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DOMINIC LIEVEN, *THE END OF TSARIST RUSSIA: THE MARCH TO WORLD WAR I AND REVOLUTION*. NEW YORK: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2015, 443 p.

Reviewed by Konstantin Dragaš*

The foreign policy of Tsarist Russia, its goals, scope, contradictions as well as its prominent protagonists – diplomats, ministers, advisors – and their diverse views on international relations in the decade preceding the outbreak of the First World War constitute the core of Dominic Lieven's interesting monograph on Russian history based on documentary sources – *The End of Tsarist Russia*. It is a book which seeks to answer the question of what challenges, problems and confusions the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and, above all, Emperor Nicholas II, and many figures in his entourage, faced in 1900–14 in the light of Russia's defeat in the war against Japan of 1905, the creation of an alliance with France and Britain, growing Austro-Hungarian and German expansionism and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In other words: to what extent did personal views, inclinations and political comments of the diplomats influence the shaping of Russian foreign policy?

What makes this study original is above all the author's interesting understanding of the causes of the First World War, which include civilian society, nationalism, growing literacy (for example, among the population of eastern Europe) but also the inability of the executive branch of the autocratic regimes to control public opinion, whose influence on the shaping of political developments was not at all negligible. Another feature is reflected in the view that the Russians lost the war of 1914–17 because of the failure of Russian government (the executive and, later, the legislature – the *Duma*) to get the peasantry and most of the conscripted army to believe in what Lieven calls "abstract" war aims, such as the conquest of Constantinople or "European balance of

power". The inability to overcome the discrepancy between the plans of the elites and the people's lack of motivation for war, i.e. the failure to achieve unity in terms of command, level of modernization and homogenization of the nation around clear goals, was one of the factors that led to the collapse of the Russian monarchy; by contrast, the wars with Napoleon or Hitler were fought with a clear internal cohesion of ideas, aims, plans and economic strength. Moreover, the author introduces the concept of the *Second World* for certain states that were insufficiently industrialized and economically competitive before 1914, among which he includes Russia, Spain, Italy.

The focus of attention, however, is on the protagonists and priorities of Russian foreign policy from the end of the nineteenth century to 1914. Russian foreign policy had to balance between two opposing parties – one inspired by the principle of loyalty to the dynastic ties between the monarchies in Europe, the other, by strong Slavophilism. Emperor Nicholas II continued his father Alexander III's Slavophile policy towards the Balkan Slavs, but paid much more attention to the Far East, Japan, expansion into Asia and the maintenance of stable relations with Germany. The primary goal of Russian diplomacy was the conquest of Constantinople, the achievement of economic and military dominance in the Black Sea and the strengthening of Russian presence in the broader area of Euroasia – the idea on which the Russian diplomats agreed in principle.

An important question raised by Lieven's book is whether Russian foreign policy in the period of 1900–14 was based

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on Slavophile traditions. Influential advocates of collaboration with Germany and Austria-Hungary, realistic “pragmatists” and critics of Slavophile policy were, for example, Nikolai Girs (foreign minister 1882–95), Vladimir Meshcherskii (editor of the *Grazhdanin/Citizen*), Roman Rozen (Russian ambassador to Japan 1903–1905), Alexander Girs. On the other hand, Sergei Sazonov (foreign minister 1910–1916), Alexander Nelidov or the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievich Romanov were Slavophiles and advocated Russia’s strong support to the Balkan Slavs. Both parties had an equal following among the ruling aristocracy; Lieven claims in his conclusion that the predictions of the “realistic” party would prove to be correct in many aspects. Many Russian diplomats, such as Alexander von Benckendorff in London or Count Nicholas von Osten-Sacken in Berlin, had sympathies for the politics of the country they served in and sought to synchronize the goals of the country they represented with it. A special place in this study is held by the politician Grigori Trubetskoi, who believed that the Straits and Constantinople could not be taken or naval dominance in the Black Sea achieved without Russia’s strong and unquestionable support to the Balkan Slavs.¹

After the Russo-Japanese War, Russia, militarily weakened and hit by a revolution and strikes, sought to renew its armies. The poor armament, the plan for an alliance of Balkan Slav states, the insecure western border (especially with Austria-Hungary and the Ukrainian population which inhabited a large part of it) and the system of bilateral agreements (with Italy, for example) made Russia back down in the Annexation crisis (1908–9) and the Balkan Wars (1912–13). As a result, the Russian government was frequently criticized by the cadet, liberal, “nationalist” and Slavophile press.

Nevertheless, although stressing the “guilt” of the Austro-Hungarian “war” party for the outbreak of the war, the author does not pay due attention to the factor of German diplomacy’s long-term goals regarding the potential colonization of Russian territory.

In the period of 1900–14, and especially after 1904, Russian diplomacy was compelled to adjust to Germany’s constant fear of the potential policy of encirclement. Many diplomats warned that good relations with Germany would be sacrificed in favour of a loose Anglo-Russian agreement the Germans sought to thwart. This adjustment was not an easy matter both because the Russian diplomats did not understand fully the German foreign policy plans and because they wanted to maintain good relations with both. This did not go easily because of diverging interests as regards the Ottoman Empire, Persia and Afghanistan, but also because of a good trade exchange (especially with Germany). As a result of Russian diplomacy’s being anxious not to make rash moves as regards the status quo in the Balkans, it frequently yielded to German and Austro-Hungarian influence. The complaisant policy towards Germany and Austria-Hungary may also be explained by the nationalist factor in eastern Europe, notably the issue of the Ukrainian population in Austrian and Russian Galicia: the nations whose fate was tied to the westernmost border of the Russian Empire were strongly disliked by the Russian autocracy and their separatism was not easy to control.

¹ D. Lieven, *The End of Tsarist Russia: The March to World War I and Revolution* (New York 2015), 130–131.