Chapter 5
Violent birth of the State

I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.
Thomas Jefferson.

SOCIAL pressures to influence the individual's attitude to the *status quo* are exerted with particular force for the moulding of opinions on the Nation/State. Those of us, for example, who went to school in England during the twenties and thirties will remember that history lessons were devoted largely to the growth of the British Empire, and that, at a later stage perhaps, we had lessons on the British constitution designed to prove to us how lucky we were to be allowed to govern ourselves, in contrast to those who had to submit to the will of a dictator.

Furthermore, there were facilities, carefully graded according to the status of the school, for preparing boys for service as officers or other ranks in the forces that would be needed during the next war to protect our possessions and privileges against envious enemies. These instructions were probably acceptable to most; but there would still be the occasional rebel with his doubts about the Empire, and suspicions that what was called democracy was in reality a manifestation of what Stephen Leacock, Canadian humorist and professor of economics, termed 'genial humbug'. The powers of the electorate, and even of Members of Parliament, were illusory, such a boy would have felt, and the means of compulsion would be ready to be used as a last resort.

As we shall see, Tolstoy was not misled by the 'genial humbug' into thinking that the English or French States differed in kind from that of the Russian, which was

unashamedly autocratic, and regularly used means of compulsion as a first resort. It is obvious from his copious footnotes that he was well aware that this situation had not arisen overnight, but was the result of a long historical process. English-speaking readers, therefore, will be better equipped to see nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia as it were through Tolstoy's eyes, and to judge the validity both of his political views, and of his critics' appraisal of them, if they possess at the outset some outline knowledge of what he knew in more detail.

The beginnings of Russian history melt into legend. Three brothers from the land of Rus, possibly part of Sweden, are said to have been invited over as rulers by turbulent tribes who lived in the forests between Lake Ladoga and the upper reaches of the Dnieper. It is not in fact unlikely that something of the sort did happen; for we know that Scandinavia was a main area of recruitment for the famous Varangian Guard of the Eastern Emperors. What more likely than that some of the young adventurers thus attracted should have dropped off on the river route across Russia to form, as did many of their fellow-countrymen in other parts of Europe, a dominant military caste among a subject population?

What is certain is that, within two centuries, they and their descendants had extended their dominion as far as Kiev, and that they treated the country as if it were a vast family estate, paying them rent and governed according to generally understood rules of inheritance. These rules may have been understood, but they were not always observed by princes with armed followers, predisposed to solving their differences by means of violence. As a result, by the beginning of the 13th century, the principality of Muscovy was well on the way to becoming the nucleus of the future Russian Empire.

In 1238, however, a new band of military adventurers arrived on the scene, Tartars from the 'Golden Horde', as the west of the Mongol Empire was known. They kept on the whole to their pastoral way of life, but built themselves a capital, Sarai, on the banks of the lower Volga, and exacted tribute over a wide area. It is hardly to be imagined that the Russian princes had ever had

scruples about appropriating for themselves anything produced by the labouring population in excess of a bare livelihood; so the latter would in the long run have stood to lose no more on the advent of the new exploiters. On the contrary, the princes, under the requirement to pay tribute, would have become in effect their new masters' agents for collecting the rent. This new way of life demanded the acquisition of new habits. Instead of fighting among themselves, the princes intrigued against each other at the court of the local Khan in Sarai, or at the camp of the Grand Khan in Karakorum, Mongolia, where in any case they had to go to be confirmed in their functions. These lessons on the nature of autocratic rule would be of lasting effect.

With the weakening of the Tartar hegemony after about two centuries, the princes of Muscovy began once more to assert themselves, conspiring with Tartar generals, intercepting the tribute for their own use, and assuming the leadership of a patriotic movement. They were therefore well placed, after the final defeat of the Tartars, to resume their policy of aggression, to extend their territories at the expense of their weaker neighbours, and to proclaim themselves Caesars, or Tsars, of all Russia. This process of absorption was completed between 1462 and 1584 by the Tsars Ivan III, Basil and Ivan IV, commonly known as Ivan the Terrible.

Among the last of the independent states to disappear were Pskov and Great Novgorod, both of which had republican constitutions of long standing. In Novgorod alone, the massacre, over a period of time, of more than 60,000 people is said to have been required before all hope of the revival of its constitution was abandoned. Also of significance for the future was the recognition of the new Tsars by the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the coronation in 1547 of Ivan the Terrible by its Metropolitan. From this time on they regarded themselves as the Lord's Anointed, far above the next highest in the land, and surrounded themselves with barbaric splendour, including a guard of young nobles dressed in gorgeous costumes and armed with silver halberds. They indulged themselves in such luxury, it must be remembered, at the expense of a peasantry restrained by force.

The clearest possible evidence of this dates from the next reign, that of Theodore (1584-98), during which the real ruler was his brother-in-law, Boris Godunov. The comparatively small number of princes, nobles and others who had compelled acceptance of their title of ownership to this thinly-populated country were unable, so long as labourers were free to move in search of higher wages, to maintain at a maximum the rental incomes on which they relied for their idle and extravagant style of living. So they secured the enactment of laws for the binding of labourers to the soil *(adscriptio glebae)*. This was the beginning of Russian serfdom.

This reign also saw the beginning of a closer relationship between Church and State, comparable with the assumption by Henry VIII of the headship of the Church of England. Hitherto the highest authority in the Russian Church had been the Metropolitan, who was formally subject to the Patriarch of Constantinople. But Constantinople had fallen to the Turks in 1453; and, while the Tsars were claiming, by virtue of the marriage of Ivan III to the niece of the last Emperor, Constantine Palaeologus, to be his legitimate successors, it seemed altogether appropriate that the Russian Church should be governed by an independent Patriarch. For a while the relationship between the religious and secular authorities even became one of blood; for Michael Romanov, who came to the throne in 1613 on the strength of his mother's descent from the previous dynasty, was also the son of the Patriarch Philaret. These two ruled on an equal footing; but all except one of Philaret's successors, the Patriarch Nikon, abandoned any such pretension.

Roughly from the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards, or the end of the reign of the Tsar Theodore, new considerations enter into the study of international affairs. Before this time, on the whole, wars had been fought with the object of territorial gain and additional rental income. After this time, the emphasis shifts to wars for foreign markets. The reason, in western Europe particularly, was that, with the concentration of land-holding into fewer and fewer hands, land-holders became richer and those who were forced to sell their

labour to others became poorer. Capital for the production and exchange of goods thus came to be drawn from rent rather than from wages; and a class of land-and-capital monopolists began to grow. A further and more dangerous effect of the increasing disparities in wealth was that, taken as a whole, the class of person whose labour brought the goods into being was too poor to buy them all, despite its evident needs. The monopolists of land and capital saw no way out of this dilemma but an aggressive search for foreign markets and outlets for capital investment.

To begin with, the chief trade rivals were England and Holland. In each of these countries an East India Company was formed with the object of exploiting the vast area of the Pacific Ocean between the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn; and the English and Dutch States bestowed on them full political, judicial and military powers, not only to claim and defend a monopoly of trade, but also to acquire territory. The inevitable result was a series of furious wars (1652-4, 1665-7 and 1673-4) in which the English were in the end victorious, only to resume a similar series in the following century, this time against the French.

The earlier part of the seventeenth century saw various foreign powers, namely the Holy Roman Emperor, the Grand Turk, and the English, Dutch, French and Swedish States, all making overtures to the Tsar that were connected with these new trends. Some wanted him as an ally against their rivals, and others commercial privileges, or permission to use the overland route to trade directly with Persia. These proposals were not regarded favourably; for the Russian ruling classes were beginning already to have ideas of their own about foreign markets, and had no wish for Russia to become someone else's. Perhaps, even then, they were dreaming of a time when their successors would be glad to have both Persia and Turkey as fields for economic expansion. The dream began to become a reality in the reign of Peter the Great (1689-1725), who spent seven years of subjection to a regency (1682-9) in studying the mechanical arts of the west, drilling troops and planning the creation of a great navy to open and maintain new trade routes

to the south-west and north-west.

Since the White Sea is frozen for much of the year, the north-west trade route would depend absolutely on the attainment of a foothold on the shores of the Baltic. This was achieved after a war against Sweden lasting for more than twenty years, culminating in the annexation of Ingria, Karelia, Livonia, Esthonia and a part of Finland. Efforts at this time to establish the south-west route were unsuccessful; but Peter had begun his period of personal rule with a demonstration of the degree of force required to maintain autocratic rule. A military mutiny had been launched with the aim of replacing his mother as regent with his half-sister, who had previously been deposed. This happened while he was still abroad; and, by the time he reached home, the mutiny had been put down. He took a hand himself, however, in the trial and execution of more than 1,200 of the mutineers, some of whom he is said to have killed with his own hand.

The reign of Catherine II (1762-96) was notable for a domestic disturbance of a more fundamental nature. She had endeared herself to the upper ranks of society by introducing into Russia many of the refinements of western, particularly French, civilisation, but had done nothing even to alleviate the misery of the poor, let alone to investigate its cause. The result was a widespread insurrection, begun in 1773 by a Don Cossack named Pugachev. The insurgents, at any rate, had accurately identified the origins of their distress; for they lost no time in putting numerous landed proprietors to death. They also pillaged Kazan, and kept the whole country in a state of alarm for more than a year. In the end, Pugachev was caught and executed, but survived in written records and the collective memory to provide Tolstoy with one of his favourite examples of popular revolt suppressed by state force.

It was also during this reign that the objective of a trade route to the south-west was achieved. Alarmed by signs that the Russians were once more on the move westwards, the French incited the Turks to attack from the south. They declared war in 1768, but were defeated and forced not only to cede Azov, Kinburn and all the fortified places of the Crimea, but also to

open the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to Russian merchant vessels, so giving them access to the Mediterranean. A subsequent ambitious plan, made in concert with the Emperor Joseph II of Austria, to conquer and divide Turkey, was only partly successful. The Austrians were defeated; so the Russians, though victorious, had to be content with minor gains. The main prize, Constantinople, remained in Turkish hands, and was so to continue until the present day. Expansion westwards was continued, however, with the three partitions of Poland (1772, 1793 and 1795), and the annexation of Courland in 1795.

South-westerly expansion was to resume in the nineteenth century under the influence of increased economic pressures, and facilitated by new means of communication. It was during the reign of the Tsar Nicholas I (1825-55) that manufacturing industry was beginning to expand, enhancing the need for foreign trade that has already been noted. The army and the navy were growing commensurately with the new demands on them; and the construction of railways and canals, for the movement of both goods and troops, was well under way. The old kingdom of Georgia had been annexed at the beginning of the reign of the Tsar Alexander I (1801-25); and the Persian provinces of Erivan and Nakhichevan were to follow in 1826. Then began the long-drawn-out subjugation of the Caucasus, in which the young Tolstoy was to take part, and transmute his experience into the stories *The Raid, The Cossacks, The Woodfelling* and *Meeting an Acquaintance in the Detachment.*

Furthermore, under pretext of protecting the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire, Nicholas I obtained, by war or the threat of war, the autonomy of Moldavia, Wallachia and Serbia, the cession of several frontier districts together with the islands at the mouth of the Danube, and full liberty for Russian navigation and commerce in the Black Sea. Continued aggression was checked in 1831 by European intervention, and even more decively in 1854-6, when British and French armies landed in the Crimea and pursued a successful siege of Sevastopol, in the defence of which Tolstoy took part as an artillery officer.

Social change in mid-nineteenth century Russia was geared

to the material needs of the new industries and railways. The monopolists of land and capital demanded cheap labour for their factories; and it is probable that the labour-intensive steam railway could never have been run without it except as a non-profit-making public service. The economic restraint imposed on such landless wage-earners by the absence of any unappropriated land for them to go to would make any further legal restraint unnecessary. So it is fair to assume that the abolition of serfdom in 1861 owed less to changes of heart than to changing economic conditions. Details of the way in which the abolition was carried out support this view.

In the first place, the land was divided roughly into two, one half remaining with the landowners and the other being conditionally allocated to the peasants, who therefore held much less than they had actually cultivated before. In the second place, the peasants were allotted the worst land, which was assessed at a high price. In the third place, the forest lands on which they had been accustomed to rely for timber and fuel were normally assigned to the landowner. For their new holdings the peasants had to pay an annual rent ranging from eight to twelve roubles. As an alternative, they could work on their former owners' land for a fixed term – forty days a year for men, and thirty for women. These obligations could be redeemed by means of a state loan on which interest at the rate of six per cent was payable for a term of forty-nine years. It is therefore hardly surprising that all but the very wealthiest peasants found themselves engaged in a continual struggle against debt, and were obliged, in order to survive, either to perform extra work for the landlords for a low rate of pay, or to join the pool of cheap labour represented by the urban proletariat.

In the circumstances, it was natural that there should be considerable dissatisfaction and unrest among a rural population that had always tended to believe that, though they personally belonged to the landowners, the land itself, despite all theories to the contrary, belonged to them. As a corollary to this, they had also imagined in their innocence that, on the abolition of serfdom, this belief of theirs would be accepted and

acted on by the State. The unrest among the peasants was at least equalled by that among the factory workers in the towns. Rural handicrafts had given way with alarming swiftness to mass production organised by managements with little concern for anything but a quick return for their outlay. It was said that, as a result, more people were killed and injured each year in Russian factories than during the entire Russo-Turkish war of 1877-8.

The situation was ripe for change, and afforded generous scope for Tolstoy to develop his ideas both on the State and on economic and social reform. He did not reach a positive and workable conclusion about the latter until some time after he had made up his mind about the State.