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Demographic Factors of Russian Civilisational Development in the 20th Century

Abstract. The article investigates the role of demographic factors in the civilisational development of Russia during the 20th century, specifically in the transformation of the political system, representing one of the key elements of Russian civilisation. The methodological basis of the conducted research was formed by the approaches and methods of political demography. Based on the analysis of statistical data and results presented in the scientific literature, the factors that twice led to a change in the political system in the country in less than 100 years are identified. Agricultural overpopulation appears as the leading demographic factor that led to the revolutionary explosion and collapse of the Russian Empire. The significance of the “youth bulge” as a factor in the destabilisation of the political system of the Russian Empire at the final stage of its development is considered. Although urbanisation, which can be identified as a key process of the Soviet era, provided a means of overcoming the country’s agrarian overpopulation, it also gave rise to new socio-demographic challenges that ultimately served to destabilise the Soviet system. The role of such factors as the formation of “new urbanites” and the social degradation of the “Soviet intelligentsia” is revealed as leading to a new crisis of the social system as a whole – and its political component in particular. A comparison of the influence of demographic factors at the beginning and end of the 20th century provides a basis for explaining the trajectories of political events. Summarising the results of the study, conclusions are drawn about the role of demographic factors in the functioning of political systems during the 20th century in Russia.

Keywords: Russia; 20th century; civilisational development; political system; demographic factors; transformation; collapse

Introduction. Political demography studies the role of the demographic factor in political processes. This is a relatively new field within political science, already actively represented in the International Political Science Association, which delineates a section on “Political Geography and Demography”.

Concept of the demographic factor. The demographic factor in political processes refers to the relationship between demographic characteristics and the specific features of political processes. The demographic characteristics of a country’s population also influence the functioning of the political system.

One of the founders of political demography in the USA, Jack Goldstone, emphasises out that any significant changes in the population or in any of its groups can influence the distribution of resources and, therefore, have a political impact (Goldstone et al. 2012: 11-12).

It should be mentioned that the influence of demographic factors in political processes in the context of individual periods of Russia’s history is yet to be comprehensively studied.

Approaches to the study of the role of the demographic factor. Myron Weiner identified five areas of research in this field: (1) structure of age groups of the population; (2) family size and provision of housing and land; (3) size and density of the population in the context of centre/periphery relations; (4) rate of population growth among different ethnic and religious communities; (5) migration within the state and across borders (Weiner, Teitelbaum 2001: 11).

Michael Teitelbaum cites the following as the most important areas of research: (1) size of the population and its relationship with the power of the state; (2) influence of the age structure of the population on political strength and political stability in the country; (3) ethnic, socio-economic and geographic composition of the country’s population and its reflection in political power; (4) impact of immigration and declining birth rates on political strength (Poston, Micklin 2006: 868).

Another important research issue concerns the problem of the role of demographic factors in the emergence and development of revolutionary events. Thus, the demographic factors of revolutionary events are considered in the work of Vadim Ustyuzhanin et al. on the example of foreign countries (Ustyuzhanin et al. 2022),

while in relation to the historical past of Russian civilisation they are covered in the works of Sergey Nefedov (Nefedov 2015) and Boris Mironov (Mironov 2017). Demographic factors are considered in relation to contemporary Russian reality in the work of Viktor Martyanov (Martyanov 2018).

Existing approaches to research in this area are based on the analysis of political phenomena through the prism of trends in four demographic components: fertility, mortality, migration and population structure. In the present work, the evolution of the political system in Russia during the 20th century will be examined by considering the influence of these four demographic components. This will record the influence of demographic factors on its functioning and development.

Data sources. The primary source of data for political-demographic research is census data and statistical data on population movements. Since we will proceed from the data on the main transformations of the political system in our country already established by historical science, our research will be of a retrospective nature.

Purpose and objectives of the article. The aim of the article is to illustrate the role of demographic factors in the established transformations of the political system. The objectives of the study include an analysis of the influence of demographic factors on political transformation during the late Russian Empire and the Soviet period of history.

Demographic factors of the crisis of the imperial political system in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. One of the key issues that led to the collapse of the empire was the problem of agrarian overpopulation in the central part of the country. In 1880, 82 million people lived in the country; by 1894, this number had increased to 122 million, and by 1914, to 182 million (an annual increase of about 2.4 million people, while for the period from 1902 to 1912, the annual increase was up to 3.7 million) (Mosyakin 2017: 29-35). Although the data presented may be criticised due to the imperfection of statistical accounting, the order of magnitude of the numbers is impressive: for every 100 inhabitants of the empire, 1–2 new ones appeared annually.

The overwhelming majority of the demographic growth was provided by the peasantry, which made up three quarters of the coun-

try's population¹. The main areas of concentration of growth were the European part of the country and the capital regions, where the number of the proletariat grew due to the resettlement of rural residents.

Demographic pressure reduced the potential for increased social well-being and increased poverty, exacerbating social contradictions, especially in conditions of economic instability (the crisis of 1900–1903 and the subsequent depression). At the beginning of the 20th century, 26.6 million peasants were on the brink of poverty and destitution (Volin 1983: 168).

The high proportion of dependents also provoked poverty for a significant part of the population. At the beginning of the 20th century, for every 100 people of working age in Russia, there were 83 people of non-working age (in Germany – 74; in England – 73; in the USA – 69). This factor impaired the development of a subsistence economy into a commercial one, as well as hindering the accumulation of capital and the intensification of agriculture (Pogrebinskaya 2008).

At this time, the proportion of the young population was extremely high. In the European part of the country, the proportion of the population under 30 years of age was 64.5%, including 48.7% under 19 years of age; in the empire as a whole, these figures were 64.6% and 48.4%, respectively².

A number of modern studies (Urdal 2004) show that a proportion of youth over 30% in the population structure significantly increases the risks of internal political conflicts. The existence of “youth bulge” in the empire at the beginning of the 20th century is widely recognised by Russian researchers (Nefedov 2015; Martyanov 2018). In particular, Sergey Nefedov considers the main socio-political consequences of the “youth bulge” to have been the mass exodus of young people from the village to the city, which led to an increase in the number of proletarian strata of the population, along with an increase in the number of students and the activation of the student movement on the eve of 1905 (Nefedov 2015).

¹*Statistical Yearbook of Russia. 1913*, Izdaniye TSSK MVD, St. Petersburg, 1914, available at: <http://gpntb.dlibrary.org/ru/nodes/6457-statisticheskii-ezhгодnik-rossii-1913-g-spb-1914#mode/inspect/page/547/zoom/4> (accessed February 12, 2025). (in Russ.).

²Ibid.

The general increase in literacy among the population also opened up fertile new opportunities for the promulgation of anti-government ideas. Thus, the proportion of literate people in the population over 9 years of age in 1897 was 27% among people of both sexes. Among men, the figure was 39%, while in the European part of the empire these figures were higher at 30% and 43%, respectively³.

Agricultural overpopulation put pressure on the political system, transforming the provinces of the European part into a kind of “powder keg”. Between 1897 and 1914, the population of Russia grew by 40.1 million people (Sifman); at this time, the surplus of labour in the rural areas fluctuated between 9.2 and 12.2 million people (Ostrovsky 1982).

It was not possible to mitigate this pressure during the Stolypin reform, since out of 9.5 million peasant households, only 2.7 million had attempted to leave their villages by 1914; in reality, only 26.6% of these managed to do so (Avrekh 1991). The resettlement policy also failed to solve the problem, since out of 1.3 million peasants who moved beyond the Urals in 1908–1909, more than 0.5 million returned, and “the number of migrants and those who left for the cities did not absorb the natural population increase” (Avrekh 1991). Tensions in the villages grew; in 1905–1907, no less than twenty-two thousand peasant uprisings took place in Russia, while in the entire 19th century there were only eleven thousand (Tyukavkin, Shchagin 1987: 70-71).

Agrarian overpopulation fuelled the prevailing ideas among peasants about social justice and collectivism (Tyukavkin 2001: 297), strengthening the desire to seize landowners’ land.

The rapid urbanisation caused by the industrial boom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries gave rise to significant layers of the so-called lumpen proletariat – yesterday’s ruined peasants who went to the cities in search of a better life. While in 1897, the proportion of the urban population across the entire imperial territory was only 15% (Lappo, Polyan 1999: 35), over the next 18 years the urban population in the European part alone grew by 6.5 million people (Rashin 1956).

Due to the continuous demographic growth in the village communes, this flow did not abate, but only continued to grow. Mean-

³ Ibid.

while a layer of explosive social elements was forming in the cities. By then, fully a quarter of the urban population was made up by former rural dwellers (Lappo, Polyak 1999: 37). Finding themselves in an extremely vulnerable position as a result of any economic downturn, such groups would become increasingly responsive to anti-government rhetoric.

The rapidly growing population of the national peripheries also often gave rise to interethnic tensions; for example, in Central Asia this was demonstrated by the uprising of 1916. Similar problems arose in the Caucasus, Poland and the Baltics. Meanwhile the Jewish question was becoming particularly acute, leading to the widespread involvement of Jewish youth in the revolutionary movement.

The objectively established demographic factors of the crisis of the political system were intensified by the events of the First World War, which provoked mass displacement of the population, including Jews, from the western provinces to the east. The number of refugees in Russia during the First World War is estimated at between 5 and 15 million people, a significant portion of whom were young people and teenagers (Mikhalev, Pyankov 2015: 95, 103). Mass migrations created unstable populations, who being cut off from their familiar environment were also more susceptible to anti-government propaganda.

Deserters from the armed forces are known to have played a huge role in the expansion of the revolution in the provinces in 1917. By the summer of 1917, the male population in the Volga region had increased by 20% due to soldiers who had fled their units or refused to return from leave; such deserters were among the most vociferous instigators of the first peasant unrest (Lyukshin 2013: 123).

Thus, the above-mentioned demographic factors created the preconditions for a social explosion. Nevertheless, while there was one set of demographic factors associated with the outbreak of revolution in 1905–1907, a slightly different set of demographic circumstances accompanied the events of 1917. But was the collapse of the existing political system inevitable under the influence of demographic factors? From the point of view of political demography, while such factors may create the preconditions for crisis and social explosion, the “trigger” for the beginning of revolutionary events

consists in other factors, which may have socio-political and other characteristics.

According to Boris Mironov, a certain rationalisation of demographic behaviour occurred among a portion of the population occurred as a result of demographic modernisation in late imperial Russia (Mironov 2017: 35). According to Sergey Zakharov, the 1910s marks the beginning of the process of gradual transition from traditional attitudes to childbearing to intentional birth control approaches (Zakharov 2003). However, only 14% of residents, from among educated and wealthy city dwellers and residents of the western regions (Jews, Catholics and Protestants), were involved in the associated demographic transition, while 86% of the population (rural and urban population of the Orthodox, Muslim and other faiths) turned out to be weakly affected by the new trends (Mironov 2017: 35). Thus, in order to prevent a revolutionary explosion, there was simply not enough time to involve broader sections of the population, especially the peasantry, in the demographic transition.

Demographic factors in the development of the Soviet political system in the 20th century. The civil war resulted in enormous demographic losses, estimated at up to 15 million people and higher (Pocheshkov et al. 2020: 67), which led to some deurbanisation in the country. Thus, from 1913 to 1920 the urban population decreased from 28.5 to 20.9 million people throughout the entire territory of the USSR, while its share of the total population declined from 17.9% to 15.3% (Moskovsky, Isupov 1984: 27). Many large cities, including regional capitals, were abandoned wholesale. At the same time, the problem of agricultural overpopulation continued to grow, threatening a new explosion in the future if nothing was done.

The Soviet response to burgeoning domestic and foreign policy challenges was to adopt a course towards accelerated modernisation. A direct consequence of this policy was “explosive” urbanisation, involving a sharp increase in the urban population that formed groups of “new urbanites” among those from the countryside who could be more easily managed and motivated. As a result, the share of the urban population had increased to almost 33% by 1939⁴.

⁴<https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/census.php?cy=3> (in Russ.).

In order to form a stable social support, the authorities created channels of mass mobility to form new cadres of workers and intelligentsia (Senyavsky 2019: 148). These migration flows also led to the formation of “new elites” – future “Stalinist technocrats” who began to push aside the previous elite groups that had emerged during the revolution and the Civil War.

Specific characteristics of urbanisation during this period included: the formation of a sharply expressed disproportion between the population size and the level of development of the social infrastructure of settlements; the formation of a network of settlements in which the marginalised population lived; a delay in the formation of an urban way of life resulting in an “intermediate state” between rural and urban mentalities (Isupov 2012: 468). Many of the social costs associated with accelerated urbanisation would become apparent in the future.

The famine of the 1930s and the Great Patriotic War contributed to the further extraction of all types of resources from the countryside, which provoked its deepest crisis and de facto solved the problem of agricultural overpopulation. By the mid-1970s, more than 62 % of the USSR’s population lived in cities⁵. The resulting demographic crisis in the rural communities led to a gradual depletion of the flow of young people to the cities, which allowed for some stabilisation of the social system. This was also facilitated by a gradual increase in the well-being of the urban population. As a result, the political system and social structure came into relative balance for a time.

Another feature of demographic development in this period was the widespread distribution of higher education, especially engineering and technical education, which gave rise to a social group of the “new intelligentsia”, which was more technocratic. Over time, this social group became increasingly significant: due to its education, the demand for social status in its ranks was significantly higher than that of many representatives of the working class.

The Great Terror led to significant extirpation of the former political elites. In turn, the Great Patriotic War contributed to their further upheaval, along with disruption of internal connections and stability. During the war, an entire generation was practically

⁵<https://www.booksite.ru/fulltext/1/001/008/114/420.htm> (in Russ.).

knocked out of the queue for the “helm of government” of the country, which would later have negative consequences. The political elites in the post-war period became qualitatively different; the top positions, instead of the “romantics of the revolution”, eventually came to be occupied by cohorts of new “Stalinist technocrats”. By this time, technocracy – the idea that all problems and tasks can be solved through the search for and implementation of scientific ideas – had become the dominant ideology.

The above processes were accompanied by an ongoing demographic transition, which was associated with an increased reduction in both fertility and mortality from infectious diseases, which significantly increased life expectancy. Medical advances, in turn, became an additional obstacle to the natural turnover of elites, significantly slowing the process down.

Increased life expectancy paradoxically had a negative effect on the pace of economic development: simultaneously with an increasing social burden on the economy due to the growing proportion of people over working age, the dynamism generated by the arrival of young leaders at the helm of the country weakened as these elites aged. The phenomenon that would come to be referred to as “gerontocracy” had emerged.

Mass migrations due to large-scale infrastructure projects also changed the ethnic picture in the country. Large cities were formed that consisted almost entirely of recent migrants; such urban communities were characterised by weak internal connections and less effective institutions for the socialisation of children, adolescents and young adults. Over time, this led to a precipitous rise in crime, along with the replacement of official ideology by a criminal counterculture.

The policy of *korenizatsiya* (“indigenisation”), which was officially proclaimed and implemented by the Soviet government in the 1920s and 1930s, contributed to the formation of national elites on the periphery of the state, some of whom, as it later turned out, may not have fully shared the dominant ideology.

As a result, the established balance between the social and political systems began to gradually deteriorate.

Demographic factors in the crisis and collapse of the Soviet political system. When discussing the demographic factors behind the collapse of the USSR, it should be noted that they

reinforced the emerging centrifugal tendencies provoked by economic problems and a decline in living standards due to the slowdown in the Soviet economy and excessive defence spending. By exacerbating the acuteness of the perception of socio-economic problems, they also undermined faith in the legitimacy of the central government and the fairness of the existing political system.

In the second half of the 20th century, a slowdown in the rate of demographic development became evident in the USSR: during the 1950s, the average annual population growth was approximately 3.3 million; by the 1960s, it had slowed to about 3.0 million, while during the 1970s–1980s it had already fallen to around 2.4 million. The slowdown in demographic growth objectively led to a decrease in dynamism in the development of Soviet society. Although the fall in the number of children reduced the burden on the socio-economic system, this was more than compensated by the increase in life expectancy that increased the population of people older than working age, thus further exacerbating it. That is, these two factors partially offset each other's impact at a time when GDP growth rates were falling significantly: in the 1980s, they were 2–3 times lower than the corresponding figures from the second half of the 1960s to the first half of the 1970s (see, for example: Gubanov, Shilayev 2013: 485). The decline in the birth rate and the increase in life expectancy contributed to the increased importance of the individual in Soviet society, which led to a certain reassessment of values and the promotion of issues of ensuring human rights in place of the primacy of state interests and proletarian internationalism. Meanwhile, the decline in the youth population reduced the ability to replenish the working-age population and limited the labour potential for new ambitious infrastructure projects.

Opposition sentiments in society grew leading to the formation of countercultural groups: from 1967 to 1971, 3,096 “politically harmful groups” were identified, and approximately 14,000 people were subjected to prophylactic work by the KGB. (Medvedev 2019). Moreover, this took place during the period of the country's most intensive socio-economic development, whereas by the 1980s the socio-economic situation had deteriorated significantly, which only increased the number of supporters of such sentiments.

Another factor was the imbalance in the rate of demographic development in different parts of the vast country. The uneven development of the union republics, expressed in the “aging” of some regions and the demographic expansion of others, gave rise to a host of difficulties, including the need for a timely redistribution of the structure of labour resources and the accompanying growth of interethnic tensions. As Aleksandr Shubin emphasises, by the end of the 1980s, in the USSR, “industrial civilisation in the European and North Asian parts of the country and Central Asian societies that were just emerging from the classical pre-industrial state” still coexisted (Shubin 2016: 25-26). National imbalances consisted in the fact that the main population growth was generated by the former imperial “national borderlands”, i.e., Transcaucasia and Central Asia, where the rate of socio-economic development did not keep pace with demographic growth, leading to a decline in the standard of living and interethnic competition. As compared with a population growth in the USSR as a whole for 1979–1989 of around 9%, in Central Asia it ranged between 13% (in the Kazakh SSR) and 34% (in the Tajik SSR). Meanwhile, although the proportion of urban residents in these republics were significantly lower than the all-Union figure of 62% (from 54% in the Kazakh SSR to 35% in the Tajik SSR), they contributed a significant increase in the proportion of the titular population. At the same time, the growth in the population of the “national borderlands” naturally increased their role in the union system, which met with some resistance in the union centre and in the established core of the union state, i.e. the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

By this point, the process of urbanisation was also coming to an end: by the mid-1970s, almost two thirds of the population of the USSR were city dwellers; by 1989, 188.8 million people lived in urban areas, with some 30.9% of city dwellers living in cities with a population of 100,000 to 500,000 people, and 38.5% in cities with a population of over 500,000. (Senyavsky 2019: 157-158). Now that the bulk of the country’s population was concentrated in cities, some new challenges appeared in terms of controlling these masses, as well as in ensuring a decent standard of living for the urban population. Nikita Khrushchev had already thought about this exigency when, in the early 1960s, he stated that a reasonable

maximum population size for Moscow could not exceed 5–7 million people.⁶ At the same time, the residual “pumping” of human resources from rural areas to cities continued; although this rate decreased to 800–900 thousand people per year in the 1980s from almost 2 million people per year in the 1960–1970s (Senavsky 2019: 157), the country’s urban settlements – and especially large cities – continued to accumulate a critical mass of the “marginalised population” – former villagers who had moved to the cities (in the 1950–1970s, from 60% to 80% of the urban population growth). In many ways, this was reminiscent of the situation at the beginning of the 20th century, albeit on a different scale. According to Alexander Senyavsky, “it was the city that became the main focus of the problems and antagonisms of the Soviet system... and became the source and basis of the extremely contradictory changes that began in the second half of the 1980s [since] the standard and quality of life did not satisfy significant sections of the population, especially in large cities” (Senyavsky 2019: 159).

Another manifestation of the demographic factor against the backdrop of economic difficulties was the strengthening of the role of the “Soviet middle class” – the intelligentsia – which began to increasingly demand changes in the distribution of economic benefits, an increase in the level of well-being, and real access to the levers of governmental power. Following the most prosperous years in material terms in the 1940s and 1950s, the material well-being and social status of the intelligentsia, especially the engineering and technical intelligentsia, seriously deteriorated – the word “engineer” became synonymous with the word “beggar” during the Brezhnev period; teachers and doctors were in a similar situation (Zolotarev 2012: 49–50). At the same time, the number of the intelligentsia was constantly growing (in the last years of the USSR, it constituted almost a quarter of the country’s population), but its qualitative composition gradually deteriorated due to widespread access to the higher education system. The so-called “intelligentsia ideology”, which had become quite widespread, included open or hidden dissidence, which did not fit well with the official state

⁶ *Transcript of conversation between Comrade N.S. Khrushchev and the leaders of the Moscow Council on urban development.* May 26, 1962, available at: <https://istmat.org/node/26312> (accessed February 12, 2025). (in Russ.).

ideology. According to researchers, “a considerable part of the Soviet intelligentsia of the Brezhnev period no longer took communist ideals seriously... the active part of the ‘sixties’ generation already perceived the Brezhnev regime as hostile” (Zolotarev 2012: 52). Moreover, the policy of the Soviet leadership partly determined this process, since in Soviet society in the 1970s and 1980s the degree of permitted freedom “grew more slowly than the need for self-expression and intellectual search” (Shubin 2008: 8-9).

Another consequence of the slowdown in population growth was the depletion of human resources required to continue along the path of extensive economic development. Although the size of the working class in the country tripled in the post-war years, which provided the opportunity for extensive economic development, by the 1980s there was no longer any prospect of continuing this policy due to the impossibility of further extracting human resources from the countryside without damaging agriculture.

In particular, the policy of *korenizatsiya*, which was aimed at developing party cadres for every nationality and implemented throughout the entire history of the USSR, created imbalances in development. Thus, by the turn of the 1990s, the RSFSR ranked only 11th among the Soviet republics in terms of the proportion of people (per 1,000 adults) with higher and secondary education (Degtyarov 2021: 37-38). While in the 1920s and 1930s, the policy of *korenizatsiya* might have seemed like a restoration of historical justice, by the late Soviet period it was already unnecessary, given that, according to many development indicators, the peoples of the union republics of the USSR had achieved relative parity. The continuation of such a policy led to the growth of national consciousness in the RSFSR, which can be seen as having contributed to USSR’s fate, since it began to be viewed by part of the RSFSR population as an unnecessary “yoke” that should be removed.

An important reason for the collapse of the Soviet political system was the change in generations of the country’s top leaders in the 1980s: the generation born in the 1900s and 1910s was replaced by younger people, mostly born in the 1920s and 1930s. Overall, it seemed like a natural process. However, due to the gerontocracy that developed during the Brezhnev era, the so-called “Gorbachev generation” of the 1920s and 1930s typically came to power at the age of 60 years and older. The gerontocracy in the upper echelons

of power in the Soviet system arose for many reasons, but a certain role in this was evidently played by the increase in the average life expectancy in the country from a little over 40 years in the 1930s to more than 60 years in the 1960s and 1970s.

The new generation of leaders also differed from the previous one in terms of its values. As Alexander Degtyarev points out, the generation of leaders who grew up and made successful careers in the stable 1960s and 1970s no longer possessed the ideological commitment of their predecessors; indeed, the new Politburo and Central Committee formed from their ranks proved ineffective at a critical moment for the country in August 1991 when they did not even meet to discuss what was happening (Degtyarov 2021: 37-38).

One can agree with the assessment that in the late USSR, in the minds of a part of the population and party-Soviet elites, “values of commitment to the local, corporate community” prevailed over universal moral principles (Martyanov, Fishman 2020), which contributed to their qualitative transformation. Moreover, this was also due to structural and demographic factors: thus, the transformation of Soviet morality and ideology was determined, among other things, by the replacement of the predominantly peasant-communal system by an urban society, which reduced the effectiveness of collective moral regulators of the pseudo-communal type (Martyanov, Fishman 2020). Thus, structural and demographic factors served to aggravate the above-described processes.

A key factor in the devaluation of the highest Soviet values was the gradual cessation of the revolutionary impulse that underlay them. As a result, by the 1970s and 1980s, instead of the meaningful production and discussion of ideological facts and meanings, Soviet official culture increasingly began to be dominated by the imitation of “ritual actions and formal linguistic practices designed only to confirm the subject’s loyalty to the moral norms/values existing in society” (Martyanov, Fishman 2020). In turn, the gradual cessation of revolutionary momentum was due, to a certain extent, to a change in generations: by the 1970s and 1980s, there were practically none of the participants in the revolution and the civil war, i.e., the founders of the Soviet state, left in the leadership of the party and government.

Thus, a whole set of demographic prerequisites for the onset of a crisis in the country, which subsequently led to the collapse

of the political system, is observed: demographic transition; elite crisis and degeneration; marginalised populations in cities; imbalances in ethnodemographic development, etc. These factors, which deprived Soviet society and the economy of dynamism (perestroika began precisely as an attempt to give them new dynamism), also gave rise to acute contradictions between the state and society, between different social groups, different generations, etc. Although the internal tensions within the social system were not fatal and could have been overcome, the reasons for not resolving them were no longer demographic.

Why did the collapse of the Soviet political system in 1991 not result in a civil war as had occurred in the early 20th century? From the point of view of political demography, the explanation lies, among other things, in the aging of the population: the median age of the population of the USSR in 1990 was 33.36 years,⁷ whereas at the beginning of the century it was no more than 20-25 years. In other words, the age structure of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century resembled that of some countries where the “Arab Spring” broke out in 2011. Research shows that an increase in the median age from 20 to 30 years leads to a significant reduction in the risk of armed internal political conflicts (Ustyuzhanin et al. 2022). This helps to explain why the collapse of the USSR, as a whole, did not result in a civil war. The rule is demonstrated by the exception of some Soviet republics, where the median age was just right for this (in the Tajik SSR in 1990, it was 18.08 years).⁸ Here it should be emphasised once again that the young age structure only creates the preconditions for the emergence of an armed conflict, while its actual onset is triggered by other factors.

However, the collapse of the Soviet system, as is well known, did cause a sharp surge in criminal activity in the country, which led to the deaths of a significant number of predominantly young men; even today, it is impossible to accurately determine the number of those killed in gang shootouts. Typically, criminal structures developed most strongly among “marginalised” city dwellers, as well as in new towns and villages where there was a high proportion of teenagers and young people in the population. Thus, here

⁷ https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_med_age.php (in Russ.).

⁸ Ibid.

too one can observe certain consequences of the demographic processes that took place in the previous period.

From the point of view of political demography, one of the results of the collapse of the USSR was the creation of a qualitatively new state in demographic terms, in which the Russian people made up approximately three-quarters of the population. These are new ethnodemographic realities that were not observed either in the Russian Empire or in the USSR.

Results. The presented study of the socio-demographic development of the late Russian Empire and Soviet Union reveals a consistent change in the dominant socio-demographic groups: first the peasantry and lumpen proletariat in the first half of the 20th century, then the working class and intelligentsia in the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, in addition to the dominant socio-demographic group, a socio-demographic group emerged in the social structure that could be conditionally called “revolutionary”. In the Russian Empire, the dominant group was the peasantry, while the revolutionary role was played to a greater extent by the working class – and, to some extent, the intelligentsia. During the Soviet period, the working class gradually became the largest group in terms of numbers, while the intelligentsia became the “revolutionary” group.

The influence of demographic factors in largely predetermining the development of political systems in the 20th century was predictable due to the fact that the country was undergoing a process of demographic modernisation. However, this was compounded by domestic and foreign policy factors that could distort these processes. In particular, such factors changed the dynamics (speed, duration) of the demographic transition, created fluctuations in demographic indicators for individual generations, and disrupted the nature of the demographic behaviour of various social and age groups of the country’s population.

Although it was impossible to avoid the crises, the fact that their occurrence at the beginning and end of the 20th century led to the collapse of existing political systems was also due to the influence of other, non-demographic factors. Again, we emphasise that demography only creates the preconditions (“field”) for historical events, but how they will develop still depends on the actions of specific people, groups and nations.

It can be noted that agrarian overpopulation, urbanisation and the transformation of the age and socio-professional structure influenced the functioning of political systems throughout the 20th century, while the degree of influence of various factors varied at different stages. At the beginning of the 20th century, agricultural overpopulation, a “youth bulge” and unfolding urbanisation created the preconditions for the collapse of the empire. In the mid-20th century, rapid urbanisation, famine, and war led to a solution to the problem of agricultural overpopulation in the country, but gave rise to new challenges associated with the socialisation of former rural dwellers in cities and meeting the increased needs of the working class. The collapse of the USSR was largely caused by a slowdown in demographic development, national imbalances, and the increased role of the intelligentsia, which was dissatisfied with its position in society and role in the state.

Was this dynamic unique? In some ways no, since it was based on the processes of demographic modernisation, which were natural for any society moving from a traditional type of reproduction to a modern one. There was no way to avoid this transition. However, the processes that occurred in the transitions at the beginning and end of the Soviet period acquired a specific dynamic due to a number of domestic and foreign policy reasons, which may help to explain why they had a different speed of development and were of a particularly painful – and often even tragic – nature. Indeed, the consequences of this type of demographic transition in the 20th century are still being felt, to varying degrees, to this day.

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