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The Emancipation of the Russian Serfs, 1861: A Charter of Freedom or an Act of Betrayal?

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Michael Lynch takes a fresh look at the key reform of 19th-century Russia.

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.

Why was it necessary to end Serfdom?

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, industrial backwardness. These were oversimplified explanations but there 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 liberalising of Russian society, beginning with the emancipation of the exploited peasants.

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.

Alexander II's Role

By an odd twist of fate, defeat in the war proved of value to the new Tsar. Although he had been trained for government from an early age, foreign observers had remarked on how diffident and unsure he appeared. The war changed all that. Coming to the throne in 1855 in the middle of the conflict, Alexander II was unable to save Russia from military failure, but the humiliation convinced him that, if his nation was to have stability and peace at home and be honoured abroad, military and domestic reforms were vitally necessary. The first step on that path would be the removal of serfdom, whose manifest inefficiency benefited neither lord, peasant, nor nation. Alexander declared that, despite Russia's defeat, the end of the war marked a golden moment in the nation's history. Now was the hour when every Russian, under the protection of the law, could begin to enjoy 'the fruits of his own labours'.

Alexander was right in thinking the time was propitious. It had long been appreciated that some land reform was necessary. To the social and economic arguments were now added powerful military ones. The army was the great symbol of Russia's worth. As long as its army remained strong Russia could afford to ignore its backwardness as a nation. But the Crimean defeat had undermined this notion of Russia's invincibility. Few now had reasoned objections to reform. Serfdom was manifestly not working. It had failed to provide the calibre of soldier Russia needed.

So it was that in 1856, the second year of his reign, Alexander II (1855- 81) announced to the nobles of Russia that 'the existing condition of owning souls cannot remain unchanged. It is better to begin to destroy serfdom from above than to wait until that time

when it begins to destroy itself from below'. These words have often been quoted. What is less often cited is his following sentence: 'I ask you, gentlemen, to figure out how all this can be carried out to completion.' Alexander was determined on emancipation, but he shrewdly judged that — by making over to the landowners the responsibility for detailing how this was to be done — he had made it very difficult for them either to resist his command or to blame him if their plans were subsequently shown to be faulty. This was evidence of the remarkable power and influence that the tsar exercised as absolute ruler.

Over the next five years, thousands of officials sitting in a range of committees drafted plans for the abolition of serfdom. When their work was done they presented their proposals to Alexander who then formally issued them in an Imperial Proclamation. When it was finally presented, in 1861, the Emancipation statute, which accompanied the Proclamation, contained 22 separate measures whose details filled 360 closely printed pages of a very large volume. Alexander declared that the basic aim of emancipation was to satisfy all those involved in serfdom, serfs and land owners alike:

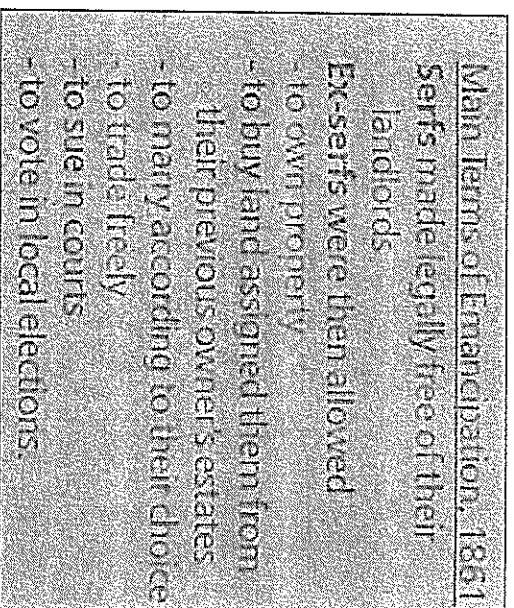
Called by Divine Providence We vowed in our hearts to fulfil the mission which is entrusted to Us and to surround with Our affection and Our Imperial solicitude all Our faithful subjects of every rank and condition.

Betrayal of the Peasants?

Impressive though these freedoms first looked, it soon became apparent that they had come at a heavy price for the peasants. It was not they, but the landlords, who were the beneficiaries. This should not surprise us: after, it had been the dvoriane who had drafted the emancipation proposals. The compensation that the landowners received was far in advance of the market value of their property. They were also entitled to decide which part of their holdings they would give up.

Unsurprisingly, they kept the best land for themselves. The serfs got the leftovers. The data shows that the landlords retained two-thirds of the land while the peasants received only one-third. So limited was the supply of affordable quality land to the peasants that they were reduced to buying narrow strips that proved difficult to maintain and which yielded little food or profit.

Moreover, while the landowners were granted financial compensation for what they gave up, the peasants had to pay for their new property. Since they had no savings, they were advanced 100 per cent mortgages, 80 per cent provided by the State bank and the remaining 20 by the landlords. This appeared a generous offer, but as in any loan transaction the catch was in the repayments. The peasants found themselves saddled with redemption payments that became a lifelong burden that then had to be handed on to their children.



The restrictions on the peasants did not end there. To prevent emancipation creating too much disruption, the government urged the peasants to remain in their localities. This was easy to achieve since, for obvious reasons, the great majority of the ex-serfs bought their allotments of land from the estates where they were already living. It was also the case that the land available for purchase came from a stock of land granted to the village and was then sold on to individual peasants.

A further aid to the authorities in maintaining control was the reorganisation of local government, which was one of the key reforms that followed in the wake of emancipation. The government, through its land 'commandants' (officials appointed to oversee emancipation) insisted that the *mir* (the village commune) become the focus of life in the countryside. The motive was not cultural but administrative. The *mir* would provide an effective organisation for the collection of taxes to which the freed serfs were now liable; it would also be a controlling mechanism for keeping order in the countryside. Arguably, after 1861, the freed Russian peasant was as restricted as he had been when a serf. Instead of being tied to the lord, the peasant was now tied to the village.

What all this denoted was the mixture of fear and deep distaste that the Russian establishment traditionally felt towards the peasantry. Often contemptuously referred to as the 'dark masses', the peasants were seen as a dangerous force that had to be kept down. Beneath the generous words in which Emancipation had been couched was a belief that the common people of Russia, unless controlled and directed, were a very real threat to the existing order of things. Whatever emancipation may have offered to the peasants, it was not genuine liberty.

The Significance of Emancipation

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 modernise 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 neighbours 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 labouring. 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 honour bound.

Timeline

1855	Death of Nicholas I, accession of Alexander II, while Russian position in Crimean war is hopeless
1856	Treaty of Paris ends the war
1857	Alexander instructs each province to consider reform
1859	Drafting Commissions appointed to consider proposals
1861	Emancipation decree; riots by peasants; beginning of expansion of schools
1862	Public budget set and published; regional military commands established
1863	Universities given significant autonomy
1864	Zemstva established
1865	Press given greater freedom
1866	Assassination attempt on Alexander II
1867	Second assassination attempt
1872	First women admitted to Moscow University
1881	Alexander II assassinated by <i>Narodnya Volja</i>

Issues to Debate

To what extent did defeat in the Crimean War provide Alexander II with an ideal opportunity to introduce major reforms?

In what ways were the Russian peasants better off because of Emancipation, in what ways worse off?

Do you accept the view that the Emancipation of the Serfs was symptomatic of the unwillingness of the tsarist system to embrace much needed root and branch reform?

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