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## CHAPTER 18

# THE EMANCIPATION OF THE SERFS IN EUROPE

SHANE O'ROURKE

The emancipation of the serfs was an epochal event in the history of Europe. Spanning an eighty-year period from the last quarter of the eighteenth century into the second half of the nineteenth century, emancipation brought an end to serfdom in all European states. Emancipation represented the enactment of the belief that no human being should have property rights in another, a belief that at the start of this period was seen as impossibly utopian. An institution that had existed in one form or another for a millennium and a half disappeared within a relatively short period. However, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that serfdom was moribund or in decline by the end of the eighteenth century. It remained vigorous, expanding continuously and tenaciously defended by those who profited from it. Only a commensurately epochal crisis could have ended such an entrenched institution so quickly. That crisis came with the French Revolution and the revolutionary wars. Revolution and war were to be an essential part of the process of emancipation either directly or indirectly. The resulting political crisis offered two forms of emancipation: one initiated from below by the peasantry; and one initiated from above by the state. Whether it was by popular action or by the action of the state, emancipation was a political act consciously aimed at the destruction of serfdom. Serfdom demonstrated a surprising capacity to resist abolition and frequently a second or even third major crisis was required to bring it to completion. Nevertheless, by the mid-1860s, serfdom no longer existed in Europe.

### THE ORIGINS OF SERFDOM

Arising in conjunction with the waning of the Roman Empire, serfdom had expanded into Western and Central Europe by the early medieval period. It had begun as a contractual relationship in which land and security had been exchanged for labor and fealty. This simple arrangement developed over the centuries into a system of bewildering complexity and density. Legal, ecclesiastical, political, and economic powers were inextricably tangled in serfdom. The state in Western and Central Europe

developed on top of this basic relationship and functioned as part of it. Serfdom, like slavery, was a protean institution, forever adapting to changing times and circumstances. It was embedded in a wider system of privileges and responsibilities in which the lord or seigneur, as well as compelling labor service from the peasant, exercised an array of judicial, social, and physical power over the peasant. The original exchange of labor had expanded into obligations to supply produce to the lord, to use his mill, to buy beer at his tavern, to ask for permission for his children to marry and pay for the privilege, to pay to transfer his tenancy to the next generation, and so on. Sometimes the bondage was vested in the land tilled by the peasant and sometimes it was in his person, or it could be a mixture of the two. The serf was subject to the jurisdiction of his lord's court and he could be fined, beaten, or imprisoned on the order of the court. There was no single system of serfdom, nor one form centrally by the state. Serfdom existed in myriad forms in Europe ranging from vestigial demands to onerous labor and financial obligations. Everywhere, even where it was only residual, serfdom and the wider system of which it was a part was deeply resented by the peasantry.

Custom, law, and local circumstance determined the extent of the lord's power over serfs. The preponderance of power was always on the lord's side given the financial and institutional resources that he controlled. The serf, however, at least in Western Europe, was never defenseless against the caprices of the lord. Most crucially, and very different from slavery, serfs existed within the law. They had legal rights that individual or communally could be enforced, though often with considerable difficulty, through the courts. Critically, too, the serfs had an occasional ally in the crown, which sometimes acknowledged a wider state interest than the interests of the noble class. But the state was a latecomer to this relationship and found itself dealing with an entrenched and resilient system. Attempts to reform it would prove extremely difficult.

In Eastern Europe, serfdom had arisen much later, roughly at the same time that slavery had developed in the New World. An expanding international grain market had led to the enserfment of a formally free peasantry in Prussia, parts of the Austrian Empire, and the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. In Russia, too, serfdom had developed, but this had more to do with the military needs of the Muscovite and Imperial states than with the international grain market. This second serfdom, as it has been called, was much harsher and more exploitative of the peasantry than the Western European version. The further east one went the harsher it became. In Prussia and the Austrian Empire, the serfs still had the protection of the law and the occasional attempts by the crown to limit the levels of exploitation. In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and in Russia, the peasantry was subjected to excessive exploitation, backed up by a

ferocious array of powers to ensure compliance. The peasants here, like slaves, existed outside the protection of the law. These serfdoms were much closer to chattel slavery than to the serfdoms of Western Europe. Peasants could be bought, transferred from place to place, and their families broken on the whim of the lord. Not surprisingly, serfs' revolts in Eastern Europe had levels of savagery far in excess of those in Western Europe. The revolts of Bogdan Khmel'nitskii in what is today Ukraine in 1648, of Stepan Razin in 1672, and of Emelian Pugachev in 1772 in Russia had levels of violence far closer to the Haitian Revolution than the peasant revolts in Bohemia in 1775 or in Transylvania in 1784.

Serfdom was sanctified by tradition, the law, and the Church. For most of its existence, it was viewed as part of the natural order of things. The only protests came from the peasantry and these usually did not involve violent challenges, but less extreme forms of protest. Even peasant revolts rarely sought the overthrow of the system as a whole. They were more concerned with rectifying local grievances and specific complaints. In addition, levels of violence were usually relatively restrained, particularly in Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, there was no such restraint either by the peasants in revolting against serfdom or by the state in repressing them. Bereft of allies in the wider society, peasant revolts had little chance of achieving their aims. Usually the best they could hope for was an amelioration of their conditions. As long as the elites of Europe shared a consensus about the legitimacy of serfdom, its future was secure.

#### THE ENLIGHTENMENT CHALLENGE

That consensus began to disintegrate rapidly in the eighteenth century as Enlightenment thought increasingly challenged the assumptions on which the old order was based. Many of the most illustrious figures of the Enlightenment such as Kant, Voltaire, and Adam Smith attacked serfdom on a variety of grounds. It was an affront to natural law according to Kant, economically wasteful according to Smith, and an outrage to human dignity in Voltaire's account. Voltaire in his famous campaign for the liberation of the serfs in Franche-Comité in 1770 demanded "l'entière abolition de cette dernière trace des siècles barbare."<sup>1</sup> Alexander Radishchev, deeply influenced by Abbe Raynal's *History of the Two Indies*, argued that Russian serfdom was comparable only to the slavery of the Americas. In his *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, he wrote:

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, *Extrait d'un mémoire pour l'entière abolition de la servitude en France in Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1817), Vol. VI, p. 204.

For I remembered that in Russia many agriculturists were not working for themselves, and that thus the abundance of the earth in many districts of Russia bears witness only to the heavy lot of its inhabitants. My satisfaction was transformed into indignation such as I feel that when in summer time I walk down the customs pier and look at the ships that bring us the surplus of America and its precious products, such as coffee, dyes and other things, not yet dry from the sweat, tears, and blood that bathed them in their production.<sup>2</sup>

These were part of the same attacks that undermined the legitimacy of slavery. It was the cumulative nature of them beginning in the seventeenth century and intensifying in the eighteenth that destroyed the legitimacy of serfdom. This was a development of immense significance, eating away at one of the main props of serfdom. There was no remotely comparable intellectual defense of the legitimacy of serfdom. An institution that had been the bedrock of the social order since the ending of the Roman Empire was deprived of moral and intellectual legitimacy in a remarkably short time. Indeed, so effective was the campaign that serfdom became emblematic for all of the evils of the Ancien Régime in Europe.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the rulers of the great serf states in Europe had accepted the case against serfdom and recognized, in theory at least, the need for abolition. Frederick the Great in Prussia, Empress Maria Teresa and her son, Emperor Joseph II, in the Austrian Empire, and Catherine the Great in Russia were all converts to emancipation at some future point. The state had always recognized that its interests were not identical with those of the nobility and that unlimited exploitation of the peasantry harmed the fiscal, military, and economic interests of the state. Various palliatives were introduced to limit the excesses of the nobility. Frederick the Great in Prussia, for example, in 1772 banned the sale of serfs without land. Attempts were also made to restrict the number of labor days that a lord could demand from his serfs. Catherine the Great considered herself an enlightened monarch. She toyed with the idea of curbing some of the excesses of serfdom in Russia. The reaction of the nobility to these gentle hints convinced Catherine that the security of her throne depended on dropping any attempt to interfere with serfdom. In fact, under Catherine, the serf system reached its apogee and she herself gave over a million serfs to various favorites at court. Although all of these rulers had accepted the intellectual and moral case against serfdom in terms of practical politics, emancipation remained a utopian project. Against the opposition of the nobility and the sheer complexity of the task of emancipating the serfs, the intellectual and moral case against serfdom counted for little. Only in the Austrian Empire was there a determined effort under

<sup>2</sup> A. Radishchev, *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, L. Weiner (tr.) (Cambridge, MA, 1958), p. 157.

Empress Maria Teresa and Emperor Joseph II to confront the problem of emancipation head on.

Empress Maria Teresa's son, Joseph II, from the mid eighteenth century until his death in 1790, made prolonged efforts to reform the agrarian system in the empire, hoping eventually to abolish serfdom. Both mother and son were motivated by a mixture of the fiscal and military needs of the state, a desire to curb the nobility, and humanitarian concern for the peasantry. A series of decrees attempted to define and limit the amount of labor the lords could extract from the peasantry, to remove restrictions on the peasant's right to move, and to limit the power of the lord's court, culminating in 1789 in a decree that would have abolished serfdom. No other rulers in Europe had confronted so directly and so persistently the problem of serfdom as Maria Teresa and Joseph II. On paper, their achievements were impressive. Yet, the reality fell far short of what the decrees promised. Opposition from the nobility, ensconced within their provincial parliaments and diets, prevented the implementation of much of the legislation. It also threatened the state with outright rebellion in Hungary, Bohemia, and other parts of the empire. Dangers came from the peasants as they willfully misinterpreted legislation or staged risings to carry out a more complete abolition of serfdom. By the end of his reign, Joseph was in despair and repealed many of the reforms. His successor, Leopold, recognizing the danger to the state, quietly dropped the whole reform program. The empire had been so scarred by the experience that serfdom was not finally abolished until the 1848 revolutions.

The attempts of Maria Teresa and Joseph to reform and ultimately abolish serfdom were unprecedented in that they were not preceded by an existential crisis, externally or internally. They also demonstrated the limits of what was politically feasible in normal circumstances. Rational and humanitarian motives lay behind mother and son's attempts to abolish serfdom. Yet, against the self-interest of the noble class, its willingness, and its ability to threaten the empire, the reform effort stalled and, despite some achievements, ultimately failed. Rationalism and humanitarianism ground to a halt against much less elevated sentiments. The self-evident wrongs of serfdom and its increasing delegitimization were insufficient to drive through emancipation on their own. By 1789, Joseph's failure was complete and the outlook for emancipation anywhere in Europe seemed bleak.

The failure of reform in the Austrian Empire revealed how tenacious the system was. The serf system had successfully resisted determined and prolonged challenges from above and below. Even when attempts by the state and peasant rebellion coincided as in Bohemia in 1775, serfdom emerged unscathed. The deadlock that was produced defeated Joseph. To break that deadlock would require something of extraordinary

significance, something that would galvanize sufficient political will to run the risks of emancipation and to overcome all opposition. Even war, however, in the eighteenth century did not threaten the political or social system. Defeats and victories in the wars between eighteenth-century absolute monarchs occurred without ever provoking an existential crisis. The wars did not seek to alter fundamentally or permanently the balance of power between the great states of Europe. In this context, even exogenous shocks to the system were limited and easily dealt with. The French Revolution and subsequent revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars changed this context. Ideologically, the revolution laid down an explicit challenge to the old order of which serfdom was the embodiment. The revolution also changed the nature of warfare. Now at stake were not small slithers of frontier territories, but the very existence of the empires as independent powers. Military defeat, economic collapse, and the obvious inability to withstand revolutionary and Napoleonic France provided the impetus to break the deadlock that had thwarted all previous attempts at reform.

#### THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND REVOLUTIONARY WARS

Table 18.1 summarizes the ending of serfdom across Continental Europe. The first major initiative was in the largest country in Western Europe. A series of bad harvests in the 1780s, culminating in the threat of a catastrophic failure in 1788, caused widespread peasant uprisings. These risings were very similar to other peasant rebellions that had taken place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They expressed peasant grievances over taxes, the high price of bread, and the seigniorial regime, and above all the continued existence of serfdom. There still existed about 1 million serfs in France on the eve of the Revolution. What distinguished this rebellion from numerous others that had preceded it was a political crisis of unprecedented depth and scope. The summoning of the Estates General and its call for a register of grievances transformed a traditional peasant jacquerie with limited and specific grievances into a comprehensive assault on seigniorial privilege. For the first time, the peasants could count on allies in the center of political power who articulated peasant desires into comprehensive assault on the old order. For radicals in Paris, serfdom in particular and seigniorial privilege in general were essential in mobilizing opinion in favor of an ever more radical revolution. The Great Fear, beginning in the Franche-Comté, the heartland of French serfdom, swept over France in the spring and summer of 1789. It radicalized opinion against the old regime in the countryside and in the town and gave an emotional charge to the more intellectual criticisms of serfdom and privilege.

Table 18.1 *The Major Emancipations of Serfs in Europe*

State	Year of Emancipation	State	Year of Emancipation
Savoy	1771	Saxony	1832
Baden	1783	Brunswick	1832
Denmark	1788	Schaumburg-Lippe	1845
France	1789	Schwarzburg-Sonderhausen	1848
Switzerland	1798	Reuss (older line)	1845
Schleswig-Holstein	1804	Saxe-Weimar	1848
Poland	1807	Austria	1848
Prussia	1807	Saxe-Gotha	1848
Bavaria	1808	Anhalt-Dessau-Kothen	1848
Nassau	1812	Saxe-Coburg-Gotha	1848
Estonia	1816	Oldenburg	1849
Courland	1817	Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt	1849
Wurttemberg	1817	Anhalt-Bernburg	1849
Livonia	1819	Lippe	1849
Mecklenburg	1820	Saxe-Meiningen	1850
Grand Duchy of Hesse	1820	Reuss (younger line)	1852
Hannover	1831	Hungary	1853
Electoral Hesse	1831	Russia	1861
Saxe-Altenburg	1831	Romania	1864

Source: Jerome Blum, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 1978), p. 356.

Growing radicalism, and the obvious inability of the state to suppress it, stimulated the more astute members of the nobility to recognize the dangers that this posed to their entire way of life. Peasant attacks had expanded from specific grievances related to serfdom and seigniorial privilege to attacks on the property of the nobility in general. Piecemeal concessions to the peasantry were no longer able to diffuse the crisis. The depth of the crisis in the countryside prompted the extraordinary session of the National Assembly on August 4, 1789. In a highly charged emotional atmosphere, noble deputies proposed the abolition of the entire feudal system. The result was a decree remarkable both for being sponsored by the prime beneficiaries of the system and its destruction in a few short sentences of the seigniorial system, beginning with the abolition of serfdom. The first article of the decree declared:

The National Assembly completely destroys the feudal regime. It decrees that, in rights and duties, both feudal and *censuel*, deriving from real or personal mortmain, and personal servitude, and those who represent them, are abolished without compensation; all others are declared redeemable, and the price and manner of the

<sup>3</sup> Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution 1789–1799* (Oxford, 2002), p. 58.



redemption will be set by the National Assembly. Those of the said rights that are not abolished by this decree will continue nonetheless to be collected until settlement.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequent articles suppressed manorial courts, hunting privileges, and the collection of tithes, all without compensation. The scope of the reform was breathtaking, as was its terse and seemingly unambiguous language. That vast, dense tangle of feudal privilege of which serfdom was the heart, whose very complexity had thwarted previous attempts at reform, was cut off at its roots. The abolition of serfdom was immediate, unconditional, and without compensation. The concision and clarity of the decree could be grasped by even the most uneducated. Those three basic principles were fixed immediately in the minds of the peasants and became the basis of their attitudes to subsequent elaborations of the principles of the decree of August 4. The decree provided the model against which all future emancipations would be measured and had resonances far beyond France. What had happened in France spilled across its borders rapidly.

The Decree of August 4 established the principles on which subsequent emancipation legislation would be worked out in the National Assembly. The debates in the Assembly and the legislation demonstrated again the tenacity of serfdom and the feudal system. A very effective rearguard action managed to salvage a great deal of what had seemingly been abolished by the Decree. Noble representatives had been particularly effective in arguing that many of the dues that the peasant paid had not been rooted in serfdom, but were rents owed to lords for property or other services. The legislation that emerged reflected this much more conservative interpretation of the decree of August 4. However, the peasantry was not to be mollified by half measures. They were helped by the clarity and simplicity of the original decree that provided a justification for resistance to the subsequent salvage operation carried out by the nobility. From 1790, a new wave of uprisings swept through the countryside, coinciding with new outbreaks of radicalism in Paris. By August 1792, the Assembly hurriedly passed new legislation that effectively put the principles of August 4 into law.

The emancipation of the serfs in France came about as part of a much wider attack on the old regime. It was the revolutionary circumstances of 1789 that enabled emancipation of the remaining serfs to take place. Peasant revolt from 1788 had helped create the revolutionary situation in France that climaxed, in peasant eyes at least, with the decree of August 4. Peasant protest and national politics fed off each other in a spiral of increasing radicalization. It was the combination of action from below together with political radicalism at the national level that enabled serfdom to be abolished. Joseph II could not and would not embrace peasant revolt as a lever to force emancipation against the wishes of the nobility. This left peasants bereft of leadership and support at the national level, condemning their

revolts to failure along with Joseph's attempts to abolish serfdom. In France, revolutionary action solved the conundrum of how to abolish serfdom.

Events in France would have been disturbing enough for the states east of the Rhine in any context. The serfdoms of Prussia and of the Austrian and Russian Empires were more onerous and extensive than the French. What made abolition in France so threatening was the universalism of the revolution and the manner in which emancipation had been carried out. The language of liberation and emancipation summoned people of all countries to follow the French example, explicitly challenging the serf systems that existed across Europe. That challenge was answered in 1792 with the first attempt to suppress the revolution from outside. The War of the First Coalition began the era of revolutionary wars and opened the way for a much more extensive emancipation of serfs.

Paradoxically, the first effect of the revolution was a decisive setback to the cause of emancipation. The destabilizing effects of the revolution were experienced very quickly on the state's bordering France. Peasant revolts broke out in the Rhineland states and in Saxony. These were suppressed without much difficulty, but they added to the already profound anxiety of the ruling elites. Every criticism of the existing system now had associations with Jacobinism. In Austria, whatever remained of the reform spirit dissipated in the much more conservative climate with the Emperor Leopold VII abandoning the reform program of his deceased brother. In Russia, Catherine the Great swiftly dropped her initial support of the revolution and vigorously persecuted anyone suspected of revolutionary sympathies. Alexander Radishchev, the author of the celebrated attack on Russian serfdom, was arrested and sentenced to death, a sentence later commuted to banishment for life. Even in Britain, the campaign against the slave trade suffered in the fearful atmosphere of the 1790s.

Such setbacks were only temporary, however. Between 1792 and 1815, serfdom was abolished by French forces or their proxies in the Rhineland states, Switzerland, the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, the Hanseatic States, and Württemberg. France imposed emancipation on these states with little cost to itself, but Prussia and the Austrian and Russian Empires were a different matter. Despite the repeated defeats inflicted by the French on these three states, they made no attempt to encourage serf revolt as means of further undermining their opponents. Even in Russia, in 1812, when emancipation could have altered the outcome of the campaign, Napoleon did not consider it. French policy, particularly under Napoleon, was to reduce the empires to satellite status under French dominion, but not to cause chaos by sponsoring peasant revolt. Even so, emancipation now no longer depended solely on French intentions.

No state was more affected by the revolutionary wars than Prussia. Defeats in the Battles of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806 were so complete that

the continued existence of Prussia was dependent on Napoleon's whim. The Treaty of Tilsit (1807) left Prussia reduced to a satellite, but still intact as an entity. This reprieve provided the opportunity for a wholesale reconstruction of the state. The scale of such an overwhelming defeat made previously unthinkable actions not only thinkable, but demanded their implementation as a vital state interest. King Frederick William II of Prussia summed up the new mood post Jena: "The abolition of serfdom has been my goal since the beginning of the reign. I desired to attain it gradually, but the disasters which have now befallen the country now justify, and indeed require, speedier action."<sup>4</sup> Serfdom was widely seen as a major cause of the failure of the Prussian state to resist the onslaught of the French. It was the starting point of the whole reform program that was devised and implemented with astonishing speed. A decree in 1807 effectively abolished serfdom, freeing the serfs from dependence on their lords and making them proprietors of their holdings. The swiftness and radical nature of the decree reflected the shock that the Prussian kingdom had suffered. What was not made clear by the decree was what degree of compensation the lords would have for loss of their land. Later Acts in 1811 and 1816 made redemption difficult and complicated, reflecting the receding shock of the early period. However, the emancipation of the serfs was irreversible.

The abolition of serfdom in Prussia was irrefutably the result of military catastrophe. Recognition that serfdom needed to be abolished had existed for at least half a century, but nothing justified the risks of such a drastic measure. Only an existential crisis mobilized sufficient political determination to bring about emancipation. The King, supported by a small group of enlightened bureaucrats, set about renovating the state. The keystone of that renovation was the abolition of serfdom. Other measures would follow, but emancipation was the precondition for all other reforms. The Prussian path to emancipation offered an alternative to the model offered by France in 1789 or the one imposed by French arms afterwards. The Prussian way, as explained by one of the architects of the reform, was "a revolution from above." By initiating and controlling the process, the state ensured that its interests were secured first and foremost. The basic terms of emancipation were dictated by the state and, though there was some negotiation, those terms remained unchanged. Not surprisingly, both peasants and nobles felt deeply cheated by the outcome. Nevertheless, the Prussian experience now provided an alternative model to that of the French Revolution, and an obviously much more congenial one for ruling elites.

The ending of the revolutionary era in 1815 ushered in a profoundly conservative mood in Europe. The desire for a return to stability and an

<sup>4</sup> C. Clark, *The Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600–1947* (London, 2006), p. 327.

end to social upheaval brought a halt to the emancipations that had begun in 1789. The sense of urgency and crisis that had driven emancipation diminished rapidly and there were no new emancipations after 1815. In Württemberg, serfdom was even reimposed. The Prussian emancipation took a decidedly more conservative turn, reflected in the Decree of 1816, which gave much more attention to noble interests. In Russia, too, the early reforming zeal of Alexander I fizzled out and little came of his many attempts to emancipate the serfs. The Austrian Empire, after its Josephite experience, had not made any attempts to abolish serfdom during the war and had even less reason to pursue this course after the war ended. Even so, the change in Europe in 1815 was astonishing. In Western and Central Europe, serfdom had all but disappeared. Echoes of it would linger on, but the institution itself had been destroyed during the revolutionary era. Serfdom remained in the Austrian Empire and vestiges lingered on in Prussia. Both states recognized the necessity and inevitability of abolition, but without an existential crisis, they lacked the political will to abolish serfdom. The 1848 Revolution provided the necessary crisis, and emancipations followed in both the Austrian Empire and Prussia by 1850.

#### EMANCIPATION IN RUSSIA

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.<sup>5</sup> 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 to 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

<sup>5</sup> F. W. Weislo, *Reforming Rural Russia: State, Local Society, and National Politics 1855–1914* (Princeton, NJ, 1990), pp. 7–8.

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.<sup>6</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup> S. Tolstoy, *The Diaries of Sofia Tolstoy*, C. Porter (tr.) (Richmond, 2009), p. xii.

(*krepostnichestvo*). 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."<sup>7</sup> 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 Kiselev, one of the most able ministers of the nineteenth century and a personal friend of Nicholas, was abandoned by Nicholas at the critical moment. Within the bureaucracy by mid-century, there was a small group, as in Prussia, which, though comprising nobles, was committed to abolition in the interests of the state. Yet, these were relatively junior officials who had no influence on this most sensitive of matters.

All over Europe, the French Revolution and revolutionary wars had stimulated emancipations. The humiliation of defeat and fears for national survival had galvanized the political will to abolish serfdom. Russia, however, had emerged triumphant from the wars in 1815. Victory over Napoleon demonstrated the effectiveness of the serf system, if not its legitimacy. Alexander I had thought much about abolishing serfdom and, in 1815, at the height of his prestige, he had sufficient political capital to at least attempt emancipation. Yet, the crushing victory of the Empire removed the stimulus of reform and Alexander opted for stability rather than a new upheaval. His successor, Nicholas I, the embodiment of what an autocrat should be, neither had sufficient nerve to push reform through nor faced a crisis of sufficient magnitude to force him. From 1815 to 1853, Russian prestige and power dominated the continent. In such circumstances, the political will to take on the task of emancipation was always lacking. All initiatives failed in the end.

The only major emancipation before 1861 had been in the Baltic states, a peripheral area of the Empire. But this was widely recognized to have been a disaster. The peasantry were freed there, but without land, creating an impoverished rural proletariat in which class hatreds mingled with ethnic

<sup>7</sup> A. P. Zablotskii-Desiatovskii, *Graf P. D. Kiselev e ero vremia: materialy dlia istorii Imperatorov Aleksandra I, Nikolaia I n Aleksandra II* (St. Petersburg, 1882), Vol. 2, p. 210.

ones in a particularly poisonous mix. The reform in the Baltic states provided a model of how not to emancipate the serfs. What was singularly lacking was a model of how to do this. The problems were immense and no state had ever attempted such a large emancipation. In France, Prussia, and the Austrian Empire, the emancipations had been traumatic, but serfdom in these places involved much smaller numbers and was embedded in a much more diverse social structure. In Russia, the serfs were an absolute majority of the population and they existed in a social structure that was starkly binary in nature. Russia was a servile society in the full meaning of the word rather than a society with serfs. Serfdom in Russia ground on through inertia in the first half of the nineteenth century and, until something sufficiently traumatic occurred, there was little prospect that this would change.

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.<sup>8</sup>

Alexander's model, insofar as he had one, was the Prussian one, as his reference to reform from above indicated. But beyond that, he had no clear idea.

<sup>8</sup> S. F. Platonov, *Aleksandr II Vremia Velikikh Reform: Kratkii Obzor Vremeni Imperatora Aleksandra II i Velikh Reform* (Moscow, 2013), p. 69.

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. A transitional

period of two years was established, but serfdom as an institution and as the foundation of the Russian state was gone. 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.

#### THE AFTERMATH OF SERFDOM

Serfdom had been abolished, but its malevolent legacy lived on for decades. The peasantry was bitterly disappointed with the terms of emancipation, since it had expected to receive the land it worked without paying any compensation. In their eyes, the land had already been paid for several times over by the sweat and blood of their ancestors. The moral outrage of the peasants endured until the 1917 Revolution, when they finally imposed their version of a just settlement on the countryside, the so-called Black Repartition (the seizure and redistribution of all non-peasant lands).

The long-term goal of the emancipators had been to create citizens out of serfs. They had recognized that this would be the work of at least two generations and that formal emancipation had only been the beginning of the process. Transforming serfs into citizens would require further reforms to the legal system, the provision of universal education, and economic development. However, none of these hopes was to be realized, or at least realized in ways sufficient to make peasants into citizens. The last two tsars, Alexander III and Nicholas II, proved to be more interested in imposing the state on the peasants than integrating them into it. The peasants remained apart from the state with little but mutual hostility connecting them. Very rapid population increase in the decades after the emancipation created unprecedented pressure on the land. In these circumstances, grievances over the emancipation settlement grew rather than diminished over the decades. Resentment at the continuing presence of the nobility in the countryside remained as strong as ever. Riots in Poltava Province in 1902 shocked the government by the ferocity of peasant violence and the depth of peasant alienation from the regime. Yet, nothing was done to

address peasant grievances and the bankruptcy of government policy toward the peasantry was revealed in all its clarity in the 1905 Revolution. Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1903 to 1904 gave the peasantry the opportunity to solve the peasant question from below. Revolution swept the countryside as peasants burned manor houses and seized the land and property of nobles. Brutal repression in 1906 restored the authority of the government, but did nothing to address the fundamental grievances of the peasantry. The Stolypin Reforms attempted to create a new basis of support for the regime in the countryside by establishing a class of independent small peasant proprietors who would support the government. However, the First World War cut short this final attempt to solve the peasant question by the imperial regime.

#### CONCLUSION

By the second half of the 1860s, serfdom had disappeared from Europe. A cycle that began with the emancipation of the French peasantry in 1789 closed with the emancipation of state peasants in Russia in 1863. An institution that had existed in various forms in Europe for a millennium and a half disappeared within the space of about eighty years. The process of emancipation was rooted in the delegitimization of serfdom that began with the Enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century. Remarkably rapid, the moral case for serfdom was undermined and from then on the institution was defended purely on pragmatic grounds. But the moral case on its own was incapable of mobilizing sufficient political will to destroy such a deep-rooted institution. Its defenders were numerous, articulate, and located at the very heart of power. Even the most powerful monarchs, such as Catherine the Great and Frederick the Great, accepted that they had little power in this respect. Only Joseph II in the Austrian Empire sought to take on the vested interests that supported serfdom and abolish it. Joseph made a determined and prolonged attempt to emancipate the serfs, yet in the end he failed and serfdom survived in the Austrian Empire until the 1848 revolutions. Joseph's failure revealed the limits of reform, however rational and moral the reform was. Until the broader political context changed, no emancipation was possible in a major state.

The wider political context changed in the most radical way just as Joseph was accepting defeat in his attempt to abolish serfdom. The French Revolution and the responses to it opened the way to emancipation at a very rapid pace. The Revolution provided the two basic models of emancipation. The peasants in France emancipated themselves through a series of risings from 1788 to 1792. This emancipation from below was supported and recognized, albeit belatedly, by the central authority in ways which would have been impossible under the old regime. Prussia provided

the alternative model of emancipation. This was an emancipation initiated from above and framed to take account above all of the interests of the state. Crushing military defeat allowed the monarch, with the support of a few enlightened officials, to emancipate the peasantry regardless of the risks involved. Only a crisis that threatened the existence of the state could mobilize sufficient political will to carry out emancipation. The Austrian and Russian Empires survived the crisis of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras with serfdom intact. Existential crises transformed the situation in Austria in 1848 and in Russia in 1853 to 1856. Both states responded with emancipation projects that definitively ended serfdom. The emancipation of the serfs in Europe was rooted in the long term in serfdom's loss of intellectual legitimacy after the Enlightenment and in the short term by acute political crises arising from revolution and war.

A GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

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