The Impact of Serfdom on the Russian Empire:
The Social, Political, and Economic Struggles from Russia's "Backwardness"

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The Russian empire has long been acknowledged as one of the greatest empires throughout history due to its expansionist conquests and rich culture. Despite Russia's many accomplishments, the individual and traditional characteristics of her people hindered the Russian empire from advancing at the speed of the other rapidly modernizing empires. As a result, Russia remained behind in many modern developments such as an industrial-based economy instead of one based on agriculture. Another delay in Russia's modernization resulted from adopting the feudal system when the other European empires were discarding theirs for more capitalistic systems. Serfdom substantially set back Russia's future and contributed to Russia being viewed as "backward" in their customs and developments as an empire.

Even though some Russian rulers, known as tsars, such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, attempted to persuade their people to embrace Western lifestyle through culture, dress, and education, these reforms were principally met with disapproval.[1] The people preferred to stay unique and retain their traditions instead of adopting those of outsiders. However, Russia readily adopted the European feudal system, from which they benefited from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Feudalism was a powerfully binding system for the tsars because it guaranteed the allegiance of the nobility to their sovereign, who was gracious enough to grant them lands, titles, and subjects to rule in return for their loyalty. The tsar, thus in the central position in the empire, awarded the larger estates to his most trusted favorites. This also sparked a competitive desire amongst the lords to please the tsar and gain his highest favor. Since Russia had such a broad territorial reach, specific areas of land were sectioned off by the tsar and distributed to the noblemen. The peasants who lived in that region then became the tenants of the estate, and they farmed the land in return for protection. The peasants had freedoms allowed to the lower class during medieval times and were allowed to leave the estate if they wished, but few did due to the lack of guaranteed protection. The tenants usually lived, farmed, and died on the land on which they were born. As the Russian empire continued its rapid expansion across Siberia, however, its financial responsibilities increased. These financial burdens were forced upon the peasants in the form of taxes, ultimately causing many of them to flee their farms, thus creating a deficiency in laborers and a resulting financial burden.[2]

In attempts to resolve the situation, serfdom became widespread in 1649 through a series of edicts known as the *Sobornoye Ulozhenie*, "code of laws." Throughout the rest of the seventeenth century, the tsars declared several more laws, slowly taking away the freedoms of the

[1] Anthony Miller, "Russia and the Enlightenment, Catherine and Voltaire," Lecture Notes, Hanover College, September 22, 2021.

[2] Valentine Tschebotarioff-Bill, "National Feudalism in Muscovy," *The Russian Review,* vol. 9, no. 3 (July 1950): 215.

serfs. Serfdom bound the peasants to the land, which they were now forced to work on. Any resentment was met with punishments such as flogging and banishment to the bitter wastelands of Siberia. They were advertised and sold as goods.[3] Restrictions were placed on marriages, and if the peasants wished to leave for another estate, they had to pay fees.[4] Intensive protocols were put in place which prohibited serfs from running away from their masters, and extensive consequences were listed for both the runaways and any lord who chose to retain them.[5] Ultimately, serfdom created disunity between the social classes, sparked resentment towards the tsar and the aristocracy, and destroyed the trust between the people and their leaders.

The hardship and distress endured by the peasants as a result of serfdom are recounted in an autobiography written by Savva Dmitrievich Purlevskii, a serf who lived in Russia during the nineteenth century. Throughout his narrative, Purlevskii spoke multiple times of the nobleman's mistreatment of the serfs on his estate, thus revealing the harshness of serfdom. Purlevskii added, "His power over us and the humiliating, slave-like condition of all society made me uneasy all my life. How to get rid of this centuries-old entrapment and free my family from it as well?"[6] The serfs were subject to work on land they did not own, to obey laws they could not control, and to live at the mercy of the lord who exercised his power in any manner he saw fit.

Purlevskii's exceptionally detailed account of life under serfdom revealed the perception of true cruelty and the events, which evoked by that cruelty, led to outcries for justice. He recalled watching with great difficulty over one hundred unjustified floggings by order of their master who fearfully assumed an uprising from the peasants.[7] The more he lived under the damaging system, and the more atrocities he observed, the more Purlevskii recognized the importance of exposing the darkness and struggles that resulted from serfdom. This awareness of the demoralized state of the serfs and the mistreatment shown to them by their landlords became commonplace throughout the empire. Frequent revolts from the serfs constituted a reconsideration of the political control over the organization of the estates to prevent further conflict. Some political leaders recognized this and passed many edicts attempting to lessen the harshness of serfdom. One such action included an edict from Tsar Paul I forbidding the landlords from demanding the serfs to labor on

[3] "Moskovskie vedomosti, Newspaper Advertisements Listing Serfs for Sale (1797)," in *Reinterpreting Russian History: Readings, 860–1860s*, ed. Daniel H. Kaiser and Gary Marker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 295.

[4] Alessandro Stanziani, "Revisiting Russian Serfdom: Bonded Peasants and Market Dynamics, 1600s–1800s," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 78 (2010): 15.

[5] "A Decree on Runaway Peasants, 1661," in *Medieval Russia: A Source Book, 900–1700*, ed. Basil Dmytryshyn (Hinsdale: The Dryden Press, 1973), 320–21.

[6] Savva Dmitrievich Purlevskii, *A Life Under Russian Serfdom: The Memories of Savva Dmitrievich Purlevskii, 1800–1868*, trans. and ed. Boris B. Gorshkov (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005), 96.

[7] Purlevskii, *A Life Under Russian Serfdom*, 100–01.

Sundays, thus giving them a day to rest.[8] However, little was achieved to eradicate the issue of serfdom as a whole. The empire was now reaching a state of increasing panic from the lords' unruly estates, the unrest from the serfs, and the growing tension between the social classes, all of which signaled an impending revolution. Change was now seen as necessary if the tsar was to retain control of the empire.

In 1842, Tsar Nicholas Romanov I addressed the situation. In a speech he gave to the State Council, Nicholas I said, "There is no question that serfdom in its present state in our country is an evil, palpable and obvious to everyone. However, to attack it now would be, of course, an even more disastrous evil."[9] Nicholas I, like his predecessors, believed that complete liberation of the serfs would be too futile to successfully achieve. Reasoning for this was driven by the lords' unpredictable loyalties and by the restless serfs who were anxious to be freed after centuries of oppression. In addition, Russia had utilized the system for so long that to discontinue it might cause radical and unpredictable implications. It would take several years to prepare the empire for a drastic shift in their economy, and the tsar would have to do so while still appeasing the lords, who would no doubt be angered by the interference from the monarchy and by their loss of control if their subjects were liberated. Russia at this time was in a very fragile state. Tsar Nicholas I had lost much of his centralized power. He blamed the unrest caused by serfdom on the landlords who mistreated their serfs and gave "their serfs more education than is appropriate for their status."[10] The problem now lay in how to make serfdom more manageable and regain a more centralized power.

As the political stability of Russia continued to decline, serfdom directly increased the strain on the economy. Serfdom demonstrated yet another "backward" characteristic of Russia because its economy relied so heavily on the agricultural output produced by the serfs. While other European nations' economies were advancing as a result of their industrialization, Russia's economy constantly fluctuated. The agricultural-based economy was at the mercy of unpredictable factors such as drought, famine, and sickness. Some historians contend that economic growth is possible through labor systems such as serfdom, which evenly distributes the state's responsibilities between noblemen and the tsar, and may have permitted more freedoms for the serfs than commonly thought.[11] However, other historians argue that with the abolition of serfdom came a substantial increase in economic output.[12] This would suggest that serfdom may not have

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[8] Paul I, "An Imperial Edict Forbidding Sunday Labor by Serfs (1797)," in *Reinterpreting Russian History,* 294–95.

[9] Nicholas I, "A Speech by Emperor Nicholas I on Serfdom (1842)," in *Reinterpreting Russian History,* 295.

[10] Nicholas I, "A Speech by Emperor Nicholas I on Serfdom (1842)," *Reinterpreting Russian History,* 295.

[11] T. K. Dennison, "Did Serfdom Matter? Russian Rural Society, 1750–1860," *Historical Research,* vol. 79, no. 203 (February 2006): 77.

[12] Andrei Markevich and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, "The Economic Effects of the Abolition of Serfdom: Evidence from the Russian Empire," *The American Economic Review,* vol. 108, nos. 4–5 (2018): 1113.

been the most effective resource for economic growth. Russia's underdeveloped economy under serfdom indicated its incapability of thriving in comparison to the other nation-states who were rapidly industrializing and modernizing.[13]

Another setback to economic growth was Russia's defeat in the Crimean War in 1856. Russia fully expected to win this war against the allied forces of other European empires. However, Russia experienced losses of massive proportions because the other empires' technology in warfare far outranked the inadequate Russian military during such a modernizing time. As historian Terence Emmons has argued, it was "clearly understood by Alexander II . . . that the Crimean defeat . . . was directly related to Russia's general economic and technological backwardness, and that the main obstacle to overcoming this situation was the existence of serfdom."[14] Immediately after Russia's defeat, Tsar Alexander II organized several committees to determine the best possible solution for abolishing serfdom and regaining stability. In 1861, the Emancipation Manifesto was officially signed by Tsar Alexander II. The peasants were released from the requirement of serving their landlords. Unfortunately, the conditions of this edict for the liberated serfs did not permit them complete liberation from the state or the land. Although serfdom was officially abolished, a similar system of restricted independence took its place in the form of peasant communes. The self-ruled communes consisted of overseers appointed by peasant households within a specific village. These overseers acted as mediators between the peasants and nobility. The peasants were still bound to the land because they could not leave their village without the commune's approval.[15] In return for the land that the state gave them to live on the peasants paid the state through a form of rent called redemption payments.[16] These measures were intended to provide the peasants with a sense of independence while still ensuring that that the state received income from the lower class. This only temporarily contained the overall distress of the empire which continued to reach a climax toward the end of the nineteenth century. A vast majority of the peasants were still impoverished and lacked the adequate means to survive in the peasant communes. Angered at their unchanged state of living, the peasants continued to rebel.

Even though serfdom was finally abolished in 1861, the damage from its duration could not be easily undone. Serfdom degraded society, created political conflicts, and slowed Russia's economic growth. It may have been true at one point that the system was effective for governing the people, guaranteeing loyalty to the tsar, and holding a vast and diverse empire together. However, Russia's institution of it in the early modern era amidst a rapidly modernizing world

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[13] Markevich and Zhuravskaya, "The Economic Effects of the Abolition of Serfdom," 1082.

[14] Terence Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry and the Peasant Emancipation of 1861* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 48.

[15] Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to Its Legacy*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 6.

[16] Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to Its Legacy*, 6.

placed her years behind in advancements and caused long-lasting adverse effects. The process of abolishing serfdom was extremely slow and produced little improvement in the beginning, but it was a necessary step to achieve so that Russia could begin to recover from centuries of "backward" rule and rise to become a dominant world power.

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