

# Russia in transition: anna karenina and the ever-changing russian landscape



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Though a majority of the characters in Leo Tolstoy's momentous novel *Anna Karenina* are members of the nobility, the reforms Czar Alexander II put in place for the lower classes had profound effects on them. The time of his rule was an era of change for the Russian people because so many of his reforms had direct impacts on society. Some of these reforms included changes to the organization of Russian social classes, educational and farming reforms, and an enormous increase in urbanization (Riasanovsky 24-27).

Alexander II profoundly affected the everyday lives of his subjects and the lives of Russians in the generations after he fell from power. Perhaps his most important reform of Russian society was freeing the serfs in 1861. Serfdom was a form of slavery instituted in the early days of feudal Russian farming. Serfs would be bound to the land and owned by the land owner. This was a longstanding practice in Russia but the revolts of serfs were imminent when Alexander II took the throne. He worked for their freedom as soon as he came to power and after six years of hard work his emancipation law was signed. When they were finally freed, some stayed and worked the farms as they had done but with an increased freedom of mobility while others moved to cities (Eklof 19-28).

This abolition of serfdom had many effects on the nobility of Russia. In *Anna Karenina*, Levin and his friend Sviyazhsky get into a heated argument over the authority they should have as landowners over the muzhiks, the new workforce that formed after the serfs were emancipated (Bradley 143). Their arguments focus mainly on the topics of education for the newly freed people and how much control they should be subjected to, considering these workers were no longer legally theirs to control.

<https://assignbuster.com/russia-in-transition-anna-karenina-and-the-ever-changing-russian-landscape/>

The education debate was indeed grounded in a reality dear to Tolstoy's heart. He was personally responsible for opening schools for peasants and trying to increase literacy through the lower class as best he could (Souder). This idea of educating peasants is argued between Levin and Sviyazhsky with Sviyazhsky advocating their education and Levin supporting the status quo. " In Europe rational farming works because the peasantry are educated; which means that with us the peasantry have to be educated-that's all... To educate the peasantry, three things are needed: schools, schools, and schools" (336). Levin objects to these arguments and offers a different point of view. " How will schools help the peasantry to improve their material well-being?" Levin asks Sviyazhsky. " You say that schools, education, will give them new needs. So much the worse, because they won't be able to satisfy them" (337).

Throughout the novel, Tolstoy makes it evident to the reader that this was a time of farming reform. There was a decreased workforce for farming, seeing as many freed serfs went away to the cities, so the policies that had been in place during the feudal days had to be completely reimagined (Lewis 776). Europe was reforming their systems and straying from the feudal idea to a more modern system that made way for broader industrialization. The Russian people weren't totally on board with changing their traditional farming practices, especially making them more European, but they knew something had to be done. With this mindset, the system of farming was revamped and reestablished itself in a way that would leave room for industrialization and continue on without serfs (Geyer 128).

We look again to Levin for how Tolstoy incorporates these societal changes into the novel. Levin, a farm owner, is passionate about his views on how farming should be structured and how the muzhiks should be controlled. After his day with Sviyazhsky, he goes over their conversations in his head and has some interesting insights. He thinks to himself:

You say our farming doesn't work because the muzhiks hate all improvements and that they must be introduced by authority. Now, if farming didn't work at all without these improvements, you'd be right; but it does work, and it works only here... Let's try to look at the work force not as an ideal workforce but as the Russian muzhik with his instincts, and organize our farming accordingly. (338)

Levin's insights show us that he favors a more personal approach to farming. He wants a united Russian workforce, though not necessarily a return to serfdom. He feels that men should care about their work, just as the old man he and Sviyazhsky encountered together. Levin makes these ideas more apparent when he decides to actually go out and do work with his peasants in the fields. Just as the old man is an active landlord, Levin is a very active farm owner. Levin goes into detail about his work with his peasants and at one point describes the personal aspect of joining in their labor:

...He [Levin] had taken a scythe from a muzhik and begun mowing. He had liked the work so much that he had taken to mowing several more times; he had mowed the whole meadow in front of the house, and since the spring of that year he had made a plan for himself - to spend whole days mowing with the muzhiks. (247-248)

This passage truly shows how much not only the country life means to Levin, but how much the life he leads honors his truest intentions. He respects the muzhiks and works alongside them, fulfilling his belief that farming should be a personal experience and that farm owners like himself should have a larger role other than just being an authority figure to the muzhiks.

The final changing aspect of Russian society was the great rates at which people were moving from the country to the city. Urbanization was seen at rates unparalleled at the time; an unsettling statement considering life in the city was considerably more expensive than in the country and the lower and middle classes were extremely poor (Lewis 776). The serfs, who were newly freed, had no gap in which they established themselves in the countryside, they made no money, just simply ran away to a better life in the city as soon as their emancipation was decreed. This led to a vast overcrowding of the Russian cities, St. Petersburg and Moscow. The cities, which had been inhabited primarily by nobles, were flooded with crowds of peasants and members of the emerging middle class, which caused a culture shock and led to many new ways of thinking for the new city-dwelling Russian. Many were turned off by the idea of cities being taken over by commoners, but there were some who had completely new ideas of how to solve the problem. New ways of thinking and new philosophies were being developed during this time, due greatly in part to the quick rate of urbanization (Walicki 86).

Tolstoy once again uses Levin as his tool to share his personal beliefs on urbanization and the focus on city versus country. Levin is, of course, a landowning countryman who does well for himself outside of the society of city life. Levin has no regrets about the way he lives his life, but he does <https://assignbuster.com/russia-in-transition-anna-karenina-and-the-ever-changing-russian-landscape/>

realize that others, including the family of his beloved Kitty Shcherbatsky, object to his simple country lifestyle. The Scherbatsky's views are illustrated here:

In their eyes, though he was now thirty-two, he did not have any regular, defined activity or position in society, whereas among his comrades one was already a colonel and imperial aide-de-camp, one a professor, one the director of a bank and a railway or the chief of an office like Oblonsky, while he (he knew very well what he must seem like to others) was a landowner, occupied with breeding cows, shooting snipe, and building things, that is, a giftless fellow who amounted to nothing and was doing, in society's view, the very thing that good-for-nothing people do. (22-23)

These thoughts he has prove to be true as we learn more about the philosophies city-dwellers hold on country life. The Scherbatskys know only high society and the royal life so it is a bit of a shock to them when they learn their youngest daughter is to marry a simple countryman.

Though it could be argued that Anna Karenina was written to tell more personal and intimate stories, it is evident that Tolstoy used it as a means to illustrate the vast array of social change that was so important to Russian society in his lifetime. After Czar Alexander II sparked social reform by emancipating the serfs in 1861, educational and farming reforms were soon to follow, as was the migration to cities. Tolstoy principally uses Levin as a vessel for his own beliefs on many topics while using other characters and the vast array of situations to pose contradictory arguments and many examples of social reform of the late nineteenth century.

<https://assignbuster.com/russia-in-transition-anna-karenina-and-the-ever-changing-russian-landscape/>