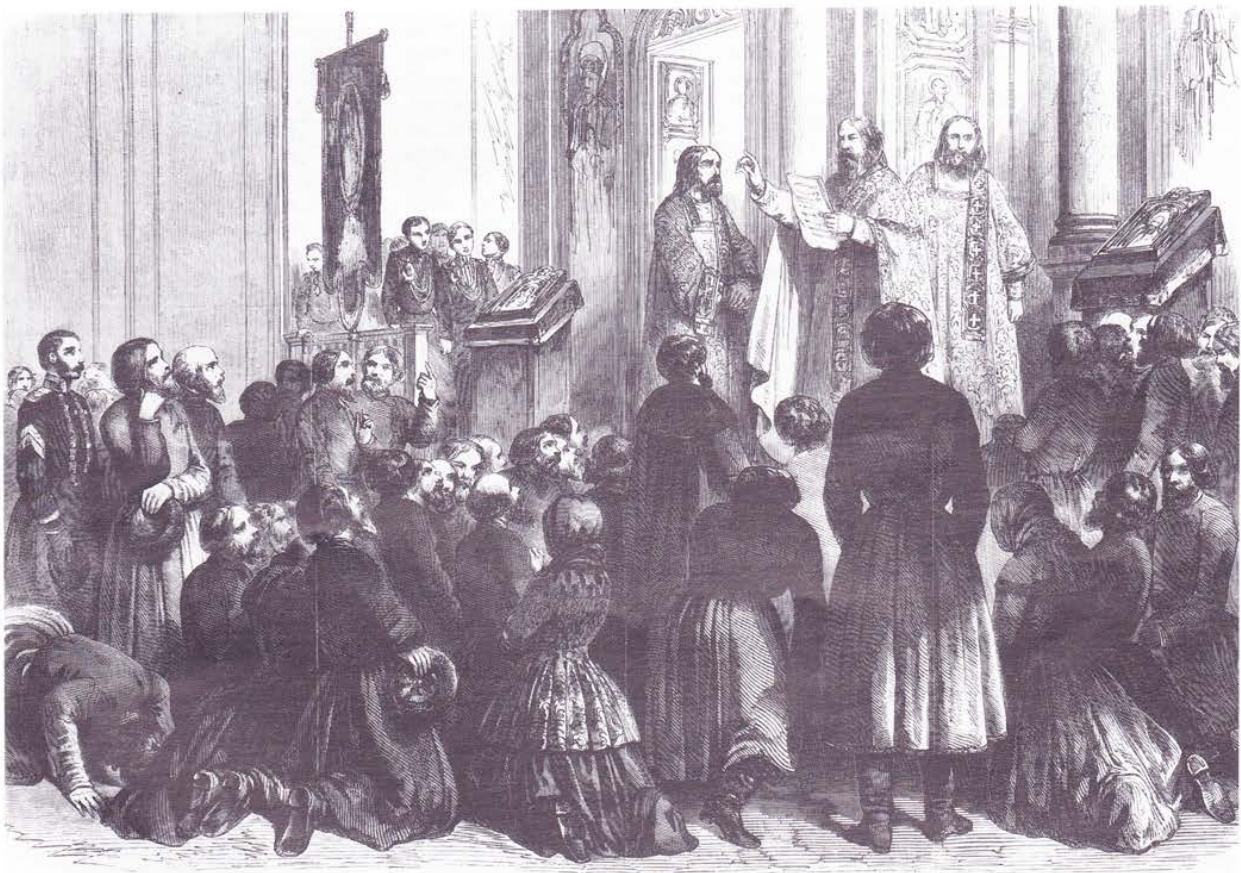


Robert Bideleux

PERSPECTIVES

# ALEXANDER II AND THE EMANCIPATION OF THE SERFS

In our first perspective, Robert Bideleux takes issue with some of the traditional views of the emancipation of Russia's serfs in 1861, and paints a more positive view of the emancipation and its effects than has often been the case.



Alexander II (reigned 1855–81) came to be known as the 'Tsar-Liberator' on account of his resoluteness in freeing millions of Russian serfs (bondsmen) through the 1861 Emancipation Act, amid widespread opposition from Russia's serf-owning nobility.

In 1850 peasants made up nearly 90% of Russia's population. Nearly half the peasantry, or about 38% of the total population, were serfs attached to private landed estates.<sup>1</sup> These serfs were required to provide their 'masters' with unpaid labour services (*barshchina*) and/or with dues in kind and/or cash quit-

rents (*obrok*). They often provided a mixture of all three. Their lives were in large measure subject to their masters' wishes in such matters as choice of marriage-partner, occupation and place of residence. Serfs could be flogged or exiled to Siberia or sent into lengthy military service if they disobeyed their masters or endeavoured to run away, although it was usually in the masters' interests to use their powers sparingly. A serf-owner's wealth was usually reckoned in terms of the number of serfs under his jurisdiction. Most serfs were allocated farmland for their own use, on which to maintain themselves and raise (often large)

**The freedom of the serfs proclaimed in a church, 1861.**

families. Thus serfs, taken as a whole, became major producers in their own right. But a serf could always be transferred to (landless) domestic service or recalled to his master's estate whenever his master wished and any serf who became a successful trader or industrialist, as sometimes happened, usually had to pay dearly to obtain his personal freedom. But serfdom was not purely an economic institution. It was also an instrument of social control over a large and widely-scattered peasant

population and a foundation stone of the Tsarist political system. This was why Alexander II's father and grandfather, Tsar Nicholas I (reigned 1825–55) and Tsar Alexander I (reigned 1801–25) respectively, had lacked the courage to dismantle serfdom, even though they came to see it as a social evil.

## REFORM BEFORE EMANCIPATION

The other half of the peasantry largely consisted of 'state peasants' and, to a much lesser extent, 'crown peasants'. These were peasants resident on and attached to state land and the landed estates of the royal family, respectively. In Russia the state domain was far more extensive than privately-owned land. Although 'state peasants' and 'crown peasants' shared many of the obligations and disabilities of serfs, their position was on the whole more favourable. They usually received more land to cultivate for their own use, they were less likely to be required to provide labour services and their lives were less subject to external interference. Moreover, from 1837 onwards, 'state peasants' were placed under the jurisdiction of a new reform-minded Ministry of State Domains and Agriculture, established and administered by Count P.D. Kiselev. Kiselev endeavoured to distribute tax and quit-rent burdens more fairly, to make 'state peasants' less vulnerable to extortionate officials and middlemen and to prevent the emergence of a landless rural proletariat, by strengthening peasant communal institutions and communal landholding on the state domains, by moderating the revenue demands laid upon the 'state peasantry' and by fostering an enlightened (albeit paternalistic) code of conduct among his officials. Whereas the Ministry of Finance had previously tried to squeeze as much revenue as possible out of the 'state peasantry' in the short run, to the detriment of peasant welfare, agricultural productivity and incentives, Kiselev's new Ministry of State Domains and Agriculture aimed to develop peasant agriculture, protect peasant welfare and increase taxable incomes over a longer time-span. Indeed, the emancipation of the serfs in the 1860s should be seen as the natural sequel to Kiselev's reform of the state domains in 1837–55. (Nikolai Miliutin, one of the principal architects of the 1861 Emancipation Act, was a nephew and close disciple of Kiselev.)

## THE TERMS OF EMANCIPATION

Alexander II both freed Russia's serfs from personal servitude and endeavoured to ensure that they were 'allotted' sufficient land to meet their subsistence needs and their future financial obligations to the state, including so-called 'redemption payments' on the land allotted to them under the terms of the Emancipation. Overall, in 43 provinces of European Russia, the former serfs received 96% of the land they had previously farmed for their own use,<sup>2</sup> although there were significant regional variations. In eight Western provinces, whose predominantly Polish nobility staged a Polish nationalist rebellion against Tsarist rule in 1863, the terms of the Emancipation were

	1860s	1870s	1880s	1890s
Population of European Russia (millions)	63.7	69.8	81.7	94.2
Net grain + potato output (million chetverts, grain equivalent)	158	187	228	290.5
– per inhabitant (chetverts)	2.48	2.68	2.79	3.08
– per rural inhabitant (chetverts)	2.75	3.00	3.18	3.55

Source: A.S. Nifontov *Zernovoe proizvodstvo Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XIX veka* (Moscow 1974), pp. 198, 200, 201, 284, 286, 287.

TABLE 1: Net grain and potato output, European Russia, 1860–90.

revised so as to punish the landed nobility by 'allotting' the former serfs more land than they had formerly cultivated for their own use, and in these Western borderlands the former serfs received their 'allotments' on more generous terms than elsewhere.

But in the fertile black earth and steppe provinces the former serfs were 'allotted' only 77% of the acreage they had previously cultivated for their own use, although terms of the transfer were more favourable than in the more northerly provinces. In the infertile and extensively forested Great Russian heartland, the former serfs received 'allotments' which were more generous in size but overpriced. Moreover, under agrarian legislation enacted in the mid-1860s, 'crown peasants' and 'state peasants' generally received 'allotments' which were both relatively large and more moderately priced, as the royal family and the state were less intent on exacting 'compensation' for the (less significant) loss of 'feudal' dues and labour-services than were the often heavily indebted and spendthrift landed nobility and the crown lands and the state domains were mainly in Russia's more outlying or forested or infertile regions.

However, while such complex land transfers were bound to involve numerous anomalies, injustices and disputes, the fact that land was transferred to former serfs, 'state peasants' and 'crown peasants' on such a massive scale by such a notoriously oppressive and autocratic state was in itself remarkable and rather unusual. In many regions of Europe and the Americas, former serfs and slaves were freed either without land on which to support themselves or with severely inadequate landholdings, so as to create large pools of cheap and vulnerable wage-labourers and dependent share-croppers who could easily be unscrupulously exploited by nearby landlords and employers. In Russia, even more remarkably, the ownership of the newly-established peasant 'allotments' was conferred, not on individual heads of household as private property, but mainly on village communes as communal village property or, in regions where communal traditions were weak or absent, on whole households as joint family property. In post-Emancipation Russia, peasant 'allotments' were farmed individually using family labour to meet family subsistence and financial needs, but they were not private property in the Western sense. 'Allotments' could not be bought, sold, mortgaged or distrained and, in most areas, they could be periodically reallocated or 'repartitioned' by the village assembly in response to changing local economic and demographic circumstances and in accordance with the peasants' own conceptions of equality and justice.

## THE TSAR-LIBERATOR

At first sight, Alexander II was a most unlikely reformer. His stern and rigidly conservative father, Tsar Nicholas I, and his tutors had endeavoured to instil in him a devotion to the Imperial Army, to military pageantry and parades, and to the military virtues of obedience, order and discipline. Moreover, Alexander II always preferred riding and hunting to committees and affairs of state. He found it difficult to concentrate on serious business for long and his concentration was not helped by the gradual breakdown of his marriage to Empress Marie and by persistent terrorist attempts to assassinate him during the 1860s and 1870s.

An important clue to his personality, which helps to explain why this otherwise conventional and conservative monarch instigated a fundamental 'restructuring' of Russian society, lay in his apparent thirst for approval and acclaim. This could be seen as weak-willed and as a source of psychological vulnerability, yet it motivated him to achieve things he would not otherwise have achieved. In his boyhood and youth, it was noted, he had always needed his austere and imposing father's approbation and praise. After his father's death, he sought the approval and acclaim of the relatives and friends whose qualities and judgement he most respected and who, it so happened, were mostly 'abolitionists'. Russian monarchs have usually paid little heed to what other people have thought of them, but Alexander II was an important exception.

## THE HISTORIOGRAPHIC DEBATE

Soviet and Western historians have argued endlessly over the motives, causes and wider significance of the Emancipation of Russia's serfs. Taking their cues from Marx and Lenin, official Soviet histories of Russia have treated history as a teleological or sequential progression through successive forms of society or stages of development, each having its own distinctive prevailing 'mode of production' and 'dominant class'. The prime movers in this process are the 'class struggle' and the 'growth of society's productive forces'. Periods of transition from one stage or form of society to the next are characterised by all-pervasive 'crises' of obsolescent 'modes of production' and outmoded 'social relations', by revolution or 'accelerated evolution', and by the emergence of a new dominant class, a new prevailing 'mode of production' and new 'social relations' corresponding to the requirements of the next stage in the progression.

According to an official *History of the USSR* (Moscow 1960), after 1800:

serfdom hampered the development of the productive forces of the country ... hindered the growth of the home market, including the labour market, restricted the accumulation of capital and hampered the development of more progressive, capitalistic methods of production. The abolition of serfdom had become an absolute necessity (p.119).

The Emancipation was officially seen as the resolution of a deep-seated 'crisis of serfdom', marking the transition from 'feudalism' to 'capitalism'. But the embryo of capitalism was already growing within the womb of 'feudalism'. The 1830s mark 'the beginning of an industrial revolution', characterised by: mechanisation and a transition from serf to wage labour in Russia's small but rapidly developing manufacturing sector; the rapid growth of towns and village industries; the emergence of a new class of capitalist entrepreneurs and capitalist forms of organisation (the factory and the joint stock company); a revolution in transport and communications (stage coach, steamboat, railway, postal and telegraphic services); and a transition from a relatively uncommercialised 'natural economy' to a commercialised market economy.

Soviet historians have claimed, not that mid nineteenth-century Russia was becoming an industrial country, but that revolutionary changes were taking place within the industrial and transport sectors, marking the beginning of capitalist industrialisation and a transformation of 'social relations'. The standard Western objections, that this industrialisation involved a narrow range of small-scale light industries with low levels of mechanisation, that Russia still lacked modern banks and significant steel, engineering, chemicals, coal and oil industries, and that Russia was still far from becoming an industrialised country, have rather missed the point. Until the 1820s the British Industrial Revolution was also based largely on sweated labour in a similarly narrow range of industries which also predated the railways and mainly consisted of small and relatively unmechanised workshops rather than factories, often located in rural areas with access to water power or wood fuel, yet this is still justifiably called the Industrial Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

### IMPACT OF INDUSTRIALISATION

Soviet historians of Russia have usefully demonstrated that pre-Emancipation Russia was not quite as far behind the West as most Westerners like to think. Railways, steamboats, factories, steam-powered machinery and postal and telegraphic services appeared in Russia not more than two or three decades after their advent in the West. And Soviet historians have used one of several possible conceptions of an industrial revolution to characterise revolutionary changes which really did occur in Russia's small but rapidly developing industrial and transport sectors and which really did pose a significant threat or challenge to the continued existence of serfdom in Russia, in much the same way that the industrialisation of the northern United States threatened or challenged the continued existence of slavery in the 'Old South' during this same period. Indeed, the abolition of slavery in the USA and abolition of serfdom in Russia occurred almost simultaneously and, to a significant extent, Russian and American 'abolitionists' exchanged ideas and made common cause against the hated institutions of forced labour and personal servitude.

Up to a point, admittedly, capitalist industry based on wage labour could and did co-exist with systems of forced labour and personal servitude. But they represented rival economic systems and mutually incompatible moral values and conceptions of human rights, which is why 'abolitionism' was ultimately a moral issue and a moral crusade in both Russia and the USA.

### THE ROLE OF PEASANT UNREST

According to official Soviet historiography, the deepening 'contradictions' or tensions between the social order and 'social relations' based on serfdom and the 'developing productive forces' of capitalism produced 'an acute social and economic crisis'. This 'crisis of serfdom' gave rise to mounting peasant unrest, a 'revolutionary situation' and Russia's first major radical publicists and revolutionary thinkers - men such as Alexander Herzen (1812-70), Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76), Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-89) and Dmitri Pisarev

(1840-68), who became the leading lights of the emerging radical intelligentsia. Moreover, following Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean War (1853-56), which cruelly exposed many of Russia's deficiencies and destabilised the economy and public finances, the Tsarist autocracy was 'forced to prepare the peasant reform of 1861'.

The Soviet emphasis on the importance of mounting peasant unrest and an emerging 'revolutionary situation' is, however, open to serious objections. The rising trend in peasant unrest is well-documented, but it fell far short of the more massive peasant unrest of the 1770s and the 1900s and does not constitute very convincing evidence of the existence of a 'revolutionary situation'. Moreover, while a radical intelligentsia and important revolutionary thinkers undoubtedly emerged amid the 'crisis of serfdom', no one has demonstrated that this was accompanied by the emergence of an organised revolutionary opposition capable of seizing power. Furthermore, 'nothing in Alexander's private correspondence or in the reminiscences of his contemporaries supports the contention that the emancipation was the act of a frightened man', according to a leading authority on Tsar Alexander II.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Nicholas I and his advisers had regarded rising peasant unrest as a reason for delaying any radical restructuring of Russian society, because of the usefulness of serfdom as a form of control over the peasantry. 'The crucial significance of growing peasant unrest lay, not in its effects on Alexander II and his leading reformers, but in Alexander's skilful use of it to intimidate the conservative serf-owning nobility into reluctantly accepting the abolition of serfdom, above all in his famous warning that 'It is better to begin to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until it begins itself from below.'

### THE CRIMEAN WAR

There is broader agreement on the importance of the Crimean War as a catalyst of reform. War is 'the midwife of progress' (Marx) and 'the locomotive of history' (Trotsky). The Crimean War highlighted deficiencies in Russia's industrial and armaments capacity, transport capabilities, morale, military reserves and ability to mobilise for war, which could only be overcome by a radical overhaul of the entire economic and social order. Significantly, some of the leading champions and agents of reform were drawn from the Navy Ministry, which drew radical conclusions from the Crimean debacle. Serfdom came to be seen as incompatible with Russia's continuance as a Great Power.

There is also broad agreement on the importance of growing pressure for reform coming from educated public opinion and the press. Liberals, radicals, Slavophiles, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and leading members of the royal family shared a growing conviction that serfdom was an evil and morally indefensible institution, a source of shame and embarrassment and a blot on Russia's image abroad, barring it from the ranks of 'civilised' nations.

	Russia	Europe (excl. Russia)	Southern Europe	Italy	Portugal	Greece	Spain	Japan	Austria-Hungary	
1892-95	534	415	260	221	174	209	350	225	507	
1909-13	555	411	276	274	160(a)	130(b)	400	240	508	
	Bulgaria	Serbia	Romania	Denmark	France	Germany	Ireland	USA	Canada	Argentina
1892-95	—	—	780	1006	555	479	526	1291	1043	—
1909-13	545	470	880	852	514	595	633	1160(c)	1693(c)	1540

(a)1918-22; (b)1925-29; (c)1911-13

Figures here represent kilograms, grain equivalent. As potatoes are 78% water and contain only one-quarter as many calories per kilogram as grain, four kilograms of potatoes have been treated as equivalent to one kilogram of grain.

TABLE 2: Annual grain and potato output per inhabitant, Russia and other countries, 1892-1913.

## SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

The terms on which Russia's serfs were emancipated have incurred severe criticism, especially from the West. Most Western historians of Russia have taken the view that, by strengthening and extending the Russian village commune system and communal ownership of inalienable peasant 'allotments', and by making the membership of each village commune collectively responsible for taxes and for 'redeeming' the land allotted to them, the 1860s Emancipation perpetuated wasteful cropping patterns which impeded agricultural advance, penalised individual enterprise, imposed crushing financial burdens (the so-called 'redemption payments'), discouraged family-limitation and 'locked' the rapidly multiplying peasant population into an increasingly impoverished village sector, promoting rural over-population, famine and the peasant unrest which exploded in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> As I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere, this dismal doom-laden view does not stand up to closer statistical investigation and it is possible to uphold much more positive 'revisionist' views of the post-Emancipation peasantry and peasant agriculture.<sup>6</sup> Professor A. Nifontov has estimated that, in 50 provinces of European Russia, the net output of grain and potatoes rose by 2% per annum from the 1860s to the 1890s, well ahead of population growth (1.3% per annum) and rural population growth (1.2% per annum), and Professor Paul Gregory has calculated that Russia's net output of grain and potatoes rose by over 3% per annum from 1885-89 to 1909-13.<sup>7</sup> Grain yields per hectare on European Russia's peasant 'allotments' rose almost as fast as those on private land from the 1860s to the 1900s, rose considerably faster than those of the West and Japan over the same period, kept ahead of rural population growth and by 1911-13 were comparable to those attained in other countries with similarly short and/or moisture-deficient growing seasons. It is also questionable whether there really was a Russian 'famine' in 1891-92, as the above normal mortality at that time can be more plausibly attributed to the concurrent cholera epidemic, transmitted via Russia's unsanitary waterways and water-supplies.

Moreover, the financial burdens on the emancipated peasantry have also been exaggerated. The 'redemption payments' on land allotted to the peasantry were often burdensome and unjustly high at first, and peasants rightly resented having to pay anything at all for land which they regarded as having always been rightfully theirs (it had been 'usurped' by the state, the Tsars, the Church and the nobility in centuries past). But the inflation fuelled by large budget deficits, excessive printing of paper money and the bonds issued to former serf-owners as compensation for the land they had ceded to their former serfs steadily reduced the burden of redemption payments in real terms, as did the remissions granted in the 1880s, so that by the 1890s redemption payments represented under 10% of state revenue and under 2% of the value of agricultural output. By



Emancipating a serf.

then all taxation amounted to under 13% of Russia's national income, which was comparable with Europe in general and well below the tax-burdens on most developing countries today.

## DEMOGRAPHIC EFFECTS

It is also questionable whether the terms of the Emancipation really were responsible for rapid rural population growth. Private property prevailed in Finland and Romania, yet they experienced rates of rural population growth similar to Russia and countries such as Spain and Italy only avoided them thanks to mass emigration amongst their most fertile age-groups. There was nothing like the population explosion occurring in today's Third World. Moreover, Russia's Emancipation arrangements did not prevent dramatic increases in peasant mobility, reflected in the steep rise in the number of 'internal passports' issued to peasants each year (from 1.3 million in the 1860s, to 3.7 million in the 1870s, 5 million in the 1880s, 7 million in the 1890s and 9 million in the 1900s). Mobility increased sufficiently to allow large-scale colonisation of Siberia, the Volga basin and the southern steppes and a 2.5% per annum growth of Russia's industrial proletariat between 1861 and 1914. Since industrial output grew by an impressive 5% per annum between 1861 and 1914, it is highly unlikely that Russia's towns and industries could have productively absorbed rural labour much faster than they did.

What the Emancipation arrangements did prevent was, not the workforce-growth needed by Russia's burgeoning industries and expanding frontiers of agricultural settlement,

but a painful proletarianisation of the peasantry and a massive growth of vagrancy, slums, shanty towns and underemployed labour, such as occurred around many European cities in the nineteenth century and around many Third World cities in the twentieth century. Wage labourers made up under 10% of Russia's agricultural workforce as late as the 1900s and under 5% of peasant 'allotments' were smaller than 2.2 hectares (5.3 acres) according to the 1877 and 1905 land censuses. (By contrast, in France, Germany and Southern and Eastern Europe between one-third and two-thirds of all farms were smaller than 2.0 hectares and in Japan two-thirds were smaller than 1.0 hectares.)

Thus, notwithstanding frequent allegations that post-Emancipation Russia neglected the needs of the peasantry or lacked an effective agrarian policy, it can be seen to have had unusually enlightened agrarian arrangements which to a large extent shielded the peasantry against the usual dire social consequences of the rapid development of capitalism in an agrarian society, without significantly impairing the development of peasant agriculture and of the economy as a whole.

Indeed, by freeing peasants from the obligations to perform onerous unpaid labour-services and/or provide 'tribute' to serf-owners and/or the state, by transferring land to the tiller, and by allowing peasants to work their 'allotments' according to their own rights and using and reaping the rewards of their own family labour, the Emancipation released long-suppressed energies and initiatives, fostering an impressive growth and diversification of independent peasant agriculture. By 1881, 85% of former serfs had become owners of their 'allotments'.

## AN INCREASINGLY ASSERTIVE PEASANTRY

The eruptions of peasant unrest in the 1900s were rarely the result of impoverishment allegedly caused by the terms of the Emancipation. They were more often the result of the growing economic strength, assertiveness, education, confidence and expectations of the emancipated peasantry (albeit from small beginnings), major non-economic grievances and declining noble control of the countryside.

The dissolution of serfdom encouraged many estate-owners to sell or lease out most of their land, especially as many invariably lived beyond their means or found themselves unable to generate enough cash to pay money wages to former serfs or discovered that, in the absence of serfdom, they were often incapable of making a success of estate-management, since the Russian nobility was more strongly orientated towards careers in the army or public administration than entrepreneurship, and so was ill-equipped for the transition to capitalism.

The partial withdrawal of the nobility from the countryside into urban occupations increasingly brought discontented peasants into direct confrontations with the state, which had to increasingly rely on officials and the army to control the countryside. Thus local agrarian disputes became increasingly politi-

cised and explosive. Moreover, the post-Emancipation peasantry continued to be subject to widely-resented legal/civil disabilities and, in addition, over half the peasantry belonged to underprivileged and oppressed ethnic and/or religious minorities, who increasingly asserted their separate identities, aspirations and demands, from the 1890s to 1917.

## UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Thus, although the agrarian arrangements established by the Emancipation of the serfs were unusually enlightened, the 'Tsar-Liberator' left a lot of unfinished business, raised expectations which his regime was unable to fulfil and released social forces which it was ultimately incapable of controlling (foreshadowing Russia's more recent experience of 'perestroika' under Mikhail Gorbachev). Alexander II was assassinated at the seventh attempt by revolutionary terrorists who believed that his reforms had not gone far enough and that his death would trigger off a more far-reaching social revolution. Instead, the assassination of the 'Tsar-Liberator' precipitated a reactionary backlash against the intelligentsia and ethnic and religious minorities and a reversal of some of his reforms, deflecting Russia off the road towards freedom and on to the road towards the modern police state and new forms of serfdom. Alexander II's life ended not just in personal tragedy, but in a tragedy from whose consequences Russia is still struggling to escape.

## NOTES

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David Moon

## PERSPECTIVES

# THE SERFS' PERSPECTIVE

Our second perspective examines the difficulty of explaining emancipation to the serfs and the confused hopes and aspirations which this gave rise to.

Most textbooks on Russian history and many of the more specialised studies have approached the abolition of serfdom in Russia from the points of view of Tsar Alexander II, the imperial bureaucracy and the landed nobility. The purpose of this article is to look at abolition from the perspective of the people it most directly affected: the 22 million Russian serfs. The article starts by considering the serfs' status on the eve of 1861. This is necessary in order to understand how serfs were affected by the terms of abolition, which is discussed in the second part of the article. The final part focuses on the immediate reactions by former serfs to abolition, paying particular attention to how, or indeed whether, they understood the reform.

## THE SERFS' STATUS

Serfs comprised slightly under half the peasant population of Russia on the eve of abolition. Most Russian peasants were small-scale subsistence farmers who relied on the labour of their families to cultivate small plots of land. Unlike 'capitalist' farmers, they did not aim to produce a large harvest to sell at a profit at the market. Instead, they endeavoured to produce sufficient to support their families, and a surplus to sell to raise some money. They used this money to buy the few essentials they could not produce themselves, and to pay the dues and taxes demanded from them by the outside world. Many peasants, especially those in the less fertile northern part of Russia, supplemented their incomes from agriculture by engaging in handicrafts or petty trade. Others, usually with permission, worked away from their home villages in a wide variety of occupations on a seasonal or semi-permanent basis.

### 1 Legal Status

Serfs were a particular, legally-defined category of peasants. They lived on the landed estates of members of the nobility. (The rest of the peasant population lived on land belonging to the state: state peasants — or members of the imperial family: appanage peasants.) Serfs were bound to the estates of noble landowners

and were not permitted to leave without permission. Serfs were also the property of the landowners, who could buy and sell them as if they were slaves. Landowners could also take serfs away from the land and convert them to domestic serfs, who worked as servants in the landowners' households, and in a variety of skilled occupations on the estate. By 1858, domestic serfs comprised 6.8% of the serf population.

### 2 Land and Obligation

Most landowners granted their serfs (with the exception of domestic serfs) the use of allotments of land, although legally the land remained the property of the nobles. Serfs performed obligations in return for the use of their allotments. There were two forms of these obligations. The first was labour obligations (*barshchina*). Some landowners retained part of the estate for themselves (the *demesne*), and compelled their serfs to spend part of their time cultivating this land. In 1797 Tsar Paul recommended, with limited results, that *barshchina* be restricted to three days a week.

The second category of obligations was dues (*obrok*). Some landowners turned over most of their estates to the serfs, and demanded dues in money and/or agricultural produce in return. On some estates, the two forms of obligations were combined. An unfortunate group of serfs on such estates were liable to both forms of obligations. Male serfs were also required to pay the poll tax to the state, and were liable to be conscripted into the army.

### 3 Landowners' Authority

In addition to owning land populated by serfs, landowners were also responsible for administration and justice on their estates. In practice, however, many landowners were absentees. They hired managers or stewards to administer their estates. Most landowners used some of their serfs to help run their estates, and turned over some of the responsibilities to the serfs themselves, to the institutions known as communes (*mir* or *obshchina*). Communes took the responsibility for apportioning the allotments of land to individual serf families, and sharing out the obligations and taxes.

These four points — the serfs' legal status,

their use of land allotments, their obligations to landowners, and the landowners' administrative and judicial authority – were the four main features of the institution of serfdom in Russia. This was the institution which was abolished in 1861.

### TERMS OF ABOLITION

The statute abolishing serfdom was signed into law by Tsar Alexander II on 19 February 1861, and published on 5 March. The eventual aim was for former serfs to become the full legal owners of allotments of land. The statute laid down a complex, gradual, three-stage process for the abolition of serfdom and transition to this new agrarian order. The first stage began on 5 March 1861. All former serfs in Russia entered a transition period, lasting from two to nine years. In this period everything, with one important exception, remained exactly as it was while preparations were made for the second stage. This was to be called 'temporary obligation', during which relations between former serfs and landowners were to be regulated by law according to charters which had been drawn up during the preceding period. 'Temporary obligation' would end when the landowner chose to initiate the third and final stage, the 'redemption operation'. During this stage former serfs would purchase land allotments from the landowners through the intermediary of the government. In 1881 the government made transfer to the final stage compulsory for all former serfs who were still 'temporarily obligated'.

The following account of the process of abolition will summarise the main terms as they related to the four main features of serfdom and to the three stages outlined above. The one thing which changed at once was the legal status of the former serfs. On 5 March 1861 serfs became legally free; they ceased to be serfs (therefore in the rest of this article they will be referred to simply as 'peasants'). Legal freedom meant, for example, that they could no longer be bought and sold, and could enter into legally binding

contracts, including the sale and purchase of property, without the landowners' permission. The former domestic serfs received personal freedom, but nothing else.

During the transition period, the size and location of the peasants' land allotments remained the same as they had been immediately prior to 1861. In the second stage, 'temporary obligation', the size and location of allotments were to be set according to principles laid down in the statute, and recorded in the charters. These principles took account of local customs, regional differences and financial considerations. The statute laid down maximum and minimum sizes for peasants' allotments in each region. In some cases, however, peasants had previously cultivated allotments which were larger than the maximum size. In such cases, part of the peasants' land was taken away ('cut off') and retained by the landowners. Some historians have calculated that in the more fertile parts of Russia, where land was more valuable, peasants lost around a quarter of their land.

In the third stage, the 'redemption operation', the peasants could buy, or 'redeem', their land allotments. As most peasants lacked the resources to buy the land directly from the landowners, or even raise the money themselves in loans, the government stepped in to act as intermediary. The government agreed to advance most of the price set for the land to the landowners in long-term bonds. The peasants would then repay the money to the government, with interest capitalised at 6% per annum, in instalments. The instalments were known as redemption payments, and were to be spread over 49 years. At the end of this period, the peasants would be the full legal owners of their land allotments. In fact, the peasants quickly ran up massive arrears. The redemption payments were rescheduled, but the outstanding amount was cancelled in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution.

The peasants' obligations to the landowners remained as before during the transition period. In the second stage, 'temporary obligation', they were set by law, and recorded in the charters. Obligations ceased only in the third stage, the

redemption operation, when they were replaced by the redemption payments. The redemption payments were ostensibly payments for the allotments of land. In reality, however, the peasants were paying more than the market value of the land. The difference was a partly hidden element to compensate landowners for the loss of the free labour of their former serfs, or the loss of their *obrok* payments.

In the area of the fourth feature of serfdom, administration and justice, the authority of the landowners over their former serfs was handed over to a reconstituted commune at the village level, and to newly-created institutions of peasant self-government at the slightly higher level of township (*volost*). This local peasant self-government was, however, subject to the supervision of officials from the local nobility and the provincial local government institutions. Moreover, there were major reforms of local government and the courts in mid-1860s.

### PEASANT REACTION

This summary of the terms of the abolition of serfdom cannot convey the true complexity of the reform. The statute ran to over 350 pages. The Tsar tried to explain the reform to the population in a short proclamation, which was read out in churches all over Russia during Lent. Alexander II put forward his reasons for abolishing serfdom, explained how the statute had been prepared, and summarised the terms in a rather general and unsystematic manner.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1 A Much-misunderstood Proclamation

In the weeks after the proclamation was read out, peasants all over Russia tried to make sense of what they had heard. The atmosphere in the Volga region of south-eastern Russia in the spring of 1861 was described in a letter by a landowner in Saratov province:

Nobody could understand [the proclamation]. We have still not received the full text of the law. This has given the opportunity for everyone to interpret it in his own way. Confusion has begun. But first it was understood that freedom was postponed for two years. But as you know not all

Peasants at work hauling boats along the Volga.



landlords are the same, but many are wicked .... It is easily understandable that when the [proclamation] was read, peasants [belonging to the latter sort] could not believe that all the Tsar's mercy just consisted of them having to remain under this oppression for another two years .... The peasants interpreted the [proclamation] to mean that, as they had been given freedom, there was no more labour service (completely logical, in my opinion) and stopped working for the landlords. ...The district administrator was sent to try to persuade them, but without success. The peasants respectfully told him 'Sir, we cannot disobey the Tsar's orders', and did not go to work.<sup>2</sup>

There were hundreds of such incidents in villages all over Russia in the spring and summer of 1861. For the most part, however, peasants restricted themselves to passive resistance. In the village of Bezdna, in Kazan province to the east of Moscow, a semi-literate peasant named Anton Petrov read the statute. He interpreted it to mean that the Tsar had granted 'true freedom', but that this was being concealed by the landowners. In part, his misinterpretation can be explained by the facts that the legislation was very complex and he was, at best, semi-literate. It is a measure of his level of literacy that he misunderstood a percentage symbol (%) to be the seal of St Anne, which he apparently believed meant that the Tsar had granted freedom. A series of officials tried without success to make the peasants see reason. Troops were sent to the village. Confronted by an enormous crowd of sullen peasants, the troops panicked and opened fire. Around 100 peasants were killed.

## 2 Reasons for Misunderstandings

The peasants' apparent misunderstandings of the Tsar's intentions and the incidents which followed can be explained by a number of factors. The terms of abolition were extremely complex, and were not adequately explained in the proclamation which was read out. The text is permeated by the Tsar's desire to reassure the nobility and maintain order, rather than to give a clear, concise explanation of what was going to happen to the peasants who were being freed from serfdom. Some of the priests who read out the proclamation, moreover, were probably semi-literate, and may not have read it out correctly.

The legislation was prepared and written by educated bureaucrats in St Petersburg. They drew up the legislation on the basis of lengthy discussions and debates inside the bureaucracy and with members of the nobility, and on the basis of detailed statistical research into the conditions of life on serf estates. Many of the bureaucrats, however, had little if any direct experience of peasant life. The resulting legislation was therefore written from an abstract and theoretical point of view, and was couched in difficult, legalistic terminology.

Peasants approached abolition from a very different perspective. The concerns and attitudes of the bureaucrats were completely alien to them. Most peasants had little experience of life outside the village and outside the basic features of peasant life. They knew about the customs and traditions of peasant family and village life. They understood subsistence

farming and that they were compelled to serve obligations to their landowner and the Tsar. But they understood all these in purely practical terms, in the ways they affected their everyday lives. This gap between the perspectives and language of the bureaucrats who drew up the legislation and the peasants whom it affected contributed greatly to the misunderstandings and confusion which followed the promulgation of the reform. Peasants had to try to relate what they had heard read out to the experience of their daily lives.

Another reason for the misunderstandings was that serfdom was not abolished primarily in the interests of the peasantry. Rather, it was a compromise between the interests of the government, the landowning nobility and, lastly, the serfs. No one involved in preparing the reform asked serfs about their views. The authorities were interested in what serfs wanted and expected, but they were probably motivated by the desire to avert, and prepared to suppress, any serious peasant unrest which may have been caused by mass peasant disappointment with the terms of abolition. There was thus a large gulf between what was enacted in 1861 and serfs' hopes and expectations.

## 3 Serf Expectations

One way in which peasants responded to this gulf was to try to examine the texts of the proclamation and statute in more detail. Most peasants were illiterate, therefore they turned to people who were literate, and whom they thought they could trust, such as Anton Petrov, to read the legislation for them. In addition to his difficulty in reading the complex language of the statute, Anton Petrov's misunderstanding also resulted from his, and the other peasants', desire to find in the legislation what they wanted and expected.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, many serfs may have accepted any measure which seemed to promise some amelioration in their status and condition. After the public announcement of the Tsar's intention to abolish serfdom in 1857, however, they had come to hope for, and to expect, major changes. Several Soviet historians have tried to reconstruct serfs' hopes and expectations at the time of abolition. The most extreme version of serfs' demands put forward by Soviet historians was as follows:

- 1 To become completely independent from their landowner, i.e. to become personally free.
- 2 To be given their land allotments without payment, and also to be given all other land on the estate belonging to the landowner. It seems that serfs had their own concept of landownership. They apparently believed that they already owned the land by virtue of having cultivated it for generations.
- 3 An end to all obligations for their landowners and to the state. They wanted to be left alone to enjoy the fruits of their own labours.
- 4 In a similar vein, they wanted to be left alone to run their own affairs as they saw fit, in accordance with peasant customs and traditions. They did not want any supervi-

sion or interference from outside, especially not from members of the local nobility.

Less extreme variants of serfs' hopes and expectations on the eve of 1861 differ from these in degree rather than substance. The terms of the abolition of serfdom, however, were a very long way from even the less extreme variants. Only the first point, personal freedom, was granted in 1861. From the peasants' point of view the changes proposed in the other areas were a very long way from what they wanted, and were postponed far into the future. At first, immediately after the promulgation of the reform, it seems that many peasants simply could not believe that the terms of abolition were the real ones. This problem of understanding was exacerbated because many peasants believed, or at least claimed to believe, that the Tsar was on their side, and wanted to enact major reforms for their benefit.

The peasants' immediate reaction to abolition was confusion, bewilderment and disbelief. Gradually, especially after 1863, they came to accept that the terms which had been explained to them were genuine. The great hopes and expectations of 1861 died down. Peasants realised that, as they had done for centuries, they would have to continue trying to make the best of their lot, waiting for other opportunities to realise their aims and aspirations.

## NOTES

- (1) For a translation of the proclamation, see: B. Dmytryshyn (ed.) (1990) (3rd edn) *Imperial Russia: A Source Book, 1700-1917*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc; Fort Worth, Texas, pp. 307-11.
- (2) Quoted in McCauley, M. & Waldron, P. (1988) *The Emergence of the Modern Russian State, 1855-81*, Barnes and Noble Books, New Jersey, p. 113.

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