Rural and Urban Crime in Late Imperial Russia

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When assessing the fall of the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century, historians typically fall into one of two camps. First, those that argue the classic, pessimistic narrative that Russia was on an inevitable path toward collapse. Second, those that argue a more optimistic narrative that the Russian Empire was not prone to collapse, but rather it was the incredibly disruptive nature of the First World War that shook the Empire to its core and destabilized it so much that it could continue to function, resulting in its collapse. Given that the optimistic school of thought is a newer point of view that has grown only within the past few decades, there is less literature that looks at late imperial Russia in this perspective. However, one historian who advances this school of thought is Wayne Dowler in *Russia in 1913* where he mentions genuine improvements in both social and economic areas. Dowler mentions that Russia was one of the world's largest economic powerhouses by 1913, as it was second only to the United States in national output growth.[1] He also brings up the expansion of civil society that had taken place in the years preceding 1913 which sought to include a wider variety of people thanks to institutions like the Russian press, religion, and voluntary associations. These expansions led to the cultivation of a middle-class, bourgeois society driven by a new Russian popular culture made up of growing interest for leisure activities, books, films, and many other things that captivated audiences of all classes who sought information and entertainment. With all these advancements made in late imperial Russia, the imminent collapse of the Empire did not seem probable. However, this is a matter of perceptive as optimists tend to downplay crucial information that shows how turbulent the late imperial era really was.

[1] Wayne Dowler, *Russia in 1913* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), 27.

If one word could describe the final few decades of the Empire that word would be "tense." Dowler made sure to mention that there was tension everywhere in late imperial Russia: between the state and the people, within the state itself, and between central and local governments. He also goes into great detail when discussing popular discourses between the contrasting ideologies of conservatives, liberals, and socialists, all of whom played a significant role in the final few years of the Empire. While most of these tensions and discourses were problematic, Dowler argues they were not necessarily the reason for the eventual collapse of the empire, but rather World War I was what shook the empire to its core and caused it to fall.

While the optimist argument makes some good arguments, there are too many factors that are left out when trying to seriously assess the state of the late Russian Empire. The list of problems could very easily fill up an entire book, so instead this paper will focus on one issue: rural and urban crime, something that Dowler seldom mentions in *Russia in 1913*. This serves as a definitive indicator of the prolonged instability that plagued the empire for many decades preceding the War and shows the inevitability of the collapse of the empire. This article intends to look at the evolution of crime and the criminal justice system beginning in 1830, through the Great Reforms of the 1860s, the era of counter reforms, and the Revolutionary years of the 1900s. This article will look at what crimes were on the rise, where they were most prevalent, and discuss whether culture played a role in why crime rose in the cities and countryside.

Pre-Reform Era

As Russia entered the nineteenth century, it became evident that the numerous laws passed under previous tsars and tsarinas needed to be collected and codified, as it had been well over one 150 years since the last formal codification. The process began in 1801 under the newly installed Alexander I, but he never lived to see the finished product as he died in 1825, five years before the

process was completed.[2] Instead, it was his younger brother, Nicholas I, who saw the publication and formal implementation of the Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire in 1830, almost three entire decades after the codification process began.[3] This collection contained over 30,000 legal enactments that spanned back to 1649, and took up forty-eight volumes, but since this was only a formal collection of laws two years later the Digest of Laws was published as a collection of fifteen volumes and served as the official law code of the Russian Empire.[4] Volume 15 of the Digest proved to be monumental since it finally defined key legal concepts, something that had never been done before. Volume 15 changed the definition of a crime from being a vague social or political offence, as it had been understood for hundreds of years, to formally specifying that a crime was an illegal act that went against a written statute, which was punishable by law.[5] Volume 15 created a ladder of punishments for crimes, ranging from capital punishment, the most severe but notably reserved only for state crimes, down to ecclesiastical punishment, the least severe.[6]

A decade later, the 1845 Penal Code defined all punishments as either criminal or correctional. There were three punishments listed for criminal crimes: the death penalty, hard labor, and exile to Siberia or the Caucasus.[7] Given their severity, these were much more rarely dished out, especially for what could be considered "ordinary crimes." State crimes in Russia were punished significantly harsher than in other European countries.[8] For example, the Penal Code dictated that the death penalty could only be applied in cases of violence against the sovereign,

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[2] Jonathan Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia: A Comparative History from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 55.

[3] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 64.

[4] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 64.

[5] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 66.

[6] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 65.

[7] Jonathan Daly, "Criminal Punishment and Europeanization in Late Imperial Russia," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 48, no. 3 (2000), 342.

[8] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 69.

conspiring to overthrow the government, or "breach of quarantine."[9] However, military courts were able to sentence more people to death since they were not bound by the rules of the Penal Code. Naturally, corrective punishments made up the vast majority of punishments handed out, and these included either brief exile to Siberia, or imprisonment.[10]

While the laws of the Empire changed over time, the judicial system lagged behind, and criminal procedure remained more or less the same. The pre-reform system was inquisitorial, meaning that the courts were active participants in criminal investigations, rather than being neutral entities. Notably, the pre-reform judicial system was not separate from the executive branch; the police investigation, which was the main part of criminal procedure, was conducted by administration officials.[11] The accused also lacked the right to a defense counsel,[12] trial by jury, or the right to appeal if convicted,[13] but despite its numerous flaws, the system appeared to work well enough most of the time. In early 1855, Nicholas I died and his son became Tsar Alexander II. The first few years of his reign were spent dealing with the effects of the Crimean War, an unpopular engagement that his father brought Russia into, but as the 1860s came around, Alexander began a new era of Russian history when he enacted the various declarations that came to be known as the Great Reforms.

Given that data collection for crimes in this era was still in its infancy, and the fact that most of the existing data is relatively inaccessible, some of the earliest data I could find regarding crime in this timeframe comes courtesy of Stephen Frank's article "Narratives within Numbers: Women, Crime and Judicial Statistics in Imperial Russia, 1834-1913." While Frank mainly

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[9] Daly, "Criminal Punishment and Europeanization in Late Imperial Russia," 343.
[10] Daly, "Criminal Punishment and Europeanization in Late Imperial Russia,"342.
[11] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 70.
[12] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 71.
[13] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 74.

discusses the concept of female criminality in nineteenth-century Russia, this article gives us important insight into crime as a whole. Between 1834, when this data collection began, and 1861, the year serfs were emancipated, women represented only 15.3 percent of all persons tried in felony cases, clearly showing that men made up a significant majority of Russian criminals.[14] Despite this clear discrepancy between men and women, it was, in fact, women who had a higher average annual criminal growth rate at 1.6 percent, compared to men at 0.5 percent average annual growth rate.[15] This is due to a heavier emphasis on male criminality when these collections began which slowly decreased over time. More notably, it is also due to shifts in prosecution, as crimes that were classified as specifically "female crimes" were beginning to be taken seriously by the administration. This shows us one of the most important concepts of this paper; numbers almost never show the real picture. Contemporary writers often made their claims solely by looking at the published statistics without consulting other factors that might have contributed to increases in the data. Keeping this in mind is crucial as we discuss how contemporary writers perceived crime in rural and urban areas. Before we delve further into that, we must first understand how the justice system changed during the era of Alexander II's Great Reforms.

The Great Reforms of the 1860s

Crime in rural Russia is something that many contemporary writers focused on even before the emancipation. Educated Russians and the state believed that the supposed high criminality in the countryside was because of the peasants' "brutal way of life" as well as their "inherent backwardness," but they also admitted that this was only part of the problem.[16] They, along with

[14] Stephen Frank, "Narratives within Numbers: Women, Crime and Judicial Statistics in Imperial Russia, 1834-1913," *The Russian Review (Stanford)* 55, no. 4 (1996), 548.

[15] Frank, "Narratives within Numbers," 549.

[16] Stephen P. Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia, 1856-1914*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 26.

peasants themselves, noted the inefficiency of the police in the countryside due to the force being extremely understaffed, underpaid, and undertrained.[17] Instead, everyday policing typically fell into the hands of the peasant communities themselves, and it stayed that way even after the reforms as rural policing problems were an issue that unfortunately continued all the way until the fall of the Empire.

The first of these major reforms was the Emancipation of the serfs, which was proclaimed in February 1861, but this new "freedom" that serfs received proved to not be exactly what they thought it was. There were still many forms of control that kept peasants tied to the land they lived on and stuck in poverty, but those issues could constitute an entirely different paper. What is important for this paper are the local peasant *volost'* courts. Initially created in 1839 for state peasants,[18] the *volost'* system was expanded following Emancipation to include the entire peasant population to replace serf owners' judicial authority with an institution where fellow peasants administered justice.[19] These courts were made up of 4 to 12 peasant judges that handled petty disputes on the basis of Russian law or customary law.[20] Serious crimes were not within this court's jurisdiction and were instead heard by a higher court. All other lower courts, most notably the two-tiered system of courts that state peasants had access to for years, were abolished by these reforms, although the peasant village assembly remained and continued to play an important role in managing community affairs.[21] Any decisions reached by these courts were deemed final until 1866 when cassation hearings were finally allowed, which could result in a sentence being overturned or even a retrial.[22] The creation of this self-administered system of local peasant courts

[17] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 31.
[18] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 75.
[19] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 40.
[20] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 41.
[21] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 44.
[22] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 45.

was intended to keep peasants out of the regular court system, as it was commonly believed that peasants were simply too ignorant to understand the laws of the Russian Empire due to their centuries in bondage and their "backward" culture. Reformers believed that having this separate system specifically for peasant affairs helped peasants for now, at least until they could be properly educated and slowly introduced into higher society and the regular court system.[23]

Roughly three years after the Emancipation and the subsequent reformation of the peasant courts, Alexander II approved even more reforms that completely changed the regular judicial system. The hierarchy of courts was simplified, with circuit courts being the most prolific type and making up the bottom tier and administered over several districts, followed by fourteen regional Chambers of Justice that were courts of first instance for state crimes as well as appeal courts for other crimes, and finally the Senate which served as the highest appeals court in the land.[24] Notably, this reformed judiciary was made independent of the executive branch, a first for Russia. All other estate courts, except for the previously mentioned peasant system, were abolished; however, it must also be noted that the peasant system remained under the control of the executive branch. Criminal procedure was also changed significantly as the old inquisitorial approach was replaced with an adversarial one, meaning that courts took a neutral position with the two parties presenting their own arguments.[25] Other notable changes that emerged from these set of reforms included the establishment of the Russian Bar, the press being allowed to cover criminal proceedings, and the introduction of forensic specialists and expert witnesses.[26] However, one of the most important changes that came from these reforms was the introduction of trial by jury for

[23] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 89.
[24] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 78.
[25] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 80.
[26] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 81.

the first time in Russian history.[27] The implementation of these reforms was not instantaneous, as some took decades to be fully implemented. Certain provinces did not receive reforms at all. Jury trials, for example, were not fully extended to areas such as Western Siberia until 1909, over forty years after it was first introduced in the Empire, and provinces like Poland and Central Asia never received the right to jury trials.[28]

Post-Reform and the Counter-Reforms

The following few decades were filled with growth and development and well as significant growing pains, given that the reforms needed ample time to be fully implemented. However, it was also a time of heightened tension following increased domestic terrorism, including several assassination attempts on government officials. During this time, secret societies were outlawed, and the state strengthened its efforts in combating political crime; most of those who were arrested for such crimes were dealt with administratively.[29] The terrorist organization People's Will had launched several failed attempts on the life of the tsar, and by the 1880s were dwindling in numbers due to the government's crackdown, but in March of 1881 they managed to successfully assassinate Alexander II as he rode in his carriage, effectively bringing an end to the era of reform. The throne then passed to his son, Alexander III, who proceeded to undo many of the more liberal reforms of his father, some of which greatly affected the criminal justice system.

One important detail that Jonathan Daly points out in his book *Crime and Punishment in Russia: A Comparative History from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin*, is that an unintended consequence of these reforms was an increase in crime rates and criminality as a whole. Over the next few decades, crime appeared to rise substantially, but it was not solely due to the rise in

[27] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 79.
[28] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 79.
[29] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 85.

criminality; rather it was due to increasing numbers of people actually filing reports and engaging in the judicial process.[30] An example of this is seen in the rise in the number of accused killers going on trial from 1880 to 1904. If we exclude infanticide, 1,154 were tried in 1880; 1,302 in 1890; 1,640 in 1900; and 2,244 in 1904.[31] This near doubling of the number of accused killers going to trial can be explained by several factors, including population growth during this time, and the previously mentioned increasing numbers of reports, which is further supported by the simultaneously increasing number of appeals during this same span.[32] But more reporting cannot explain the entire increase in numbers, so criminality did in fact rise. However, this can be explained by the state's loosening of social control. While the state kept meddling in just about everything, it was significantly less than before, resulting in less repression but more criminality, especially among young people and in urban areas. By the end of the nineteenth century, just over 8.4 percent of the county's population resided in cities and towns, but out of that section came nearly twenty-five percent of all convicted persons.[33] Contemporary writers argued that rapid industrialization as well as increased migration from the countryside were to blame for the crime surges seen in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Contemporaries also believed that the most prolific types of urban crimes were property crimes, as violent crimes were seen to mainly occur in the countryside among peasants, who compared to urbanites, had little of value to take other than maybe a horse.[34]

Regarding the countryside, there was still significant discussion about peasant criminality, specifically the notion that peasant crime was inherently more violent compared to crimes

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[30] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 83.

[31] Louise McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian: True Crime and Punishment in Late Imperial Russia*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 20.

[32] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 83.

[33] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 84.

[34] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 59.

committed by other portions of the population, such as members of the middle-class or the nobility. Contemporaries inferred this solely by looking at circuit court data that was published between 1874 and 1913. Samples from this data set indicated that an average of 84.5 percent of all circuit court murder convictions came from rural localities.[35] They also show that the percentage of rural property crimes was significantly lower compared to violent crimes, showing an average of 51.8 percent of theft convictions coming from rural localities, a significant decrease compared to the rural murder convictions.[36] As previously stated, however, these numbers do not paint the entire picture. These are averages of nearly forty years' worth of data, and throughout these years, many changes occurred that altered the numbers and helped the contemporary perspective. For starters, many property crimes that were mainly perceived to be "peasant crimes" were moved to lower courts and therefore are not represented in the data, resulting in lower percentages of rural property crime convictions coming from rural circuit courts.[37] This can be seen in 1874 as property offences made up 61.1 percent of all rural felony convictions, but this number steadily declined in the following decades, down to 50.5 percent in 1884, 32.8 percent in 1894, and 25.1 percent in 1906.[38] All the while this was happening, peasant prosecution in circuit courts for violent and administrative offenses increased which resulted in those percentages ballooning, but there is little evidence that these crimes were actually rising that dramatically.

This is not to say that there was no violence in the countryside. On the contrary, violence was endemic in rural Russia, but not all violent crimes were created equal. Given the patriarchal nature of Russian society, some of the most common forms of "violent" crimes had to do with insult of person or honor. These "violent crimes" could range anywhere from verbal insult and

[35] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 58.
[36] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 58.
[37] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 63.
[38] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 62.

foul language to more physical altercations, like shoving, spitting, and hair-pulling.[39] These offenses were taken particularly seriously in the countryside since insulted peasants might lose respect from their communities, which is why many fought to clear their names. Punishment for this crime typically depended on the person being insulted. If it was a peasant insulting a fellow peasant, the punishment handed down by *volost'* court likely led to a couple of days in jail. However, insults to persons above their social class resulted in months in prison, especially if it were an insult to the tsar himself or another member of the royal family.[40] Something that must be noted here is that rape fell into the category of "insults to honor" under Russian law, meaning that no severe punishments were dished out for this offense, but rather compensation and reconciliation were the main objectives in rural rape cases.[41] These cases were, however, seen behind closed doors to protect the identity of the victim, because the mere assumption of being a victim of such a crime was enough to ruin a woman's reputation within her community.

Of the more physically violent crimes, brawling and fighting were the most common forms of violence prevalent in the countryside. Most of these fights were the result of petty squabbles, such as revenge for the previously mentioned insults. However, brawls were seen by educated Russians as evidence of the peasants' cultural backwardness, as it was common for communities to engage in full-blown brawls to reinforce village solidarity, a practice that stretched back centuries.[42] Unfortunately, domestic violence was very common in rural Russia, so much so that the numbers likely do not accurately represent the prevalence of the crime. These cases were seen before the *volost'* courts who were not nearly as sympathetic to women as higher courts, such as

[39] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 149.
[40] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 155.
[41] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 162.
[42] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 156.

justice of the peace courts, were.[43] Because of their perceived heightened vulnerability by educated Russians, peasant women essentially became the faces for marital reform in late imperial Russia. However, notable reform never came so women were forced to go through a long system of appeals to have the chance to petition for a passport to legally live apart from her abusive husband.[44]

Homicide is likely the most well-talked about form of rural violent crime given the contemporary assumption of the violent peasant, but even this assumption remains flawed. While the statistics do not show motives and cannot differentiate between acts of one defending their own property and instances of cold blooded murder, what we can see is that between 1874 and 1913, excluding the revolutionary years, the yearly rate of increase for homicide is 3.3 percent, making it the lowest yearly rate of increase for all felonies.[45] These data sets also reveal prosecution patterns showing that, despite their small number, murder trials made up a sizable portion of jury trials. In 1872, for example, murders made up roughly five percent of all crimes committed but were over 40 percent of trials heard by juries.[46] Notably, Russian juries became infamous for how lenient they were, oftentimes letting accused individuals who had previously confessed to their crimes walk free. One such case was the Vera Zasulich trial of 1878 when a jury acquitted her even after openly admitting to shooting St. Petersburg Governor Trepov earlier that year.[47] While this particular case is somewhat of an outlier, high acquittal rates were a significant issue that Alexander III issued various counter reforms that reshaped the makeup of Russian juries.[48] These counter reforms did just what they were intended to do, as acquittals of men accused of

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[43] Barbara Alpern Engel, *Breaking the Ties That Bound: The Politics of Marital Strife in Late Imperial Russia*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 107.
[44] Engel, 106.
[45] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 166.
[46] McReynolds, 20.
[47] McReynolds, 93.
[48] McReynolds, 107.

premeditated murder went from 36 percent in 1880 down to 16 percent in 1900, but acquittals for women remained at around 50 percent.[49]

Contrary to popular belief at the time, property crimes were a much larger issue in the Russian countryside than contemporaries let on. Contemporaries often noted the noble landowners who had the most issues with peasants not abiding by property laws since they were often caught stealing fruits and vegetables from their lands, illegally felling timber in their forests, or using private land for animal grazing.[50] Such examples helped the prevalent myth of peasant ignorance since many believed that peasants could not comprehend the concept of laws themselves, let alone private land ownership. However, there is considerable evidence that peasants did know the law, interpreted it in ways beneficial to them, and oftentimes willingly chose to ignore them for a myriad of reasons. Peasants were extremely skeptical of the justice system, with many believing it was corrupt and favored those of higher social status.[51] This skepticism was also present when trying to resolve petty disputes within the community as many times disputes were dealt with informally between the two parties alone with them only seeking trial in the *volost'* courts when a settlement could not be reached or the terms were unfavorable.[52]

Of the many property crimes that took place in rural Russia, the ones that were taken most seriously were those that directly affected the state. After the monopolization of liquor by the state in the 1890s, bootlegging became one of the fastest growing crimes in this era. By 1914, surveys showed that on average every village had 5.7 illegal saloons in operation.[53] Bootlegging was a massive issue for the state because, given the vastness of the countryside, there was no way to

[49] McReynolds, 110.
[50] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 104.
[51] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 92.
[52] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 97.
[53] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 123.

combat it effectively, resulting in the state losing out on a significant amount of revenue that it desperately needed. Other notable rural property crimes like robberies, horse theft, and arson were not taken as seriously by police officials but were nevertheless detrimental to those who were on the receiving end of them. While it was widely written that nobles were the primary victims of endless property crime, statistics show that peasants were the overwhelming victims of theft in the Russian countryside. A data set consisting of ninety-four reported thefts from Raizan province in 1884 shows that 70.2 percent of victims were peasants, 7.4 percent were nobles, 6.4 percent were priests, and 4.3 percent were merchants.[54] Horse theft and arson were the two most notable forms of property crimes because they proved to be enough to ruin the lives of those affected simply because of how poor some peasants were. This is why peasants grew furious when offenders were given lenient sentences or, sometimes, not punished at all. This further drove a wedge between the criminal justice system and the peasants. Oftentimes, knowing perpetrators might get off easily if turned in, peasants took matters into their own hands and resorted to traditional tactics, such as *vozhdenie* (leading the thief) or *samosud* (self-judgement) to hold criminals accountable by humiliating, beating, or even killing them.[55]

The plight of the rural peasant is one that contemporaries did not discuss often as they were more concerned with the noble landowners who appeared to be at constant odds with the peasant class on issues of unlawful usage of private lands or acts of violence. Looking at data, however, we see that crimes against members of higher classes paled in comparison to the number of crimes perpetrated amongst the peasants themselves. In 1894, Alexander III died unexpectedly, leaving the throne to his son Nicholas II. Nicholas promised to continue his father's policies, but after a tumultuous first decade as tsar, he was forced to go down a completely different path. One that

[54] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 121.
[55] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 264.

sought to curb his autocratic authority and transform the empire into a system of constitutional monarchy.

Twentieth Century: Revolution and the Fall of the Empire

As the twentieth century rolled around, Nicholas II continued to uphold his promise to his father but faced many challenges that made it increasingly difficult to do so. Tensions continued to grow, and soon labor movements began to take shape in cities throughout the empire. Following the events of Bloody Sunday, where Russian soldiers fired upon peaceful protesters who sought to bring a petition to the tsar, demonstrations and crime reached all-time highs. In response to the massive amount of unrest, Nicholas II was forced to issue the October Manifesto on October 30, 1905, which promised expansions to civil rights and the creation of a legislature, things that hindered his autocratic hold. This promulgation of the October Manifesto did not immediately end the unrest in the country as it took roughly two more years before there was relative peace again. During these years, the government carried out massive suppression campaigns to put an end to unrest throughout the empire, but by 1909 the prison system, which had just gone through a massive expansion campaign, was beginning to overflow.[56] Over 50 new prisons were being constructed in 1905, but these were only meant to accommodate for moderate increases, so by the time 1909 rolled around, these newly built prisons were already experiencing deteriorating conditions due to the immense overcrowding within them.[57] It was painfully obvious that reform was required, so the newly created State Duma sought to work with the administration to enact new criminal justice reforms. In 1909, a parole system was established which helped take pressure off of the overburdened prison and exile systems.[58] They also helped establish the first juvenile

[56] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 96.
[57] Daly, "Criminal Punishment and Europeanization in Late Imperial Russia," 357.
[58] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 96.

courts in St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1910 and 1912, respectively, and abolished the land captains in the countryside and brought back the office of justice of the peace in 1912.

Part of the extreme increase in crime during these turbulent years can be attributed to the rise of a new phenomenon in Russian cities: hooliganism. The St. Petersburg boulevard press papers began writing about gangs of so-called, "hooligans" who were committing crimes in the streets as early as 1901.[59] However, they were more closely associated with committing minor offenses, such as drunkenness and prostitution rather than serious infractions.[60] However, this notion changed after hooligans suddenly turned violent in 1903 when reports of hooligan gangs committing muggings, stabbings, and random attacks on city dwellers dominated the front pages.[61] Crime in general, including hooligan crimes, peaked during the 1905 Revolution. It must be noted that hooligan crime and violence were not seen as being part of the ongoing labor movement, but it should nevertheless be seen as another form of lower-class unrest.[62] With the successful suppression of the labor movement by the end of 1905, the government turned its attention to the growing unrest in the countryside. Simultaneously, it dealt with the hooligan issue in the city through administrative action, which can be seen in the significant drop of hooligan crimes tried in the 1906 court statistics.[63]

With the increased need for police and administrative officials on the streets to deal with the labor movement, hooligans took advantage by effectively taking control of underpoliced areas within the city, further demonstrating the breakdown of order during these turbulent years.[64] As a result, the government resorted to exiling thousands of hooligans from the city, but that had the

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[59] Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900-1914*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 25.

[60] Neuberger, 34.

[61] Neuberger, 38.

[62] Neuberger, 75.

[63] Neuberger, 82.

[64] Neuberger, 81.

unintended consequence of further expanding hooliganism into the Russian countryside.[65] Hooligans dominated city streets, parks, taverns, and billiard halls, which in turn exposed everyday city dwellers, including children, to their behaviors. And so, a connection between lower-class urban street culture and hooliganism began. The unsupervised, poor youth of St. Petersburg had very few options for recreation or entertainment in the capital, so the hooligan-filled streets is where they gravitated towards, which left many youths to adopt hooligan culture as their own. The government attempted to "correct" the path that some of these youths were on via the establishment of the Special Juvenile Court[66] or institutions, like Dr. Shlezinger's "Children's Village," who sought to reform hooligan youths by providing them with "guardians" and activities,[67] but these experiments were deemed to be failures by contemporaries who noted how quick youths returned to their old ways. Some avant-garde artists also adopted hooliganism to "shock the philistine" by expressing themselves and performing their art in the streets in order to elicit reactions from the public and educated Russians who wrote about their actions.[68] Fortunately for the government, hooliganism appeared to fade following the revolutionary years of 1905 through 1907, but this calm did not last long.

The early 1910s saw the resurgence of hooliganism, and this time it proved to be too much for the government to bear. As the papers began reporting on the increasing hooligan activity, there was a noticeable shift in how they were being portrayed in the press. Throughout the pre-revolutionary years, and during through the Revolution of 1905, it was widely accepted that lower-class citizens who participated in hooligan activities were susceptible to cultural improvement, but now educated Russians and the press viewed hooligans as thoughtlessly violent and beyond the

[65] Neuberger, 219.
[66] Neuberger, 199.
[67] Neuberger, 206.
[68] Neuberger, 144.

point of cultural reform.[69] Hooliganism had become synonymous with lower class violence. This extended to the violent labor unrest that came as a response to the Lena Goldfield Massacre during the 1914 General Strike in St. Petersburg; this time contemporaries and the press no longer tried to differentiate between worker and hooligan violence. Part of the reason for this lack of differentiation was that the lines between hooligan and worker violence had become blurred since workers readily adopted hooligan tactics, like seizing control of public areas, to further their agenda.[70] The Bolsheviks, who had encouraged workers to engage in the 1914 General Strike, strictly requested that there not be any violence since they feared they might lose control of the movement.[71] However, violence did occur, and the labor movement did collapse, but not due to loss of control, but because Russia was preparing to enter World War One.

The labor movement appeared to vanish overnight as Russia geared itself to enter World War One that August. This could be attributed to provinces being under martial law or extraordinary security upon the beginning of the war, but many saw a unified front as Russia faced her adversaries.[72] Even the countryside saw significant drops in crimes as droves of peasants were being conscripted into the war.[73] However, these initial signs of improvement proved to be nothing more than a mere illusion. Some of the first signs of stress came when police officials became even more overwhelmed than before, given that significant portions of their ranks had been drafted to the frontlines, leaving them with too many responsibilities that were impossible to complete.[74] In 1915, Nicholas II decided to leave Petrograd (wartime name for St. Petersburg) to take personal command of the army, but given his poor leadership capabilities, Russia began spiraling out of

[69] Neuberger, 231.
[70] Neuberger, 263.
[71] Neuberger, 266.
[72] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 100.
[73] Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, 303.
[74] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 100.

control. 1915 saw the return of the labor movement and crime rose exponentially as people expressed their bitter discontent with the state of the empire.[75] The Russian government, which was already stretched thin due to the war effort, tried their best to combat the unrest, but this time it proved to be too much to handle. Strikes ballooned to sizes never seen before, and tsarist troops no longer saw how they could successfully repress the movement, resulting in mass mutinies in cities throughout the empire.[76] As troops stepped down, the crowds took control of government buildings, police stations, and prisons, effectively signaling the collapse of the Russian empire.

As the empire changed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so did crime. The judicial system morphed over time, thanks in large part to the Great Reforms of Alexander II. Prosecution patterns shifted, resulting in certain crimes sticking out in the statistics more than others. Property and violent crime were endemic in the countryside as officials were unable to control it due to their understaffed and undertrained police forces. Crimes like horse theft and arson, which could seriously affect a peasant's economic well-being, were secondary in the eyes of the state to crimes like bootlegging, which directly deprived the state of revenue, and crimes against those of a higher social class. Inadequate penal and exile systems left violence prevalent; resulting in violent offenders returning to their communities after their sentences concluded to resume their crimes and continue their violence in another provinces and villages. Cities did not fare any better as they were seen as places of notoriously high crime due to rapid urbanization in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Mass peasant migration into the cities caused populations to grow but also were blamed for the increases in crime by contemporaries. The unrest that came from the 1905 Revolution resulted in a massive spike of all forms of crimes, much of which was dealt with administratively. After a few calm years, crime began to rise again

[75] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 101.
[76] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 101.

with the return of the labor movement in the 1910s, followed by unrest that originated from Russia's disastrous first years in World War I.

Culture became connected to rural and urban forms of crime. Rural peasants and their distrust of the judicial system and government was not a new phenomenon in 1917 when the Empire collapsed. Since most crimes within rural communities were not taken seriously by police officials, peasants often resorted to traditional tactics, like *samosud* or *vozhdenie* to hold criminals accountable. In the cities, hooligans were seen as the main purveyors of city violence and debauchery. They occupied spaces within the city that the government already exhibited weak control over and turned them into places that everyday city dwellers and educated citizens feared. While initially not seen as part of the labor movement, hooliganism spread through its association with urban street culture resulted in workers adopting hooligan tactics when labor tensions rose again in the 1910s.

Crime did not cease after the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917. In fact, it got exponentially worse. After the Provincial Government took control of the country, crime in the cities was completely out of control, and had gotten so bad that workers themselves formed red guard brigades to protect themselves from the mass amount of crime perpetrated in the cities.[77] The countryside did not fare any better as poor policing continued to plague rural Russia well into the Soviet era. This article has argued that crime and the tensions it caused were present in Russian society well before the outbreak of World War I. The issue of crime was just one crack in the many pillars that held up the Russian Empire. The state's inability to control crime over the years, and especially in the empire's final decade, showed how weak Russia had become. As other pillars continued to crack alongside crime, it was inevitable that Russia was on a direct path toward

[77] Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia*, 103.

failure. Despite not being the sole reason for the collapse, Russia entering World War I was in fact the death blow as it drained resources that the empire desperately needed to fix internal struggles. In the end, it was not a few years of fighting in war that doomed the Russian empire, but rather decades of repeated failure and negligence that sealed the empire's unfortunate fate.