

Emancipation of the Serfs by Alexander II

Feb 10, 2009 Michael Streich

The 1861 Emancipation Act gave millions of Russian serfs freedom but their newly acquired land allotments were insufficient, creating a new type of slavery.

Alexander II became Tsar of Russia in the closing days of the Crimean War. The war had demonstrated the inherent weakness of the Russian military and prompted the reform-minded 37-year old Tsar to overhaul major areas of the Russian State, including military, judicial, and educational reforms. It was the emancipation of Russia's serfs, however, that earned him the accolade of "Tsar Liberator," although the actual effects of the emancipation are a subject of debate.

Emancipation of the Russian Serfs

Although previous tsars had entertained reforms of Russian serfdom, the institution had become too entrenched after centuries of acceptance. Often, following localized insurrections such as the great peasant uprisings under Razin, Bulavin, and Pugachev, the government supported stronger measures to limit peasant activities and impose stricter controls. Alexander II, however, came to the imperial throne at a time other European dynasties had already mitigated their institutions of serfdom or eliminated them altogether. According to the new Tsar, it was important to reform serfdom from the top down.

Of Russia's sixty million inhabitants, fifty million were peasants. Although approximately one million peasants (counted by males) were state owned, the majority of serfs were privately owned. At the time emancipation was seriously discussed in secret committees, almost three quarters of all privately held serfs had been mortgaged to credit institutions by their owners. Serfs represented a tradable commodity and those owners forced to send male serfs as military recruits (or voluntarily given up for recruitment as a punishment) received generous government redemption certificates.

Nikolai Gogol's unfinished *Dead Souls* satirizes the system of Russian serfdom through the protagonist's plot to purchase the souls of dead serfs still on the taxation register, mortgage them after acquisition through legal documentation, and retire in great wealth. The story highlights the absurdity of the system which had no regular census mechanisms providing for accurate records in terms of living serfs.

The Emancipation Act of 1861 granted personal freedom but in stages. After a two year period during which serfs negotiated land allotments due them in conjunction with the imperial manifesto, they would be free and able to subsist on small plots that were taken from their owners land holdings. In most cases, these land allotments were of poor quality and smaller in size than pre-emancipation plots that the landlords had set aside for the peasant's personal use. As a result, many peasants became tenant farmers, unable to sustain themselves from their small land allotments. Additionally, the traditional right to obtain timber and firewood had been eliminated, imposing further burdens.

The costs of emancipation were also borne by the peasants who had to repay the state over a forty-nine year period for the compensation paid to landowners by the regime at the time of emancipation. By 1905, when all remaining outstanding repayments were canceled, most peasants still owed the state vast sums.

In some ways, emancipation imposed a greater burden on peasants. Household serfs, possessing no agricultural skills, had to find other employment which included working in the slowly industrializing sector or metallurgy. Freedom is always better than slavery, yet freedom without the ability to acquire property or upward social mobility imposes a new kind of slavery. Little wonder that for years after the 1861 act, peasants still believed that the *real emancipation* was still in the future.

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