

BOOK REVIEW



Abraham Ascher, *P.A. Stolypin: The Search For Stability In Late Imperial Russia*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, 468 pp

Nicolae Ganea*

Western histories about the pre-revolutionary Russia are very rare, and general encyclopaedias or treatises talk very little about this subject by recycling dusty clichés about despotism, regress and under-civilisation. Most times, Russia is considered from a current geopolitical perspective and, as the Western geopolitics almost always requires a quite suspicious view, the end result is a caricature full of prejudices. For example, an atlas containing maps of Russia from various periods, most recently published by a notable publishing house in London, depicts only two representative historical figures on the cover: Stalin and Lenin. No wonder that Alain Besancon, him being also very harsh with Russia's past, bemoaned, in this context, the state of historiography on the great empire of the East.

From this point of view, as well as others, we must mention Abraham Ascher's book dedicated to the last great political figure given by the Tsarist Empire, Piotr Stolypin. Escher, a professor at the University of New York, aims to rediscover the figure of the former Russian Prime Minister, the impact of his policies on Russia and his legacy, although he is aware of the absence of

* Nicolae Ganea is Book Review Editor for *The Review of Social and Economic Issues*. E-mail: ninelganea@gmail.com.

relevant biographies and the difficulty of a historian following the influence of over 70 years of Soviet domination over local sources. Moreover, Stolypin was a *nomina odiosa* to the Bolsheviks, considered rightfully by Lenin, as the man who impeded the revolution through his reforms and who, if he had not been assassinated in Kiev, would have made it downright impossible. "If Stolypin's policy is continued ...then the agrarian structure of Russia will become completely bourgeois, the stronger peasants will acquire almost all the allotments of land, agriculture will become capitalistic, and any solution of the agrarian problem – radical or otherwise - will become impossible under capitalism", the communists' parent wrote in exile.

Ascher's biography has the merit not only to present the Stolypin's agrarian reform, the cornerstone of its political program, but to highlight the origins, influences and, more importantly, the personality of its initiator, along with other ways of restructuring Russia on a grounded conservative structure.

Thus, the historian manages to make Stolypin a living figure, with his fears and problems, sometimes depicted in domestic contexts, in informal discussions told by his friends, which humanize the character and break the monolithic image of the politician with an iron hand on Russia. Moreover, Ascher reveals a less extensive side of the former Prime Minister's adolescence, and allows us to understand the influence of a solid education acquired in the family on the destiny of a valuable man.

Stolypin was born in Dresden and inherited some of the rigor and thoroughness of the Germans whom he admired for their worthy spirit his entire life. His family was one of the most famous ones in Russia and could draw their origins to the sixteenth century. His father was a great military man who befriended Tolstoy during the Crimean campaign, even if, subsequently, the relations between the two former soldiers would cool amid the increasing alienation of the novelist by the Russian tradition. But the old Stolypin would not stand out only on the battle field. He was an accomplished musician who owned a Stradivarius, he

would carve with talent and was passionate about playing cards at high stakes. The Prime Minister's mother came from an equally haloed family and enjoyed quality literature. Gogol and Lermontov frequented his house for intellectual debates. Moreover, the young Stolypin grew together with his two brothers in a lofty atmosphere, free from radical influences, in the midst of a library consisting of over 10,000 volumes and a family that valued the stability offered by the Tsarist autocracy. In addition, Stolypin went to church regularly, preserved the tradition, as Ascher allows us to understand, and later, after the marriage, he ended his all letters to his wife with the words "my love for Christ and you is boundless." The historian does not go very far with this vital connection, even in a negative sense, which is a clear flaw of the book, but, even in these circumstances, the reader can form a general idea about the role played by religion in the life of a believer from the late nineteenth century.

The education received by Stolypin kept him away from radical ideas, but, at the same time, turned him into a politician with a pragmatic vision on Russia, alien to the rigid conservatism or the manic fixation of ideologies. It is clear from the biography why we are not applying a doctrinal label on Stolypin. He was clearly a supporter of the Tsarist autocracy, but he realized that a broad strata of the population had to be involved in the power to preserve the regime. He was a constitutionalist, but rejected parliamentarism. He wanted a complete reform of private property in agriculture, but liked the social insurance schemes of Bismarck or the free health programs for the entire population. He wanted the reinstatement of the Patriarchate, but he had debates with the cabinet members on the introduction of the freedom of conscience and of atheism in the constitution of Russia. In short, Stolypin sought to find a middle ground and to practice an Aristotelian discernment to navigate between, on the one hand, the radical communists and the Kadets, and, on the other hand, the obtuse conservatism of some aristocrats blind to the dangers awaiting Russia, while remaining a man of his era.

Ascher has the merit to highlight all the complexity of the character and to abolish some persistent myths, like the one about the suppression of the 1905 Revolution by strong politics. First, as shown in Stolypin's letters to his wife while he was the governor of Saratov, one of the most troubled regions of Russia, he was reluctant at the use of pure force and prayed to God to protect him from bloodshed. Hence, during the conflicts he had with local revolutionaries, from his position as governor of the province, he always tried to avoid gunshots and to disarm his opponents with courage and negotiation. Typically, protesters were called to the extensive discussions when he tried to reach a compromise. If this tactic did not work, Stolypin preferred to intimidate them by grouping soldiers at key points of the city to prevent large-scale demonstrations. Then, if that strategy did not work either, the governor would place himself before the gendarmes and face the trouble-makers directly, who, most often scared by his temerity, surrendered and retreated, which brought him an immense admiration and loyalty of the troops. But there were also cases when it came to physical violence and Stolypin's life was directly threatened by the revolutionaries. As a matter of fact, he was the victim of no less than 18 attacks, among which the last one, the one in Kiev, was fatal.

The most shocking assassination attempt, however, took place at his holiday home when he was Prime Minister. Three radicals detonated the bombs they had in suitcases and killed 27 people, seriously wounding many others, including two of Stolypin's children. The Prime Minister remained calm, he carried the wounded to the hospital, recommended the doctors not to amputate the legs of his daughter, then, the next day, held a cabinet meeting as if nothing ever happened.

His fight against terrorist revolutionaries had two essential components, as Ascher noticed. The first meant the rapid suppression of the revolution by setting up courts martial that would streamline the legal actions against those whose actions were so obvious that no longer required a broader trial with

juries. In Russia, Vera Zasulich, for instance, was acquitted in a resounding trial, although she admitted that she had tried to kill Colonel Trepov and, moreover, regretted that she had only managed to hurt him. Stolypin wanted to make sure that these situations would be avoided, fact that encouraged the radicals to continue a bloody politics. Thus, courts martial occurred that were required to give a verdict within four days after the arrest of the suspect. Despite a justified impression at first glance, Stolypin's courts were not acting at his discretion, and 71 person were released out of the 1200 people investigated. To understand the context of the era, Ascher recalls that, between 1905 and 1906, no less than 3600 government officials were killed by revolutionary terror, which, unlike today, was individual. Courts martial were a success, and shortly the attacks decreased in frequency and the general atmosphere improved, fact noted in particular by the western ambassadors.

Stolypin was, however, aware that he needed something more to curb the growing influence of revolutionaries among the peasants. For this reason, his goal was to transform the former serfs in a class of prosperous farmers, through a massive apportionment of property program. But for this to happen, the council of the commune should be abolished, "the Mir", an institution appreciated by Slavophiles, but which seriously impeded the economic development and kept peasants in a form of legal compulsion. Stolypin eliminated many regulations hindering the peasants out of the collective ownership of land and encouraged the nobles to put their land up for sale to provide agricultural land to those who wanted to leave the Mir. Also, state-owned banks would provide loans with low interest rates to the peasants to buy land. Ascher does not mention, unfortunately, that the Tsar and Stolypin cancelled in 1907 payments that peasants had to make for the land obtained at their release from serfdom, especially given that the total amount owed was about 120 million roubles. In 1914, six years after the onset of the reform, about 20% of the peasants had a private ownership on land, and 14% of the

collective land had been withdrawn. The figures are not necessarily spectacular, but neither do they show a failure of the program, as testified by many historians (see for example Peter Waldron, *Between Two Revolutions*). Stolypin himself estimated that it would take about 20 years to fulfil the agrarian reform and see the new face of the Russian peasant, pillar of the autocratic rule stability. Ascher, to his credit, places Stolypin's achievement in the right context: "A substantial number of peasants did acquire their own property, and their attitudes toward economic and political issues were likely to change. Given more time for implementation, the agrarian reform might have contributed to a more moderate resolution of the political crisis than the one of 1917. That would not have been a mean achievement".

But, up to event from 1917, it is not at all certain, as evidenced by Ascher's book, that Russia would have embarked on a disastrous war if Prime Minister Stolypin had remained in office. His foreign politics (although he had no official duties, his opinion was highly valued in the Tsarist circles) was a non-interventionist one. The annexation of Bosnia in 1908 by Austro-Hungarian Empire has raised more than eyebrows in Moscow, especially since territorial rapture occurred in violation of an explicit promise made to Russia. Then the word of Stolypin mattered in the decision not to militarily intervene on the side of Serbia. Incidentally, the prime minister foretold that if Russia had 20 years of peace, no one would be able to deny its economic and material supremacy, a consideration strengthened nowadays, after extensive research, by respected historians of the world economy, as Anthony Sutton. In other words, the weakest point of Ascher's book is, undoubtedly, the presentation of the imperial family, especially that of Tsar Nicholas II, depicted in the established note. That is, an under-average character that oscillated between mysticism, frivolous concerns (death of his favourite dog, Imam) in major contexts, with disastrous indecision and structural weakness. However, several letters of Stolypin to his wife, quoted by Ascher, reveal another side of the character,

sincerely concerned about the fate of Russia and of the Prime Minister, a warm, sentimental person with a healthy political intuition.

Another chapter with serious flaws is the one related to the assassination of Kiev, where Ascher mainly supports the lone nut theory. Even if all the data to indicate a conspiracy are missing, the historian shows Stolypin's murder as a whim of a troubled revolutionary, but being on the payroll of the secret service.

Even with these flaws, Stolypin's biography revives an essential part of the greatness of a major historical figure whose death paved the way for the Bolshevik Revolution.