



Tsar and Cossack, 1855-1914

Robert H. McNeal

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The name "Cossack" is to some a synonym for tsarist repression, to others a symbol of the romantic freebooter, to everyone as familiar as "tsar" and "Russia". But for all their fame and infamy, the Cossacks remain one of the least understood of the elements in the decline of the Russian Empire. In "Tsar and Cossack, 1855-1914" Robert H. McNeal provides the first clear picture of the unique system that the last three tsars and their War Ministry developed to enable this strange anachronism to survive into an age of proletarian revolution. The system rested on a myth of a special relationship of tsar and Cossack - of beneficent grants of land and other assets (even oil wells) by the monarch and in return the unwavering loyalty of "the martial estate". The harsh reality, however, involved a system of highly bureaucratized control of the civil life of the Cossacks by the War Ministry and costly military obligations imposed on a faltering Cossack economy. This book is an important contribution to the debate on the decline of Imperial Russia. The tsarist regime survived the Revolution of 1905-7 thanks in large measure to the availability of the Cossacks, mobilized to the hilt. But the study also shows that even before this crisis the Cossack system was in deep trouble. And with the Duma era, the revival of an alternative myth of the free and democratic Cossack challenged the old order. Faced with Cossack demands for political and economic reforms, the tsarist regime in its last few years was failing to sustain the anachronism of a separate and loyal warrior caste.

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