Preface

Many years ago the editors of a volume on late-imperial Russian cities asked me to write the entry on Moscow. In the first draft of my article I utilized the demographic, economic, and sociological approach of my first book, *Muzhik and Muscovite*. The editors sent my article back and asked me to add a bit on cultural and intellectual life in order to round out what was supposed to be a broad survey of the city. While I had done some general reading in these areas, I had never pursued this dimension of Moscow's history. Considering the request to be a reasonable one, I began to look over my notes as well as at some new material.

While reading up on topics less familiar to me, such as Moscow University, the city's schools, the publishing world, and the world of art and art patronage at the turn of the twentieth century, I was struck by one particular feature of Moscow's culture—the number and variety of clubs and societies that dotted the city's landscape. I read that Moscow had a flying club, an automobile club, a racing club, a vegetarian society, an Esperanto society, a lawn tennis club, and a fox terrier and dachshund society. I had never particularly noticed, much less paid attention to, these kinds of organizations. Having spent years researching chiefly the city's peasant migrants and the urban poor, I wondered what I had been missing. Not much, I thought at first: such clubs were no doubt for the city's small upper crust and even smaller cultural and artistic elite. They could hardly have touched or cared about the city's factory districts, multifamily tenements, and Khitrov Market, the city's main skid row.

However, as I read on, other kinds of organizations caught my eye—temperance societies, literacy committees, technical societies, medical societies (and separate ones for new, specialized areas of medicine). To be sure, in my first book I had examined the city's overall welfare infrastructure, but my focus had been on state and municipal relief, not on private charity. Curious, I checked a few city directories of the era and saw that indeed Moscow had a sampling of Victorian-era civic organizations, organizations whose missions, I surmised, were to ameliorate this or that aspect of city life. I noticed also that many organizations, especially the science and other learned societies, had extensive publications, including *Izvestiia (News), Zapiski (Notes), Trudy (Proceedings),* and so forth. According to the city directories, the societies held meetings at particular venues and had officers. Some sponsored expeditions, organized exhibitions, and founded museums.

But we don't think of Russia as a nation of joiners, so what were these Victorian-type organizations doing in Moscow (and in St. Petersburg as well)? Were they, perhaps, hollow imitations of European organizations? How did they get started? What were they trying to accomplish? What was their relationship to the government? In Europe and North America, historians often regard voluntary associations as incubators of middle-class values. Did their existence mean that the prevailing judgment about a small and ineffectual Russian middle class has been misleading? Likewise, in Europe and North America, historians often regard the existence of civic organizations as evidence of a sphere of life outside the control of the state. Did their existence in Russia mean that the autocratic state had loosened its grip on public life? I decided that while I might not be able to address all dimensions of Russia's associations, their existence merited analysis. Moreover, it seemed then that few historians were looking at this dimension of Russian life.

If by the end of the nineteenth century Russia's big cities had borrowed the typical Victorian-era voluntary associations from Europe, then, I reasoned, I had better learn more about the European originals. Reading the comparative literature on nongovernmental organizations took me into new historiographical fields—the middle class, history of science, urban culture—in other countries. It was beginning to seem to me that while the experience of association was never entirely the same in different countries, there were many shared traits. I found immensely stimulating *The Peculiarities of German History* by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, which challenged the idea that Germany developed along a separate path from the one followed by the rest of Europe. Russia, of course, has had its own *Sonderweg*. Its experience of voluntary association differed from that of Great Britain and the United States. But the more I read about European and Russian

associations and even about the relationship between state and society, the more similarities I saw, especially when Russia is compared to continental Europe. Although differences between Russia and the West certainly stand out, insufficient attention has been paid to commonalities.

The beginning of my interest in the topic took place in the late 1980s. One of the features of the era of glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union was the rapid appearance of new forms of voluntary organizations. They were grassroots and unofficial, or, as they were called in Russian, *neformaly*. Sociologists counted and studied them, and the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* wrote about them—no doubt, because the unofficial organizations appeared to be drawing young people away from the Komsomol. Private initiative, long suppressed or channeled by Soviet official bodies, seemed to be enjoying its springtime. Historians at the time, in the Soviet Union and abroad, were seeking "alternatives," or a "usable past," as ways to revive dimensions of the past that had long been suppressed or ignored, dimensions that clustered around alternatives to Stalinism and alternatives to Leninism. Could there have been alternatives to tsarism, I wondered, in prerevolutionary grassroots civic activities, which were later swept away by war, revolution, and the party-state?

This was also a time when the concept of "civil society" was enjoying a rebirth. Beginning in the late 1970s, the East Europeans began to use civil society, a "parallel polis," in the words of the Czech dissident Jan Benda, to conceptualize a field of thought and action that was an alternative to the party-state and, on a deeper level, an alternative to the pervasive étatism of authoritarian regimes. In other regions experiencing a "transition from authoritarian rule"—southern Europe, Latin America—the concept of civil society found receptive adherents. In western Europe and North America, theorists from both the Left and Right framed discussions of political culture in terms of civil society or in terms of a closely related concept popularized by Jürgen Habermas, the "public sphere." On the Left, civil society became a useful category of analysis of social change that loosened rigid Marxist categories of class and class struggle and shifted focus to the realm of culture and citizen initiatives. On the Right, civil society evoked the localism of Burkean "little platoons" and directed attention away from the modernizing state and to the actions of private individuals. By the late 1980s, Soviet political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers were using the term civil society *(grazhdanskoe obshchestvo)* as a way to frame a discussion of rights, private initiative, and the rule of law, still largely an imagined, though perhaps, it seemed then, a realizable, community.

But what did theorists in the West and nonstate actors in the East understand by civil society? Was it the relatively homogeneous political community

of the ancients? Was it the private battleground of competing interests that ushered in the modern world, described by the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment and theorized by Hegel? Was it the site of "intermediary bodies" admired by Montesquieu and Tocqueville, of self-rule that defended the individual from the centralizing state? While much writing about civil society was eclectic, to say the least, in its most general sense civil society promised a community independent of the state. But under the conditions of authoritarian and totalitarian rule, which denied autonomy from the state and its agents, such a community was highly contested and to a significant degree still imagined.

Late-tsarist Russia had also embarked on a "transition from authoritarian rule," even if the transition was fitful and contested by autocracy. Although voluntary associations were an important part of that movement, historians have underappreciated their role. The world of bylaws, meetings, and annual reports was a world of choice, community, and new public identities. The story of Russian voluntary associations was the story of the self-organization and initiative of dedicated Russians, the story of myriad projects to spread scientific knowledge and improve life, the story of collaboration and partnership with government officials and state agencies. Fatefully, it was also the story of increasing conflict with political authority. In short, associations were a critical part of the development of civil society that was struggling to limit the scope of arbitrary autocratic and bureaucratic authority.

It would not be possible to tell this story had it not been for the material and intellectual assistance of a long list of institutions and individuals. In the early stages I benefited from a summer fellowship and a Travel to Collections grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as a fellowship from the National Council of Soviet and East European Research. Visiting teaching positions at Ohio State University and Georgetown University helped me conceptualize the project in its early stages, and I am grateful to my short-term colleagues and students for these opportunities. Being a guest one summer of the history faculty at Moscow State University at the invitation of Yuri S. Kukushkin allowed me to embark on archival research. I would also like to thank the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies for a travel grant, which helped in the final stages of manuscript preparation. At all stages, the Office of Research at the University of Tulsa has provided research support.

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Passages from two of my published articles appear in chapters one, four and the conclusion: "Subjects into Citizens: Societies, Civil Society, and Autocracy in Tsarist Russia," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 4 (October 2002): 1094–1123, and "Pictures at an Exhibition: Science, Patriotism and Civil Society in Imperial Russia," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 934–966.

I have used the Library of Congress system for the transliteration of Russian words throughout. All dates are according to the Jullian calendar.

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