**Emancipation in Russia**

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By mid-century, serfdom had effectively disappeared from all of Western and Central Europe. It had taken sixty years to eliminate serfdom, but it happened. Only in Eastern Europe did it survive, above all in the Russian Empire. Here, millions of people remained in bondage. There were approximately 48 million serfs in Russia on the eve of the emancipation: roughly 22.5 million belonged to private landlords, 23.5 million to the state and almost 2 million to the crown. Together, they made up more than 80 percent of the population. Russian serfdom was not vestigial nor an irksome reminder of a lower social status. Serfdom in Russia was a form of chattel slavery in which the serf could be bought and sold, separated from his family, exiled to Siberia or conscripted into the army, and beaten with birches or flogged with the fearsome knout, which could easily kill a person.

Labor services were heavy, varying from three to six days a week, and the tendency in the nineteenth century was for these to rise. In areas where agriculture was poor, cash payments replaced labor services. Most serf owners, like slave-owners, recognized a balance had be struck between their theoretically unlimited powers and what was practically possible to extract from their serfs. But that balance was weighted very much in the interests of the serf owners. The serf owner’s power extended far beyond his ability to extract labor through force. Many owners of serfs used that power to exploit the female serfs under their control. Lev Tolstoy, himself a scion of a wealthy serf-owning family, wrote “serfdom is an evil, but a very pleasant one,” referring to his life as a young man when he had used this power liberally.

Like a slave, a Russian serf existed outside the law. The law afforded him no protection from the whims of his master. Serfs in France and the Prussian and Austrian Empires had a venerable tradition of appealing to royal courts to defend their rights. They sometimes found in their favor. A Russian serf had no legal rights and Catherine the Great removed the last remaining recourse of the serf, the right of direct appeal to the emperor. The major difference from slavery was that Russian serfs had the dubious privileges of paying taxes and serving in the national army, both deeply detested. Peter the Great had abolished formal slavery in Russia in 1723 because too many serfs were selling themselves into slavery and thereby avoiding taxes and military service. This says much about the nature of Russian serfdom. The levels of exploitation and the degree of debasement generated fierce resentments among the serfs and deep fear and suspicion among the nobles. This was not a theoretical fear.

The Pugachev Revolt (1773–75) had far more in common with the Haitian Revolution in terms of violence than it did with the serf revolts of Western and Central Europe. Nobles who fell into rebel hands were murdered indiscriminately. The almost contemporary peasant revolts in the Austrian Empire – in Bohemia and Transylvania – were also violent, but on both sides the violence was more restrained, and primarily directed against real estate rather than people. Executions were restricted to the leaders of the revolt. In Russia, the specter of Pugachev remained within living memory well into the nineteenth century and haunted the nobility until 1917. Few Russian nobles were under much illusion about the real feelings of their serfs toward them. The delegitimization of serfdom had advanced steadily in Russia in parallel with that in Europe.

Nearly all of the Empire’s elite recognized the abusive and corrupting power of serfdom. The attempts that were made to delegitimize serfdom in ideological terms were lame and unconvincing, possessing none of the power of the pro-slavery ideologies of the Southern United States. From Catherine the Great onward, all the emperors believed that Russian serfdom was harmful for the Empire economically, politically, and, above all, morally. Often, the emperors used the word slave (rab) or slavery (rabstvo) to describe the peasantry rather than the more technical term serf (krepostnoi) or serfdom). In 1834, for example, Nicholas I wrote: “Since the time I came to the throne, I have gathered all the papers which relate to the legal process which I want to lead against slavery when the time comes to free the peasantry in all the empire.”

But as with his predecessors, the time never came for Nicholas to do this. The practical problems of freeing tens of millions of serfs were overwhelming. The state was built on serfdom and a real fear existed within the ruling elite that emancipation would lead to the collapse of the state. Even attempts to limit some of the worst abuses of serfdom provoked such hostility from the nobility that they were hurriedly abandoned. Nicholas I set up no fewer than nine secret commissions to look at ways of reforming or abolishing serfdom. Each time, the commissions concluded that serfdom needed to be abolished, but not at that moment, which was hardly surprising since the commissions were dominated by some of the largest serf owners in Russia. The one commission that made a serious attempt to limit the abuses of serfdom, led by Count Kiseliev, one of the most able ministers of the nineteenth century and a personal friend of Nicholas, was abandoned by Nicholas at the critical moment.

The Crimean War of 1853 to 1856, in which Russia lost to Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire, provided sufficient trauma to the Russian political system to convulse it out of the stasis that Nicholas had attempted to impose on it. Defeat on Russian soil, the death of the Emperor Nicholas I in 1855, and the realization that the Empire’s status as a great power was at stake shook the political elite out of its complacency, not least the new Emperor Alexander II. The only reform that matched the gravity of the situation was the emancipation of the serfs. It was widely believed within the elite that without emancipation Russia would fall further and further behind the Western powers. For the first time in a generation, emancipation moved to the center of the political agenda. Emancipation would be dependent on many factors, but first and foremost would be the attitude of Alexander. Without his support, there was no possibility of emancipation.

Alexander revealed his intentions, in a typically ambiguous way, in a speech to representatives of the Moscow nobility in 1856. I have learned, gentlemen, that rumours have spread among you of my intention to abolish serfdom. To refute any groundless gossip on so important a subject I consider it necessary to inform you that I have no intention of doing so immediately. But, of course, and you yourselves realize it, the existing system of serf ownership cannot remain unchanged. It is better to begin abolishing serfdom from above than to wait for it to abolish itself from below. I ask you, gentlemen, to think of ways of doing this. Pass on my words to the nobles for consideration. Alexander was committed to reform from the end of the Crimean War. As an emperor with unlimited powers, unburdened with assemblies, and responsible only to his conscience and God, he was free to introduce whatever measure he wished. However, on this matter his position was much less secure than it seemed.

He was opposed by most of his family, the court, the bureaucratic elite, and the provincial nobility. His grandfather and great-grandfather had been murdered because they had offended the great nobility. Within his family, only his brother, Grand Duke Konstantine, and his aunt, Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, unequivocally supported him. Small groups of committed abolitionists were concentrated in the Ministry of the Interior and the Naval Ministry, but these were middle-ranking officials, far removed from setting policy on the serf question. Emancipation would be a political battle waged within the elite, first over whether or not to emancipate and second over the terms of emancipation. Popular or economic reasons were secondary in this battle. Alexander’s intention was to follow the Prussian model by introducing reform from above. On his summer vacation in 1857, he discussed emancipation with Prussian experts. The problem for Alexander was that the Prussian model was useful only in a very general sense. The Russian context was very different in its scale and intensity.

Finding a solution that was politically feasible and satisfied both the nobility and the peasantry was to prove difficult. The overwhelming majority of the nobility were opposed to emancipation in principle and even more so when it threatened to deprive them of any of land. The peasantry anticipated being emancipated with the land they worked and without compensation to the nobility. Seeking to resolve this dilemma, Alexander turned to the bureaucracy as his father had done so many times before. True to form, the bureaucratic committee debated for eighteen months and then informed the emperor that there was little that could be done. After nearly two years of work, Alexander found himself no further forward.

The year 1857 provided a critical juncture in the emancipation process. The bureaucracy delivered its verdict that the time was not right, the initial shock of defeat in the Crimea was diminishing, and the Empire was peaceful. There was no imminent threat to the serf system outside the political elite and it could have continued under its own inertia for decades more. Everything was tending toward the discreet dropping of the emancipation project, but it was at this point that Alexander decisively intervened in the process. He publicly called for the nobility to submit reform projects, thereby taking the issue of emancipation out of the hands of the bureaucracy and openly committing the state to some form of emancipation. The battle now shifted to what type of emancipation would be enacted and who would enact it.

The failure of the bureaucracy to deliver any sort of reform led Alexander to set up a commission under one of the few men that enjoyed his complete trust, Genral Iakov Rostovtsev. This was an ad hoc commission outside the normal bureaucratic chain of command and answerable only to the emperor. Rostovtsev was allowed to choose the members of his commission and, critically, he selected them overwhelmingly from the younger bureaucrats who were committed to emancipation. He also selected several experts on the question from outside the bureaucracy who shared the same general commitment to emancipation. This commission’s task was to draft the emancipation decree, subject to revision at the highest level. Three basic principles were established: immediate freedom of the serf from the lord, emancipation with land which would be communally owned, and compensation for the landlords for the loss of their property. These principles reflected awareness of the calamitous emancipation in the Baltic states in 1819. What was at stake in 1857 was how much land the peasantry would receive and what levels of compensation would be offered to the nobility.

These were technical issues that the experts could work out, but it was also an intensely political process in which opponents of emancipation sought by every means to discredit the Commission in the eyes of the emperor and to convince him to abandon it. The emperor was subject to constant pressure from the court, senior bureaucrats, and his entourage to bring the emancipation project to an end. This type of politics helps explain the longevity of serfdom across Europe, where reforming monarchs confronted at every turn opponents of emancipation. This was a battle fought not in ministries or committee rooms, but in soirées, balls, and hunting parties. The informal side of autocratic politics was particularly dangerous for the supporters of emancipation since, with the exception of Rostovtsev, they were excluded from this battle as they were rarely in the presence of the emperor. It was widely feared that Alexander would give way under such pressure, as he was not known for his strength of character.

Yet Alexander showed unsuspected steel and, ably supported by his brother Grand Duke Konstantine Nikolaevich and his aunt Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, remained steadfast in his support for the commission, intervening openly at critical junctures to support it. The Committee was able to complete its work and produce draft legislation that for its time and place was extremely radical. The proposals of the Commission, which became law with only minor modifications in 1861, embodied the principles of peasant freedom from the lord’s authority, emancipation with land, and redemption payments to the lords for that land. The government was to pay the redemption fees and the peasantry would repay the government over the next fifty years. By this Act, 22 million people were emancipated from serfdom. Two years later, a similar Act freed the remaining state serfs.

The Emancipation Act has been subjected to withering criticism over the decades. Its failure to satisfy either the nobility or the peasantry was obvious from the start. It has been blamed for many of the subsequent disasters in Russian history. Yet, the criticism seems unfair to say the least. The achievements of the emancipation were staggering. Twenty-two million people were emancipated, virtually without violence, from a form of slavery. A similar Act two years later freed another 23 million people. The contrast with the United States undergoing its own traumatic emancipation process at the same time is striking. The Emancipation Act was the foundation stone of a modern state, giving the empire the possibility of developing into a state based on law and citizens rather than despotism and bondsmen.