, 139-140.

¹²⁰ In April 1917, when Lenin returned to Russia from exile, he issued a list of reforms and actions to enter the next phase of revolution. This list came to be known as the "April Theses".

each other, which happened throughout the whole society and wasn't solely bound to military usage. An example of these forms of address was the aversion of lower ranks when they were forced to use the forms accompanied with the Table of Ranks with forms as "Your Honour", or "Your Excellency" as we saw in the beginning mentioned by Obolensky. This also applied for (commanding) officers, which often were people from noble descent. A first change happened in March 1917 when "Order No.1" was issued by the Petrograd Soviet. Formal titles such as "Your Excellency" were replaced by the informal title of *gospodin*, meaning "sir". After the fall of the Provisional Government in 1917 this wasn't enough and was eventually changed to *tovarishch*, meaning "comrade".¹²¹ Second, were the epaulettes (insignia on the soldier's uniform which indicated someone's rank) had to be stripped from the military uniforms because it indicated inequality. These recognizable decorations were also abandoned when the Soviets gained a lot of power, and the Sovnarkom (acronym of: Soviet narodnykh kommissarov, "Council of Commissars") issued another called the "Decree on the Equal Rights of All Military Personnel" in November 1917.¹²²

Interesting mentioning here, was that if someone compared these secondary sources to the main characters' perceptions, the problems with the titles of address or the need of equal treatment, stayed under the radar and aren't mentioned by none of the four. An explanation why this problem wasn't seen with the four aristocrats can be traced back to Chapter 1. These aristocrats only operated in the regiments that were existed primarily or a majority of members of the nobility. Maybe the aristocrats didn't perceive these small gestures as important, but, according to Matthew Rendle, this equalization of society/societal elements seemed of uttermost importance for other groups. For example, such as the dismantling of the old social estates, but the tsarist government under Nicholas II didn't handle this. He argued that the succeeding Provisional Government could have responded proactively to this need of society, but it also failed to do dismantle them, or even provided them with a (small) gesture of intent. Rendle argued that they only partially fulfilled society's wish; "For many, the complete abolition of these was a vital part of the revolution and a clear sign that equal rights had been successfully introduced. The newspaper *Izvestiia*, argued that the mere existence of nobles, peasants, and others demonstrated continuity with the past. It viciously attacked the

¹²¹ O. Figes and B. Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution – The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven 1999) 60-61.

¹²² *Ibidem*, 54.

government's continuation of the table of ranks and its practice of referring appointees by their old imperial titles."¹²³

As the soldiers at the front, members of the upper classes were also fed up with the Tsar. Emeritus professor Rex Wade perfectly followed up on the comment made by Tchouikina earlier; "They [the upper classes, e.g. the aristocracy, ed.] had become increasingly alienated from the regime of Nicholas II during the war and most immediately accepted the February Revolution and the Provisional Government. [...] As it became obvious that the mass of the population did not see 1917 as just a political revolution, but as the opportunity fundamentally to restructure society itself, they became frightened. These developments, and what the old elite (now often referred to as "former people") saw as the disintegration of the country and collapse of the war effort, led many to turn to the ideas of a military strong man."¹²⁴ In addition, this didn't mean the upper classes were completely passive in organizing interest groups after the February Revolution. For instance, they created interest groups who sought to defend the property and homeowner rights of individuals.¹²⁵ The reaction of the upper classes didn't seem so strange, because this period turned out to be where everybody was blaming each other for the sorrows that they had, or feared. An explanation for this has been given by historian Lev Protasov, who stated that in that period the so-called "partyization" in Russia, meaning that the forming and radicalization of political parties, reached its peak.¹²⁶ As we saw earlier, Rodzianko blamed the peasantry for not seizing the given opportunities in 1905, or Yusupov who denounced the intelligentsia and also added to the (political) division in Russia:

*As to the "intelligentsia", they were a focus of disorder and anarchy, and a serious danger to the country. This group tried to spread dissension between the people on the one hand and the Government and the aristocracy on the other, by sowing seeds of envy and hatred. When the representatives of this group assumed power during the Kerensky period, they proved how incapable they were of governing.*¹²⁷

This also explained why the Provisional Government only partially succeeded in changing certain elements and thus easing the revolutionary temperament in Russia was due to a struggle

¹²³ Rendle, *Defenders of the Motherland*, 54.

¹²⁴ Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 109.

¹²⁵ Ibidem, 109.

¹²⁶ L. Protasov, 'The All-Russian Constituent Assembly and the Democratic Alternative - Two views of the problem', in: R. Wade (ed.), *Revolutionary Russia New Approaches to the Russian Revolution of 1917* (Hoboken 2004) 243-266, there 247.

¹²⁷ Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 57.

that erupted when the February Revolution ended and the fight for power and leadership began. The power vacuum that was left behind by the Tsar where the eventual price, but society seemed utterly divided and didn't seem reconcilable for a solution. This was also reflected in the situation with the Provisional Government which led by Alexander Kerensky, a member of the Socialist-Revolutionary party, and the Petrograd Soviet. Because no side could obtain full control after the fall of the Tsar, they were forced to cooperate with each other. This resulted in the formation of the so-called *dvoyevlastiye*; meaning "Dual Government", or "Dual Power". Within this structure, the Provisional Government was held in a chokehold by the Petrograd Soviet, or as Kerensky had put it; it was a "democratic hostage", because of several factors.¹²⁸

First, the war had created a fanatic constituency among the soldiers who wanted the war to stop, and thus listened to the Soviet with their appealing motto of "Peace, Land, and Bread". But due to the war, every part of the economy was hit and affected, which created sorrows for almost every group in the society. Second, the Bolsheviks gained even a better position when they were asked and armed by the Provisional Government to stop the imminent coup of the "military strong man" the upper classes had hoped for in the person of General Lavr Kornilov, who wanted to overthrow the Provisional Government and restore the old order. In the end, the Bolsheviks were successful in fending off the coup of Kornilov, which meant that they gained even a better position and image, because people started to distrust the Provisional Government of its capability to govern.¹²⁹ Relating this unrest to the aristocrats in question, it seemed that even in this period, which also wasn't (financially) beneficial for the aristocracy, they still lived liked that everything was going to be fine, and maintained their old ways of lavish living. Harrowing example have been given by Rodzianko and Obolensky:

*[...] Mama was advised to cut down household expenses. Did she sack any of the white-coated chefs eating their heads off in the kitchen? No. But she decided to cut down on the thing she detested most and had been ordered by the doctor. Sending for the head cook, she solemnly explained that he was to economize and spinach was not to appear again.*¹³⁰

This same kind of behaviour was seen by Obolensky at his wife's mother who already lived in Nice, France but continued the lifestyle she was used to in Russia:

¹²⁸ Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 47.

¹²⁹ Protasov, 'The All-Russian Constituent Assembly and the Democratic Alternative - Two views of the problem', there 250.

¹³⁰ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 18.

*[...] she now lived completely in the past, the Bolshevik Revolution scarcely seeming real to her. She still had a little money—a lot of money, in fact, by our modern standards—which she was spending as lavishly as ever.*¹³¹

These remarks showed that certain members of the upper classes, especially older generations, didn't want to realise, or were still in denial to the changing society and that the days where they could do what they wanted, were over. An explanation for this behaviour can be traced back to what can be seen in Chapter 1, where it appears that living nobly such as a certain degree of hospitality, and living up to certain standards, was truly of importance even when times were harsh, *noblesse oblige*. Another possible aspect could be the difference of generations of aristocrats, where the debate could evolve around if these reactions of Rodzianko and Obolensky were genuine, compared to their own behaviour. Either way, the continuation of this kind of behaviour/lifestyle led persons to being attacked by others via several ways. A perfect example, concerning this behaviour, was Mathilde Kshesinskaia. She was a famous ballerina who became part of the Romanov family, due to her marriage with Grand Duke Andrei Vladimirovich. Historian Krista Sigler showed that Kshesinskaia's lifestyle and that of others, had definitely put more fuel to the already growing anger of the people: "By spring 1917, Petersburg was flooded with popular attacks on Kshesinskaia, emphasizing her dissolute lifestyle."¹³² Again, the perception of the people towards members of the aristocracy was very important even if the allegations seemed untrue and were only used for propagandistic uses.

In October 1917, these dissolute lifestyles abruptly stopped, because another revolution broke out, which would mark the definite end of Old Russia. The Bolsheviks led by Lenin, took over power in Russia via a *coup d'état*. The Provisional Government of Kerensky was overthrown and replaced by their Petrograd Soviet as the supreme government of Russia. In St. Petersburg and Moscow, where the revolutionary spirits were immensely lively, it was the opposite on the countryside. It took much longer for the news and the revolutionary spirit to arrive on the rural places. The October Revolution accomplished several things; 1) the dissolution of the Provisional Government, and 2) the transfer of the governmental powers to the Petrograd Soviet. As Obolensky correctly noted, the October Revolution was in fact a *coup d'état* by a minority group in Russia, which succeeded due to their fanaticism and furiousness:

¹³¹ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Six-Exiles, Section 1.

¹³² K. Sigler, *Kshesinskaia's Mansion: High Culture and the Politics of Modernity in Revolutionary Russia* (Ann Arbor 2009) 115.

*Only the historical accident of the Bolshevik minority having control of the soldiers and sailors in St. Petersburg and the support of the industrial workers, only eight million or so in all Russia, enabled them to break up the democratic government that was coming into being [...] It shows what can happen to a government, like Kerensky's, whose members are afraid to shoot to defend their parliamentary system or fight for their constitution. After all, it was only a Bolshevik minority that took over St. Petersburg with mob violence [...] After that there was no stopping them.*¹³³

After gaining control of the most important parts of Russia, the Sovnarkom, which replaced the Provisional Government, issued the “Decree on Peace” and the “Decree on Land”. The first decree called for an immediate armistice with the Germany Empire and its allies.¹³⁴ Whereas the latter decree sought to disband individual landed ownership, which had to be passed on to the local commune, the *zemstvo*.¹³⁵ In November 1917, after the October Revolution, elections were promised and organized by the Sovnarkom. They decided that the elections were open to any party to participate. What the Bolsheviks forgot was that the majority of the Russian people was still a peasant. As historian David Moon calculated that of the ± 90 million Russian people, between 75-90% of the population was a peasant.¹³⁶ This election turned out to be a mistake made by Lenin. The reason why it became a mistake, was because the absolute majority of the people, the Russian peasants, only seemed to care about the land problem. The party who put this land reform strongly on their agenda, were the Social-Revolutionaries (“SR’s”). As a result, the Bolsheviks were tremendously defeated by the SR’s in terms of number of votes received. In response, the Bolsheviks didn’t accept the outcome, and declared the results of the elections to be voided. This made sure the country reached its culmination in an already polarized society, where parties were preparing for the coming Civil War.¹³⁷

Civil War 1918-1923

After the October Revolution and the failed elections of 1917 organized by the Bolsheviks, members of the aristocracy who hadn’t already fled Russia, were preparing themselves for the unknown future that laid ahead. In 1918, the whole of Russia headed into a civil war. This war composed of two different parties, namely; the Reds, and the Whites. The Reds consisted

¹³³ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Four-Horses in War, Section 4.

¹³⁴ Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 254.

¹³⁵ Ibidem, 1917, 241.

¹³⁶ D. Moon, ‘Estimating the Peasant Population of Late Imperial Russia from the 1897 Census: A Research Note’, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 48:1 (1996) 141-153, there 144.

¹³⁷ Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 278.

primarily of Bolsheviks and its supporters who occupied the most important cities of (European) Russia. The Whites, on the other hand, consisted of a varied group of supporters, varying from members of the nobility, monarchists, foreigners, and others who conspired against the Reds. Most members of the aristocracy were primarily more in favour of the Whites, but there also seemed to be some nuance to this notion. Of the four aristocrats, Benckendorff seemed the one who was the most acceptable towards the new Bolshevik government after the overthrow of the Provisional Government. Moreover, he seemed (passively) willing to try to live and adapt in the approaching new situation in Russia, as the following remark showed:

*I was much gratified that when I told Uncle Paul [Benckendorff, ed.], in detail, the why and wherefore of my not only remaining in Russia but serving under the present government, he not only entirely approved, but thought it the only right, if not sensible, thing to do.*¹³⁸

As mentioned in the introduction, Tchouikina showed that different reactions occurred among members of the aristocracy/nobility. Benckendorff's choice indicated there wasn't a unanimous decision of resistance (or acceptance) against the new Bolshevik government by the aristocracy/nobility. Where Benckendorff seemed willingly to accept an eventual future, where the Bolsheviks were the rulers of Russia, the other three aristocrats seemed more in favour of the old order. Eventually, of the four, Benckendorff, Rodzianko, and Obolensky were actively involved in the Civil War, whereas Yusupov's role was already ended after the killing of Rasputin. He was exiled to their estate in Rakitnoye (Belgorod Oblast) and later left to Crimea during the Civil War, where he kept waiting in one of his estates for the restoration of the old society he knew.

One who was eager to fight the Reds and voluntarily joined the White Army, was Rodzianko. But, he wasn't the only one of his family, because his father, his brothers Alexander, Serge, Vladimir, and Victor also fought the Reds. In 1918, at the start of the Civil War, he became an attaché for Major-General Alfred Knox of the British Army, who was sent to Vladivostok (Eastern-Russia), to form, train, and advise the Russian White Army under Admiral Alexander Kolchak in East-Russia. This was the chance for Rodzianko, which made him able to continue his battle against the "yoke of Bolshevism".¹³⁹ Only to find out, shortly after his arrival, that the Romanovs had been murdered in Ekaterinburg. Moreover, he also

¹³⁸ Benckendorff, *Half a Life*, 264.

¹³⁹ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 18.

began to realize that victory for the White Army didn't seem possible, even though they occupied a massive territory:

*The Reds had at their disposal all the munitions factories built up and organized during the war. As they retired they were able to use their own supplies, whereas we had but one perilous railway line across Siberia and often ran out of munitions.*¹⁴⁰

Historians have argued on why the Reds were able to win the Russian Civil War, also becomes clearer. In Rodzianko's view, one of the main reasons were; the Whites were too dependent on the aid of its allies (Britain, France, Italy, etc.), and the Reds controlled the most favourable territory of Russia to fight from. In 1919, all these elements made him realise his time was done in Russia and Rodzianko went back to the United-Kingdom. In the same year, Benckendorff was forced to serve in the Red Navy despite his aristocratic background, because it didn't matter for the time being. The reason why he had to serve, was due to an overall personnel shortage and military experience in the Red Army.¹⁴¹ He stated that during that time, and also for the first time, he started to experience that Russia was totally polarized in its political landscape, which expressed itself through verbal harassment of his fellow Red Navy men:

*The number of glasses of peasants blood I had drunk for breakfast.*¹⁴²

Luckily for Benckendorff, he only experienced verbal "class violence" during his service in the Red Army, because the tone had changed after the creation of the Cheka in 1917 (acronym of: Vserossiyskaya chrezvychaynaya komissiya po borbe s kontrrevolyutsiyey i sabotazhem pri Sovete narodnykh komisarov RSFSR, meaning: "All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage under the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR"). This organisation was created to combat the "counter-revolutionaries", like the Whites during the civil war, which also meant "former elements" like members of the aristocracy. Someone who also refused to accept the Bolshevik regime and combatted the Bolsheviks during the civil war like Rodzianko, was Obolensky. He started and led a guerrilla war in the Crimea against the Bolsheviks who, ultimately, conquered the peninsula over the Whites. But, during this guerrilla war, he witnessed the brutal physical retaliations from the

¹⁴⁰ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 20.

¹⁴¹ Benckendorff, *Half a Life*, 245.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*, 310.

Bolshevik Cheka against “counter-revolutionary elements”, which in fact were ordinary soldiers:

*The officers, some dead and some alive, were thrown into the bay, with stones attached to their feet. The water of the bay off Yalta is very clear. For a long time afterward, on a sunny day, the corpses were visible under the water, waving their hands with the currents.*¹⁴³

In the end, both sides inflicted terrible retaliations on each other and leniency wasn't known on either side. This also showed that the hatred between the various group that fought for the Reds, and the various groups of the Whites all ended up in a battle where these feeling became irreversible. It didn't stop with the personal (military) retaliations, other “elements” also became targets of fighting the counter-revolution by the Bolsheviks.

Determining a reaction

All elements of the old regime were fought with high intensity. Sigler also showed that the Bolsheviks were focussed on changing former “keystones” of the old order. Those keystones were either destroyed, replaced, or reused in their new (Bolshevik) way. Sigler showed, via the St. Petersburg mansion of Kshesinskaia that the new Bolshevik/Soviet society was eager to quickly change these hatred elements. Meaning, that they legitimized, for example, the confiscation of the houses of members of the Russia's old elites, such as the aristocracy, because such symbols of the old order had to be disposed.¹⁴⁴ The aristocracy wasn't the only target of the Bolshevik anger. As Smith also noted that from 1917 onwards, the (noble) land owners, “rich” peasants, estates of the Orthodox church, and all property of the “bourgeoisie” legitimized confiscation.¹⁴⁵

When the civil war ended in 1923, the Reds were declared the victors. This meant that the introduction of a whole new society was bound to take place. But, members of the nobility, and thus the aristocrats who hadn't already left, had to make a choice. Historian Vera Kaplan noted two important things she retrieved Tchouikina, regarding the possible reactions of members of the Russian nobility during and after the turmoil in revolutionary Russia. First, “Sofia Chuikina has determined a number of patterns of response to the revolution among the old elite: protest and emigration; migration inside the country; allegiance to the new authorities

¹⁴³ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Five-The Reign of Terror, Section 1.

¹⁴⁴ Sigler, *Kshesinskaia's Mansion*, 125-127.

¹⁴⁵ Smith, *Verloren Adel*, 184-185.

in the hope of an improvement in the situation; and, finally, apathy”. Second, “It might be added, however, that personal networks, including patronage connections that stemmed from professional and occupational ties, played a significant role in choosing a particular path of behaviour”.¹⁴⁶ Using the framework provided by Tchouikina, it appears that all four aristocrats, eventually, made the decision of “protest and migration”. Although all four chose to leave Russia/the Soviet Union, it is also important to note the consequences for aristocrats who decided to stay in the Soviet-Union, which meant the chance of being degraded by the new rulers of Russia’s new society.

Several historians, like Figes, Smith, and Wasson, showed that at first the Bolshevik leadership was very keen on degrading and terminating the former privileged classes, via forced employment like cleaning the streets of snow.¹⁴⁷ Another frequently returning method of the Cheka was to detain members of the aristocracy for no reason, because they were considered “counter-revolutionary”.¹⁴⁸ Frequently, family members had to pay a ransom to release them from prison.¹⁴⁹ Wasson also added to this; “As ‘former persons’, aristocrats were prevented by decrees from gaining employment. They did manual labor or became beggars, living on the streets.”¹⁵⁰ Tchoukina gave an explanation for this “treatment” by the Soviets: “Former distinctions like a title, a famous family name, a graduation paper from a prestigious educational institution, the possession of real estate and landed property turned into forms of “negative capital.” As a rule, the wealthier and more notable the family was under the old order, the more persecuted it was under the Soviet regime.”¹⁵¹ The consequences mentioned above were only the beginning and turned into more harsh methods of terminating them. During the civil war, and after the proclamation of the Soviet-Union in 1923, elements that symbolized the old order were still on the radar of institutions like the Cheka, after which they took more rigorous measures such as shooting the persons in question.¹⁵²

The reason why the consequences were noted above, was because Benckendorff seemed, at first, willingly to choose for “migration inside the country” towards his former estate in Sosnofka, and swear “allegiance to the new authorities”. Whereas, the final reaction of “apathy” wasn’t noticeable among the four aristocrats, because they definitely wanted to get out of Russia

¹⁴⁶ V. Kaplan, ‘Weathering the Revolution: Patronage as a strategy of survival’, in: *Revolutionary Russia* 26:2 (2013) 97-127, there 98.

¹⁴⁷ Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 529.

¹⁴⁸ M. Rendle, ‘Family, Kinship and Revolution: The Russian Nobility, 1917-1923’, in: *Family & Community History* 8:1 (2005) 35-47, there 41.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *Verloren Adel*, 190.

¹⁵⁰ Wasson, *Aristocracy in the Modern World*, 164.

¹⁵¹ Tchouikina, ‘Collective Memory and Reconversion of Elite’, there 65.

¹⁵² Smith, *Verloren Adel*, 312.

when they got the opportunity. In addition to Tchouikina, other historians like Eline Multanen, argued that compared to the ordinary people, the aristocrats already had certain advantages when they fled the country. Tchouikina argued that the aristocrats were better off in foreign countries because; 1) they could speak French, English, or German, 2) already had family members who had left Russia and lived abroad, and 3) they sometimes had properties, or money in those countries, which all benefited their requests of asylum or (temporary) emigration.¹⁵³ These aristocrats especially had a higher chance of succeeding in getting into countries like the United Kingdom or France.¹⁵⁴

Maybe of greater importance seemed to be the personal networks, when applied to the fleeing of the four aristocrats. For instance, Benckendorff's mother and his sister were able to flee to the United-Kingdom, due to his father reputation as former ambassador, and a lucky possibility for Benckendorff himself, because he had to (legally) transfer the embassy over to the new Bolshevik-ambassador, which meant he was able to leave the Soviet-Union. Rodzianko, was able to leave due to his friendship with General Knox, whom he joined during their time in Eastern-Russia and also followed back to the United-Kingdom when the Civil War seemed lost for the White Army. Yusupov also showed that their relationship with the Russian royal family provided a solution to flee Crimea, via a special British warship that was send by the United-Kingdom, which eventually led them to settle in Paris, France. Lastly, Obolensky was able to flee the Crimea via Switzerland to the United-Kingdom with the help of an old Oxford friend, the Austrian-Hungarian diplomatic secretary, Count Chaki.¹⁵⁵

Historians Catherine Andreyev and Ivan Savicky showed that at first “the Russian émigré community saw itself as seeking temporary asylum and only gradually began to appreciate the attitudes of immigrants who sought to create a new life in better conditions”. The reason for this was that the Russian émigrés were slowly adapting to the new host countries, because the émigrés hoped to return, but this became impossible after the victory of the Reds in 1923, which also changed the status of temporary to permanent asylum.¹⁵⁶ The reason why the year of 1923 also became important for the aristocracy, was because it marked the definite end of the “Old Russia”. It was replaced by the newly founded Soviet-Union (formally; “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”, abbr. USSR). In addition, as historian Marc Raeff noted the

¹⁵³ Tchouikina, ‘Collective Memory and Reconversion of Elite’, there 67.

¹⁵⁴ E. Multanen, *British Policy Towards Russian Refugees in the Aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution* (London 2000) 116.

¹⁵⁵ Benckendorff, *Half a Life*, 318; Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 20; Yusupov, *Lost Splendor*, 298; Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Five-The Reign of Terror.

¹⁵⁶ C. Andreyev and I. Savicky, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-1938* (New Haven 2004) xxiii.

following about the Russian émigrés: “A Russian émigré was a person who refused to accept the new Bolshevik regime established in the homeland. This refusal became irreversible – at least for most – when the Soviet decree of 1921, repeated and reinforced in 1924, deprived them of their citizenship and made them into stateless persons [...]”.¹⁵⁷

According to different sources, in the after the civil war broke out between 755.000 and 2.935.000 émigrés had left Russia. Logically, among those émigrés were also members of the former ruling classes, such as members of the aristocracy, but as Raeff noted; “Émigrés of former wealth, title, or high social position were proportionately no more numerous than they had been at home, perhaps even less so.” The majority of the émigrés were members of the urban bourgeoisie, small landowners, (skilled) workers, and agriculturalists (not to be confused with the traditional peasants).¹⁵⁸ After their emigration, even the four former aristocrats had to search new ways of getting an income. A perfect example of the struggle began for them was expressed by Rodzianko after his return to United-Kingdom. He seemed to realise what kind of privileged position he held in Russia’s old society, and what that position has given him in those years, compared to his new “home” where he had to find new ways of making ends meet:

*For the first time in my life I was out of an army and had to look around for a way of “making money.” I had tried many things in my life, but never that. In fact I was as innocent about finance as a convent demoiselle should be about love.*¹⁵⁹

Different outcomes were possible for members of the aristocracy, when they had escaped the Soviet-Union. Others, like Yusupov, managed to take some of their valuable gems, paintings, or other things with them, which they sold to fund their new existence. Others couldn’t, which made sure that most of them couldn’t sustain their former lifestyle after the Bolshevik take over. But, certain questions remain, like “when” the nobility knew about their forthcoming demise. For instance, Smith argued that in the 18th century the aristocracy/nobility’ already knew about the wish of certain groups of being removed in Russia.¹⁶⁰ Like the debate on when, another debate on “how” Russia should have been guided to apprehend the 1917 Revolution was discussed after the Revolution by Obolensky and the Bolshevik Admiral Alexander Frolov:

¹⁵⁷ M. Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration 1919-1939* (New York 1990) 16.

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem, 24-26.

¹⁵⁹ Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Chapter 21.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, *Verloren Adel*, 39.

*“We don’t feel that the Russian people are ready for democracy,” he said. “You knew it better in those days than we do now. They need the lash. They’re lazy and peace-loving. [...] “That’s exactly what I don’t believe,” I said. I realized that he was expressing what he thought the old conservatives believed in, myself included, and he was a victim of his own propaganda. “We never believed in the lash,” I said, “and without it we could have achieved a great deal more than you.” Frolov and I had a long argument on precisely this point—what Russia could have done with the steps toward democracy that had been taken under the old order. He felt I should know better. “The Russian,” he said again and again, “must be coerced [...]”.*¹⁶¹

The quote gave a glimpse on “how” the new rulers sought control over the Russian society. For the aristocracy it didn’t matter anymore how a democracy was to be reached, because they were outlaws in the Soviet-Union. But, if the question of “when” by Smith has to be answered, it is the following in the view of this research. In 1905 the sword of Damocles had appeared, fell in 1914, but decapitated the aristocracy (and other groups of the upper classes) of Imperial Russia with the February Revolution in 1917. Within the seven years between 1907-1914, the upper classes weren’t capable of organizing *tangible* solutions for other groups to please them and keep the revolutionary spirits at bay. The four aristocrats here only noted, with hindsight, that they *only* understood some of the problems Russia’s society had, but they mostly waited passively on a miracle to happen where everything was going to be alright, because they couldn’t think of a solution. The year of 1923 marked the absolute end to their former privileged position and existence in Russia’s new Bolshevik society. If it wasn’t the 1917 Revolution who ended the lives of the aristocrats, later it would be the Joseph Stalin and his Great Purge, who cleaned the last remnants of this former ruling group.

This chapter showed that from the moment the First World War had started, the Russian government was already too late with counter-measures that had to be taken when the war was turning the (changed) society against it. Although the aristocrats had different opinions on how Russia needed to be saved, they again, defended the country against foreign and domestic enemies. But, from the chaos the war induced to the country, every group distrusted, didn’t understand, and did grant each other something, which created a situation of a standstill. Simple reforms weren’t possible due to this problem. All four aristocrats saw different causes for the doom of Old Russia, when it ended up in the 1917 revolutions. One thing was sure, the aristocracy’s historical privileged position had ended due to the abdication of the Tsar. Thereby, after the civil war, the role of the old order had ended, because the Bolsheviks seemed more

¹⁶¹ Obolensky, *One man in his time*, Part Seven-New World, Section 6.

determined to reach their idealistic communistic state, compared to all the other groups in Russia. Where the aristocracy and also the peasantry waited, became passive, and were bound by a loyalty to something that didn't exist anymore, the Bolsheviks guided by a solid leadership and beliefs. They were able change the historical places in Russia and coerced them into leaving the new Soviet-Union.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the different experiences and perceptions of four different aristocratic persons and their families, and has tried to understand these elements while trying to fit, and weave these perceptions into the context of radically changing times. In their case, and for this thesis, the crucial event of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Until the last decade, the topic of the Russian aristocracy/nobility has been left aside, due to more interest of scholars and academics in other (social) groups such as; the working classes, or the peasantry. But in this decade, this tendency has been turned around and provided new ways and approaches of doing research about this topic. For example, a more geographical approach (via their estates) by Priscilla Roosevelt, a sociological approach/angle of Sofia Tchouikina, a more categorical approach by Matthew Rendle, or a more biographical (and maybe romanticized) approach by Douglas Smith.

This thesis is more or less comparable with the latter approach. By taking the aristocrats' own statements into account, to bring the reader closer to the four aristocrats and their experiences as an intertwined chronological story. Via the memoirs of the four members their relationship with the event was scrutinized. These memoirs contained their own subjective opinions, which functioned as the nucleus of this thesis, and were "directive" in this matter. All four characters that were used in this research, were unique in their own way, but also showed several similarities in their reminiscences. For instance, Benckendorff gave a lot of insights on the peasantry and the land problem, Rodzianko told a lot about the military aspects of the wars Russia was evolved in and their consequences for persons like the Tsar, Yusupov who gave a lot of information about the duties of the Russian aristocracy and behaviour via his extravagant lifestyle as one of Russia richest heirs, and Obolensky who provided a lot of different insights regarding his political views and opinions about Russia and how it affected the country. Apart from these more obvious topics they talked about, they sometimes also (unexpectedly) provided more, or a divergent opinion on certain topics. For example, where Yusupov blamed the *intelligentsia* for the failing of the Provisional Government, Rodzianko who argued that the peasants shouldn't have complained about their well-being after the October Manifesto, or Obolensky who mentioned that the educational system was also to blame for creating revolutionary spirits in Imperial Russia.

In other words, the goal of this thesis was to construct a history, which combined every aristocrat's writings in a fluid and single story, via the topics they had put much emphasis on in their own memoirs, while comparing their experiences to the other three aristocrats, and

secondary sources. This was done to answer the central research question; what can the memoirs of four Russian aristocrats tell us about the position of the Russian aristocracy during the transition from Imperial Russia to the Soviet Union between 1880-1923? The different chapters in this thesis has produced multiple remarks and comments. Chapter One (1880-1905), showed that the origins of the Russian aristocracy/nobility also affected the four aristocrats in their growing up in society that wanted change. The history of the Russian aristocracy showed that their traditional and centuries old relationship with their former serfs had only come to an end recently. They understood and realized that the rural estate, with its former serfs, showed a clear demarcation of lifestyles when they returned from the cities. The four characters all grew up in families and in an environment where (almost) everything was possible, or available due to their background, and where no hardships were endured. Sometimes this was all a façade, because it appeared that a lot noblemen had reoccurring problems with money due to their extravagant lifestyles. This behaviour was also part of the “noblesse oblige”, but showed that they weren’t completely involved in reality, because they had to distinguish themselves via certain schools, lifestyles, and other things by which they created their own bubble.

Chapter Two (1905-1914), showed that the changing Russian society played an important role, which also applied to the aristocracy, where aristocrats also adapted and responded to the new situation, but most of them weren’t. This development happened alongside the hope of solving eternal problems like the (peasant) land question. When the 1905 Revolution happened, it proved that the aristocracy didn’t see it coming, and wasn’t prepared for the demands of its new society, because it had evolved into a multi-layered, and more class-consciousness society. One of the direct causes for this development was an explosion of the urban toiling class, which happened due to the changing of the economy and the influx of people towards the major cities. The 1905 Revolution showed that different reactions were possible among the aristocrats. For example: 1) not even mentioning the events (Yusupov), 2) compassion and understanding of the peasants’ problems (Benckendorff and Obolensky), and 3) downplaying the importance and praise measures like the October Manifesto (Rodzianko). More importantly was that the aristocrats acknowledged the problems society faced, but were preoccupied with other things, were they could have used their influence in another ways to provide solutions that were needed.

Chapter Three (1914-1923), was the beginning of their final days of the four Russian aristocrats was central. After the peasant rebellions between 1905-1907, which was the only real (big) problem of that time, the aristocracy got into some calmer waters. These rebellions also showed that most of the times the nobility organized themselves, was to form counter-

movements (e.g. *United Nobility*, or individual property right groups) with the only interest of defending their old way of life. When the First World War started in 1914, all the miseries of Russia came together and became too much to solve at once. Where certain groups of people saw a fanatic and energetic Vladimir Lenin as their leader, who was engaged with and talked about the “real” problems that Russia had, the nobility was looking for someone the same. In their cases this person had to be the Tsar (Nicholas II), but in reality his support was crumbling down and people started to distrust him due to affairs like Rasputin, taking over military command, and his wife from German origin. Spasmodic attempts to kill a hatred advisor, in the eyes of the aristocracy, backfired. When eventually Nicholas II abdicated, there was no one to replace him and the aristocracy became trapped in a situation where they were always a step behind, but also didn’t come up with solutions proactively, whereas the Bolsheviks were producing decrees left and right. For instance, the importance of the equalization of society, such as small gestures like disbanding the ways of addressing military ranks in the army was only solved when the Provisional Government couldn’t exercise their authority, which halted Russia’s war effort. When the White movement lost the civil war and the aristocrats had to flee Russia, they received for the first time a real reality check, because they had to work to sustain their new life.

When the four characters had to be evaluated, via their memoirs, certain general and specific remarks can be made. In general, they weren’t afraid to contribute to the war efforts and defended Russia without hesitation just like the older generations had done, but the older generations of the aristocracy didn’t provide a clear and real picture of Russia’s changing society, because they were, more or less, still focused on their own well-being, rather than that of other groups in society. This caused the generation of the four aristocrats to accept and copy most of those lifestyles, habits, customs, and values into their own lives. This strongly influenced the perception of other individuals, and their sentiments towards groups like the aristocracy. On the other hand, it appears that the generation of these four aristocrats at least *saw* the problems Russia faced, compared to generations above them. They even understood their parents’ lifestyles with financial messes was no longer accepted, shameful, and even foolish. Another general remark that can be made is that none of them aspired, or even mentioned political ambitions to change Russia. Even though most of them presented themselves as being engaged with the problems Russia faced, they didn’t act to it and probably saw this as a job for the government and not them. On the other hand, some of them also acknowledge that the aristocracy didn’t live up to its position from where it could influence the right persons. This is something that remained unclear why they didn’t do something extra to

steer the Tsar and his decisions in a different direction, which maybe could have delayed, or even have faded away the revolutionary spirits in Imperial Russia.

The difference between the group of people the four belonged to, was completely the opposite of other groups in Russia's society that either already existed (the peasantry), or the ones that significantly grew in size at the end of the 19th century/the beginning of the 20th century (the toiling classes). This also coincided with currents of a society that became more vocal/expressed their opinion more intensively, due to the partyization of the political arena, which gave the previously unheard a "voice". Moreover, the changing sentiment of society, whether it was due to soldiers spreading stories and declining service at the front, peasants complaining about the lack of food (and its price levels), the Duma politicians being perceived as oppositionists by the Tsar, or the aristocracy complaining that the Tsar and Tsarina didn't accept their advice. It showed that everyone's stakes and interests were so far a part, that no middle ground was found for all these different people to accept, because there wasn't a person who could have united the Russians. This meant that the most radical and fanatic people were the ones that ultimately succeeded in achieving their goal. Where groups like the peasantry seemed passive in their actions and deeds towards a needed change, other groups like the soldiers and workers were actively fighting for their longed change. It appeared that the upper classes also weren't as passive as maybe thought. So the explanation of why they couldn't efficiently produce a counter-movement to fight the Reds, should be sought in the bigger internal differences they had, compared to the similarities the Reds had. From the start, the Bolshevik objective and goal was clearer and their fanaticism.

On a personal level there were also remarks between the four characters. For example, Benckendorff didn't really held much affection for the aristocratic life. He appeared to value a more "simpler" life, enjoyed the rural lands in Sosnofka, and seemed progressive. This also could explain why he felt for the Russian peasants, their life long problem with the land, and his aspired job as Marshall of Nobility in his region. Due to these characteristics he was the one who seemed most attracted to living in a Soviet state, because he passively accepted the new rulers and served in the Red Army, instead of desperately trying to escape. Rodzianko was totally the opposite of Benckendorff, he was a conservative, loyal monarchist, and die hard anti-Bolshevik. He really fancied the aristocratic privileges, such as standing guard and doing parades for the Tsar, or to do equestrianism in Italy to represent Russia. This also explained his defending of the results of the October Manifesto, and his appalling for a "communistic state", due to which he actively joined the White Army to fight the Reds. Yusupov on the other hand was unique in his own way. Compared to the other three, he only cared and was busy with the

continuation of his life he had lived till then. Due to his family's wealth and name, he could do whatever he wanted, especially to maintain the "noblesse oblige" that was expected from him. His pursuit of retaining his wealth even led him risking his life when he returned to St. Petersburg to collect certain valuable items while Bolsheviks had taken over the city after the Revolution. Obolensky, just like Benckendorff, mentioned and acknowledged certain problems that different groups were facing in society. But, he seemed to be a dreamer and a practical aristocrat in one. He didn't have the solutions for the problems for that time, but he was prepared to think a philosophize about the solutions Russia needed to halt the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, his practical side expressed itself through fighting the Reds on their ideological basis, because he didn't wasn't to live in such a state.

Concluding, this thesis shouldn't be read as an indictment towards the aristocracy, their behaviours, their lifestyles, or even their opinions, but it tried to show that the end of the 19th century the Russian society had started evolving into different worlds, where the aristocracy thought it still only contained one. In their world they still perceived themselves as a fundamental and unmissable part, which couldn't be removed from the equation. In reality, they became disconnected, hated, and cleansed from the world they thought to understand. Maybe, a recommendation, for further research on the fate of the Russian aristocracy in relation to the 1917 Revolution, could be to use even a larger amount memoirs of members of the aristocracy/the nobility, where this research has (only) used four English available memoirs. All of these memoirs combined could lead to a more complete story, which could add to the revival of the grandeur and nostalgia of the Russian aristocracy in the context of changing times. The revival can also be seen in recent visual adaptations about the upper classes. For instance, the BBC produced a television-series based on the novel "War and Peace" of Count Leo Tolstoy (2016), and Netflix produced a series called "The Last Czars" (2019) about the rise and fall of the Imperial Russia under Nicholas II. Could this spark a new era where the part of the aristocratic families of "War and Peace" will be combined with the final years of Imperial Russia in 1917 portrayed in "The Last Czars"?

EPILOGUE

A young man comes to see me.

Brought up under the Soviet, he has no remembrance or knowledge of what life there was before.

He is the new generation.

He has toiled as a peasant, slaved in Leningrad, been cold and hungry, lost a leg in a concentration camp and somehow escaped.

“I never knew what luxury was,” he says, “until by mistake I was put in a Commissars’ Nursing Home in Moscow.

Then I saw a new class of people of whose existence I had not dreamed.

They ate grapes and their children visited them in limousines and how fat those children were!”

“Never mind,” I comfort him, “batches of Commissars have been shot off lately.”¹⁶²

Pavel “Paul” Rodzianko (1939)

¹⁶² Rodzianko, *Tattered Banners*, Conclusions.

GLOSSARY

Several remarks on the terms mentioned in the glossary:

1) Members of the aristocracy are part of the more general term and group of nobility. But, members of the nobility aren't always part of the aristocracy, because of two aspects. One, the noblemen (or their families), aren't attached to a certain (given) piece of land which has been given or granted to them and has been in the family for a very long time. Two, the title some nobleman has been given could be temporary, and would be taken away when that person would die. It differs on individual cases what the status of their nobility was. The distinction here is that aristocrats; 1) always had hereditary titles, 2) they and their families were linked to a specific piece of land. Thus, within this research the four main characters can both be referred to as "aristocrats", as well as "noblemen".

2) Some restraint is also required because of the following remark. Terms like *peerage* and *nobility* weren't, and aren't, the same in every country, and the terms are used interchangeably in different (academic and scholarly) book and articles. This is also the result of using, originally and primarily, English terms while referring to certain members or groups, of other nobilities, like the Russian nobility in this research. As professor Dominic Lieven already explained, the different usage of terms such as the (British) *peerage*, which didn't define the exact same as in Imperial Russia. Being part of the English (landed) gentry/land nobility wasn't the same as in Russia, because the English gentry was much more defined what someone was required to do, and how to act. This resulted in a much more homogenous group than its Russian counterpart. Summarizing, this research is aware of the problem mentioned above and has tried to explain everything as best as possible.¹⁶³

Aristocracy

Umbrella term for the social class within a country/society. It is part of the nobility, but differs slightly from the nobility. Members of the Russian aristocracy always had hereditary titles attached to a specific piece of land, which was given or granted to them by the tsar or tsarina. This differed with other non-aristocratic noblemen.

¹⁶³ D. Lieven, *Aristocracy in Europe, 1815-1914* (Basingstoke 1992) xiv.

<i>Bolshevik(s)</i>	Faction, meaning “majority”, caused by a split within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), which was led by Vladimir Lenin. Other faction, <i>Menshevik</i> .
<i>Boyar</i>	Old title for someone of the Russian nobility, next to <i>knyaz</i> . Indicated a person of noble descent. Usage started during Kievan Rus and stopped after the introduction of the Table of Ranks in 1722. This title was replaced by either; prince, count or baron. People who were a <i>boyar</i> became part of the new titled aristocracy.
<i>Chin</i>	A “step”, rank, or stage within the Table of Ranks system which was introduced by Peter the Great in 1722. Someone had to complete 14 steps before becoming part of the (lower) hereditary nobility.
<i>Dvorianstvo</i>	The Russian term for the Russian nobility as part of the laws that were introduced alongside the new social estate system (see: <i>Soslovie</i>).
<i>Dvoyevlastiye</i>	Term coined by Lenin to indicate the cooperation between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet after the fall of the Tsar. Commonly known as “Dual Government”, or “Dual Power”.
<i>Dushi</i>	Literal translation “souls”. Term used to indicate how many male serfs a landowner had on his estate. Having a lot of serfs, the more prestige and more wealth that person ‘would’ have, as people assumed.
<i>Gospodin</i>	Meaning “sir”. Became new form of addressing each other after the Order No. 1 in 1917. Was later replaced with <i>tovaritsch</i> .
<i>Intelligentsia</i>	The Russian intelligentsia constituted of a closed educated caste of individuals, admission to which required commitment to materialism, socialism; and utilitarianism.
<i>Knyaz</i>	Literal translation “prince”. Noble title that was used before the introduction of the Table of Ranks in 1722, which introduced the Western styles of address for noble people.
<i>(Landed) Gentry</i>	The same as <i>landed nobility</i> , see below for explanation.

<i>Landed nobility</i>	Part of the nobility, refers to persons/families who were able to live from the (rental) income from their land. Can both be groups; aristocrats and noblemen.
<i>Marshall of Nobility</i>	An person of the nobility who was elected by the zemstvo to defend the interest of the selected community, locality or region. Tasks could be to help with legal problems or disputes because they were educated and most of the inhabitants were not. Primarily someone of noble descent.
<i>Menshevik(s)</i>	Faction, meaning “minority”, caused by a split within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). Other faction, <i>Bolshevik(s)</i> .
<i>Mir</i>	Encompassed the rural peasant life, which focussed on certain habits, values, and the commune.
<i>Nobility</i>	Umbrella term for the social class within a country/society. This term refers to the people who received a title due to military, civil or other services, and persons who were incorporated via the old <i>boyar</i> system. Important differences with the aristocracy is that: 1) it depended, on individual cases, whether the title became hereditary, or temporarily. 2) Noblemen weren’t given strictly bound to a certain piece of land.
<i>Peerage</i>	The English system which contained, primarily, members (a “peer”) of the hereditary aristocracy, but there are also non-hereditary peers. A peer can hold the title of: Duke, Marquess, Earl, Viscount, or Baron.
<i>Pomeshchik</i>	Name for a landlord/-owner of a (large) estate in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe.
<i>Service nobility</i>	Branch of the nobility, which derived its status as a nobleman or -women, from being in ‘service’ to the tsar or tsarina. Two possible ways of achieving this status. First, this could be achieved via passing all the ranks (“ <i>chins</i> ”) of the Table of Ranks. Second, a family was already of noble descent, and a member was employed in, for example, the bureaucracy or diplomacy (hence: service nobility).

<i>Soslovie/Sosloviia</i>	A system that was introduced and divided the Russian society within four social estates. They consisted of four main estates: the nobility, the clergy, the urban workers and the rural workers (peasants). A specific part of the <i>soslovie</i> , for example, the urban workers was called a “ <i>sosloviia</i> ”.
<i>Table of Ranks</i>	A system introduced by tsar Peter the Great in 1722 to formalize and codify the different types of (hereditary) civil, noble, military and aristocratic titles available in Imperial Russia.
<i>Tovarihsch</i>	Meaning “comrade”. New way of addressing each other in the military after the Petrograd Soviet issued Order No.1 in 1917. Part of the equalizing the Russia’s habits and customs.
<i>United Nobility</i>	Formation of a group by land owning nobles, which sought to defend their interests during the peasant rebellions between 1905-1907.
<i>Zemskie nachalniki</i>	‘Land captain’ or ‘land commandant’. Function comparable with the function of <i>Marshall of Nobility</i> and also often someone from the nobility who was given the function.
<i>Zemstvo</i>	Local committee which dealt (with) and solved local affairs. Became important in the years when the serfs were emancipated. In this <i>zemstvo</i> their voice could be heard for the first time. In some degree it had autonomy in making decisions. Worked closely with the Marshall of Nobility to ‘represent’ the needs of the needs of the community. After the October Revolution of 1917 the <i>zemstvo</i> ’s were replaced by the “soviets” (lit. councils) by the Bolsheviks.

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