

# The emancipation of serfs



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From the mid-nineteenth century the pace of change in Russia rapidly accelerated. The decade following the Crimean war saw the most dramatic social and institutional upheaval that the empire had ever undergone. Central to the so-called ' Great Reforms' of the period was the abolition of serfdom. The statute of 1861 set the 22 million serfs owned by private landlords free from personal bondage. The fundamental relationship upon which the economic, social and political structure of the empire had been based was to be dismantled.

In 1861 serfdom, the system, which tied the Russian peasants irrevocably to their landlords, was abolished at the Tsar's imperial command. Four years later, slavery in the USA was similarly declared unlawful by presidential order. Tsar Alexander II (1855-81) shared with his father, Nicholas I, a conviction that American slavery was inhumane. This is not as hypocritical as it might first appear. The serfdom that had operated in Russia since the middle of the seventeenth century was technically not slavery. The landowner did not own the serf. This contrasted with the system in the USA where the Negro slaves were chattels; that is, they were regarded in law as the disposable property of their masters. In Russia the traditional relationship between lord and serf was based on land. It was because he lived on his land that the serf was bound to the lord.

The Russian system dated back to 1649 and the introduction of a legal code, which had granted total authority to the landowner to control the life and work of the peasant serfs who lived on his land. Since this included the power to deny the serf the right to move elsewhere, the difference between slavery and serfdom in practice was so fine as to be indistinguishable. The

purpose behind the granting of such powers to the Russian dvoriane (nobility of landowners) in 1649 had been to make the nobles dependent on, and therefore loyal to, the tsar. They were to express that loyalty in practical form by serving the tsar as military officers or public officials. In this way the Romanov emperors built up Russia's civil bureaucracy and the armed services as bodies of public servants who had a vested interest in maintaining the tsarist state.

The serfs made up just over a third of the population and formed half of the peasantry. They were most heavily concentrated in the central and western provinces of Russia.

### **Reasons for The Emancipation Edict of 1861**

In a number of respects serfdom was not dissimilar to the feudalism that had operated in many parts of pre-modern Europe. However, long before the 19th century, the feudal system had been abandoned in Western Europe as it moved into the commercial and industrial age. Imperial Russia underwent no such transition. It remained economically and socially backward. Nearly all Russians acknowledged this. Some, known as slavophiles, rejoiced, claiming that holy Russia was a unique God-inspired nation that had nothing to learn from the corrupt nations to the west. But many Russians, of all ranks and classes, had come to accept that reform of some kind was unavoidable if their nation was to progress.

It became convenient to use serfdom to explain all Russia's current weaknesses: it was responsible for military incompetence, food shortages, over population, civil disorder, and industrial backwardness. These were

oversimplified explanations but they're some truth in all of them: serfdom was symptomatic of the underlying difficulties that held Russia back from progress. It was, therefore, a particularly easy target for the intelligentsia, those intellectuals who in their writings argued for the liberalizing of Russian society, beginning with the emancipation of the exploited peasants.

Nikolai Miliutin, who participated in bringing about the reform, believed that it was necessary to end serfdom to increase agricultural productivity and thereby increase the capital required for industrialization. His friend the legal historian and westernizer Constantine Kavelin, who had good connections with reform-minded relatives of the tsar, maintained that serfdom was the chief cause of poverty in Russia. Although historians have debated to what extent serfdom retarded economic development, what is crucial is that Alexander II and other important figures such as Samarin, Nikolai Miliutin, and Kavelin believed that ending serfdom would strengthen the Russian economy and thereby the country as a whole.

As often happened in Russian history, it was war that forced the issue. The Russian state had entered the Crimean War in 1854 with high hopes of victory. Two years later it suffered a heavy defeat at the hands of the Allied armies of France, Britain and Turkey. The shock to Russia was profound. The nation had always prided itself on its martial strength. Now it had been humiliated.

In 1856, the Slavophile Yuri Samarin wrote:

**“ We were defeated (in the Crimean war) not by external forces of the western alliance but by our own internal weakness...Now, when Europe welcomes peace and rest desired for so long we must deal with what we have neglected...At the head of the contemporary domestic questions which must be dealt with, the problem of serfdom stands as a threat to the future and an obstacle in the present to significant improvement in any way”[1]**

Defeat in the Crimean war was a profound shock to Russians, and one, which compelled a complete reappraisal of the empire and of its place in the world. It revealed what many had long suspected, that profound disorder was undermining the empire's capacity to sustain its role as a European great power. It demonstrated that the army, reputedly the strongest in Europe, could not defend a fortified base in its homeland against troops dispatched from thousands of miles away. It is said that Nicholas I on his deathbed acknowledged the tacit condemnation of his system, enjoying his son to take action to remedy the ' disorder in the command'.

The shortcomings of Russia's military performance were due not least to the backward state of her industry and communications and the precarious condition of her finances. She was unable either to manufacture new rifles to match those her adversaries possessed or to purchase them abroad. Much of what was available, including food and weapons, never reached the battlefield over the muddy tracks and dusty post-roads, which connected the southern extremity with the heartlands of the empire.

## **The Emancipation Of Serfs**

Alexander II was the “ tsar liberator”, the ruler who finally freed the serfs in 1861. He also instituted other important reforms, especially in local government, the judiciary, and the military. Mindful of Russian weakness displayed during the Crimean war and faced with serious economic problems, he hoped the reforms would strengthen Russia without weakening autocracy. Fulfilling such a combined goal however was an almost impossible task, even if Alexander II had been a stronger and more visionary leader than he was. Although the reforms helped modernize Russia, the climate that bred them also fostered discontentment and discord. Reactionaries, conservatives, liberals, radicals, and government officials battled against each other and among themselves.

The keystone of the reforms was the emancipation of the serfs, which, by releasing roughly half the peasants from personal bondage while guaranteeing them land, cleared the way – in principle – for them to become small property owners and full citizens, able to participate without handicap in political life and in the market economy. In practice the emancipation edict stopped well short of doing that. We have seen that the provisions regarding land disappointed most peasants, leaving them with an abiding grievance. Furthermore, though no longer enserfed, they remained segregated in so-called ‘ village societies’, usually the old village commune, which contained only peasants as members; priests, schoolteachers, medical orderlies and other people who happened to live in the village were excluded from membership.

Peasants were bound to these 'village societies', which held their pass books, until they had paid in full for the land that they were allocated, in a redemption operation scheduled to take forty-nine years; during that time they could not mobilize their resources by selling their allotments or using them as a collateral to raise loans. They were subject to a legal system distinct from that introduced for the rest of the population, they were tried in segregated volost courts, and they were still liable to corporal punishment and to 'mutual responsibility'. The volosti or 'cantons', the higher-level administrative unit encompassing several villages and perhaps a small town, likewise admitted peasants only to its assembly and its courts.

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2On February 19, 1861, Alexander II signed the legislation into law. The new law was a political compromise between the interests of the nobles and those of the peasants and their supporters, and the government was unsure of the response of either side. The nearly 400 pages of statutes and annexes

that made up the new law were terribly complex, but the emancipation provisions can be summed up as follows:

“ The right of bondage” over serfs was “ abolished forever” (except in some outlying areas of the empire such as the Caucasus, where separate emancipation legislation came later.

New arrangements regarding gentry-peasant relations and landholding were to be worked out in stages during the next few decades.

Peasants who had previously farmed gentry land, as opposed to household serfs, were eventually to receive land, the exact amount to be determined by combinations of negotiation, government maximum and minimum norms for each province and the use of mediators.

Most of this new land was to go to peasant communes, not directly to individual peasants.

Landowners were to be compensated for their loss of lands by a combination of government notes and peasant payments.

Peasants, unless they chose a free and miniscule “ beggars’ allotment,” were obliged to repay the government with annual redemption payments spread over a 49 year period.

### **Significance of The Emancipation Edict of 1861**

Emancipation proved the first in a series of measures that Alexander produced as a part of a programme that included legal and administrative reform and the extension of press and university freedoms. But behind all



these reforms lay an ulterior motive. Alexander II was not being liberal for its own sake. According to official records kept by the Ministry of the Interior (equivalent to the Home Office in Britain) there had been 712 peasant uprisings in Russia between 1826 and 1854. By granting some of the measures that the intelligentsia had called for, while in fact tightening control over the peasants, Alexander intended to lessen the social and political threat to the established system that those figures frighteningly represented. Above all, he hoped that an emancipated peasantry, thankful for the gifts that a bountiful tsar had given them, would provide physically fitter and morally worthier recruits for Russia's armies, the symbol and guarantee of Russia's greatness as a nation.

There is a sense in which the details of Emancipation were less significant than the fact of the reform itself. Whatever its shortcomings, emancipation was the prelude to the most sustained programme of reform that imperial Russia had yet experienced (see the Timeline). There is also the irony that such a sweeping move could not have been introduced except by a ruler with absolute powers; it could not have been done in a democracy. The only comparable social change of such magnitude was President Lincoln's freeing of the Negro slaves in 1865. But, as a modern Russian historian (Alexander Chubarov, *The Fragile Empire*, New York, 1999, p. 75) has provocatively pointed out: 'the [Russian] emancipation was carried out on an infinitely larger scale, and was achieved without civil war and without devastation or armed coercion'.

Yet when that achievement has been duly noted and credited, hindsight suggests that emancipation was essentially a failure. It raised expectations

and dashed them. Russia gave promise of entering a new dawn but then retreated into darkness. This tends to suggest that Alexander II and his government deliberately set out to betray the peasants. This was certainly the argument used by radical critics of the regime. It is important to consider, however, that land reform always takes time to work. It can never be a quick fix. Alexander's prime motive in introducing emancipation was undoubtedly the desire to produce results that were beneficial to his regime. But this is not to suggest that he was insincere in his wish to elevate the condition of the peasants.

Where he can be faulted is in his failure to push reform far enough. The fact is that Alexander II suffered from the besetting dilemma that afflicted all the reforming tsars from Peter the Great onwards – how to achieve reform without damaging the interests of the privileged classes that made up imperial Russia. It was a question that was never satisfactorily answered because it was never properly faced. Whenever their plans did not work out or became difficult to achieve, the Romanovs abandoned reform and resorted to coercion and repression.

Emancipation was intended to give Russia economic and social stability and thus prepare the way for its industrial and commercial growth. But it ended in failure. It both frightened the privileged classes and disappointed the progressives. It went too far for those slavophiles in the court who wanted Russia to cling to its old ways and avoid the corruption that came with western modernity. It did not go far enough for those progressives who believed that a major social transformation was needed in Russia.

There is a larger historical perspective. It is suggested by many historians that, for at least a century before its collapse in the Revolution of 1917, imperial Russia had been in institutional crisis; the tsarist system had been unable to find workable solutions to the problems that faced it. If it was to modernize itself, that is to say if it was to develop its agriculture and industry to the point where it could sustain its growing population and compete on equal terms with its European and Asian neighbors and international competitors, it would need to modify its existing institutions. This it proved unable or unwilling to do.

Therein lies the tragedy of Emancipation. It is an outstanding example of tsarist ineptitude. Its introduction held out the possibility that Russia could build on this fundamentally progressive measure and modify its agricultural economy in such a manner as to cater for its vast population, which doubled to 125 million during the second half of the 19th century. But the chance was lost. So reduced was the peasant as an agricultural worker by 1900 that only half of his meagre income came from farming. He had to sustain himself by laboring. So much for Alexander II's claim that he viewed the task of improving the condition of the peasants as 'a sacred inheritance' to which he was honor bound.

### **Immediate impact of The Emancipation Edict of 1861**

The immediate impact of the statute was much less dramatic than this longer-term picture might suggest, not least because of the economic terms and administrative arrangements under which the peasants were set free. These terms preserved, if in milder form, many of the obstacles to economic growth and social change characteristic of the pre-reform era. The principle

of the statute was that the serfs would be emancipated with their household plots and an allotment of land, but that they should pay for this land. The amount of land made available to them to purchase should be approximately equivalent to the allotments they had been allowed to till for their own subsistence under serfdom. The government would compensate the nobility immediately and the peasantry would repay the government would compensate the nobility immediately and the peasantry would repay the government with redemption dues spread over a period of forty-nine years. In practice the peasantry' allotments were significantly smaller than those they had used before emancipation; the ' cut offs' withheld by landlords were particularly large in the fertile ' black-earth' regions and were a source of intense and lasting bitterness. The price the peasants paid was artificially inflated to compensate the nobility for the dues in labor and cash, which they were losing. However unattractive the peasants found the terms of land redemption, they were compelled to transfer from the initial status of ' temporarily obligated' tenants to outright purchasers if their landlords insisted. On the other hand, where it suited the nobility to retain landownership, they could, until 1881, refuse to embark upon redemption at all.

### **Negative Impacts on the serfs**

As was to be expected, the reaction to the emancipation manifesto was mixed. Many of the emancipated serfs were confused about the complex new statutes and disbelieving or disappointed when told they would have to make payments (for half a century) for land they received. Many peasants believed that the fault with evil officials and nobles who were frustrating the

tsar's real intentions. They thought that as soon as he overcame these troublemakers, new, more favorable, legislation would be forthcoming. Before the year was over, nobles reported more than 1000 disturbances, most of which required to quell. In the summer of 1861, alexander felt it necessary to admonish a delegation of peasants: " There will be no emancipation expect the one I have granted you. Obey the law and statutes! Work and toil! Obey the authorities and noble landowners!"

The following selection is from the first edition of the Englishman's first-hand observations and reflections.

**3" It might be reasonably supposed that the serfs received with boundless gratitude and delight the manifesto...in reality the manifesto created among the peasantry a feeling of disappointment rather than delight. To understand this strange fact we must endeavor to place ourselves at the peasants' point of view.**

**In the first place it must be remarked that all vague rhetorical phrases about free labor, human dignity, national progress, and the like, which may be readily produce among educated men a certain amount of temporary enthusiasm, fall on the ears of the Russian peasant like drops of rain on a granite mark."**

Collectively the former serfs received less land than their pre-emancipation allotments. More than one-fourth of them received allotments insufficient to maintain their households-former serfs of polish landowners, especially after polish rebellion of 1863, and imperial and state peasants came off better.

Overall the noble serf owners kept roughly two-fifth of their lands, whereas the ex-serfs, greatly outnumbering them, received the rest. And the

peasants eventually paid more for their land than it was worth and received land less suitable than that retained by the owners.

The economic impact on the peasantry of the settlement and the powers entrusted to the post-emancipation commune is, as we shall see, a matter of fierce controversy. Clearly, the phasing out of traditional dues removed the spectre of increased production being creamed off by the landlord, while peasant security was increased by the opportunity to buy the land. Peasants on crown lands and state peasants, liberated by the statutes of 1863 and 1866 on broadly similar terms to those of private serfs, were able to buy rather more land on better terms.

Yet the peasantry as a whole remained in a position of extreme economic and political weakness. Advantaged households might briefly establish a privileged position within their own commune and rent land from the nobility on their behalf. But the containing practice of periodic communal redistribution of land, the heavy impositions of state, the vulnerability of even the most successful household to the vagaries of the climate-all provided major obstacles to the emergence of sturdy yeomen. Most significant was the process by which peasants continued to divide the land of large households to set up new families in their own homes and merged plots which old age and death had rendered unviable. The overwhelming majority of peasants remained "middle peasants" who, despite gradual integration into the market and a slow rise in literacy, remained in large measure set apart from and subordinate to the world outside. The other Great Reforms of 1860s, affecting the judicial system, the press, and the universities, had little effect on the peasantry. They did gain a minority voice

on the new local government bodies (zemstva) set up in 1864, but they tended to view them as an additional burden rather than as a vehicle for pursuit of their own interests. For the most part, their political leverage was still restricted to local instances of illegal resistance and spectre of mass disturbances. Amidst the dislocation of Crimean war and the uncertainty, which followed it, rural unrest had made a significant impact on government policy. Peasant protest had reached a level, which led Soviet historians to identify the period as Russian first 'revolutionary situation'. Acute disappointments at being made to pay for the land they considered their own sparked widespread and in places violent protest between March and May 1861. But swift and drastic actions by the government succeeded in crushing resistance. Although below the surface tension remained high in the countryside – at once reflected in and fed by repeated rumors of an imminent 'real' Emancipation – the number of disturbances trailed off.

Yet in the midst of these economic and cultural changes, the peasants gained no new outlets for their political aspirations. Other than the Zemstvos (which had limited functions and powers), they had no institutions through which they could express their grievances and seek solutions to them. Even as they were beginning from below to bridge the gap between themselves and the empire's elites, there was no sign of a civic nation, which they could join.

For such a system to work, however, the peasants would have needed a sufficient amount of land or unrestricted opportunities to make money in non-agricultural employment. Neither desideratum was attained. While maximum and minimum norms were established for different zones, they

were not always realized or adequate in all cases even when they were realized. The peasants often lost land, particularly in black earth region- in sartov and Samara more than 40 per cent of what they had previously worked. In such provinces, they were often forced by economic circumstances if not by law to continue working for their masters (otrabetka replacing barshchina in technical terms). In less fertile regions near the center and in the north, it is true, they often gained land, but here the obrok form of payment had long been more profitable for the landlords than labor services, and therefore land was not as important to the erstwhile masters as cash.

### **Alternative View on The Emancipation Edict of 1861**

The following selection is from the memoirs of Prince Peter Kropotkin, a student in the corps of pages in 1861 when a statute abolishing serfdom was enacted.



**“ I was in Nikolskoye in August 1861, and again in the summer of 1862, and I was struck with the quiet, intelligent way in which the peasants had accepted the new conditions. They knew perfectly well how difficult it would be to pay the redemption tax for the land, which was in reality an indemnity to the nobles in lieu of the obligations of serfdom. But they so much valued the abolition of their personal enslavement that they accepted the ruinous charges – not without murmuring, but as a hard necessity – the moment that personal freedom was obtained...**

**When I saw our Nikolskoye peasants, fifteen months after liberation, I could not but admire them. Their inborn good nature and softness remained with them, but all traces of servility had disappeared. They talked to their masters as equals talk to equals, as if they never had stood in different relations. Besides, such men came out from among them as could make a stand for their rights”**