

The Social and Economic Impact of the Emancipation of the Serfs in Russia

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Abstract

The emancipation of the serfs in Russia had a huge impact on both its society and economy. With the majority of the population of Russia being serfs, the emancipation transformed society; though fell short of a total transformation of the social hierarchy. Despite this, the emancipation did provide the peasantry with more social and economic freedom than that which had existed under serfdom; leading to the emancipation the development of a new class, the bourgeois. The emancipation also fostered the steady increase in urbanisation, industrialization, and commercial farming. Nonetheless, the majority of the peasants remained economically weak. The nobility also suffered from the emancipation, losing a substantial part of their income. It is, however, worth noting that the emancipation must be considered in terms of evolution rather than revolution, as changes occurred very gradually. Additionally, the social and economic transformation during this period was the result of a number of factors, and thus the impact of the emancipation must be judged with a degree of caution

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Essay

The emancipation of the serfs in Russia (1861) is perhaps the most defining moment in Russian history, with its impact being seen many years after the event itself. Lenin saw the emancipation of the serfs as a precursor to the revolution of 1905, which itself he saw as a dress rehearsal for 1917.

Thus we see the profound impact of the decision to emancipate the serfs on some of the most important events to follow it. However there is some debate surrounding the emancipation and its impact on the Russian society and the Russian economy. While assessing the impact on these two elements we should also consider the speed of change, as this will allow us to understand the extent to which the change was felt by society at the time. We must briefly consider society prior to the emancipation in order to draw conclusions about the effects of the reform. The Russian economy was primarily centred on agriculture. Serfdom was in place, with the nobility owning the majority of the peasants, forming part of a strict hierarchical society. The nobility's power essentially came from the right to own land and the right to own serfs. However by the time of the reign of Alexander II serfdom began to be questioned and attempts to abolish serfdom began; a process which was only fully completed during the reign of Nicolas II, in 1866 with the emancipation of state serfs.

We should familiarise ourselves with the terms of the emancipation itself. It was decided that the serfs should be emancipated with both their household plot and an allotment of land, the size of which should be around the same size as that which they tilled prior to the emancipation. However the size of these plots were often smaller than this due to 'cut offs' by the nobility (Acton, 1995). The peasants would also have to pay for this land via redemption payments to the government over a 49 year period, whilst the price of the land was artificially inflated so as to compensate the nobility (Acton, 1995). Land was also not given to individual ex-serfs, but to the peasant commune, a traditional form of local peasant government (Acton, 1995). However the serfs were not immediately freed from bondage. Following the announcement of the emancipation in 1861 the serfs still had to carry out two years of 'temporary obligations' to their former masters while the individual terms of the emancipation were decided locally. The movements of the peasants were also still restricted, only now by the commune rather than the lord, for those who wished to travel had to apply to the commune for an internal passport (Robinson, 1932).

First of all we shall assess the effect of the emancipation of the serfs on Russian society. Perhaps the best place to start lies in the peasant reaction to the announcement of the reform. D. Field (1994) provides an account of a village which has just been told of the terms of the emancipation through the story of Luker'ia. What is most notable about this account is the divide between the reactions

of men and women. The men are primarily concerned with the economic implications of the emancipation, such as what land they will receive and how much they will have to pay for it. This contrasts with the reaction of Luker'ia, a woman, who is overjoyed by the news of an end to serfdom in principle. However, the reaction of Luker'ia cannot be taken as the general reaction of the country. The government was aware that the final terms of the emancipation would provoke peasant disturbances, thus the presence of government officials in rural areas increased, employers in the capital were ordered to tire the industrial serf out before the announcement of the terms (Acton, 1995), and the peace mediator was established (Field, 1994). Despite this, in some cases there was violent protest, usually caused by the rejection to perform *barshchina* (labour dues imposed on serfs by their lords) or *obrok* (land tax paid by the serfs to the lord) for their former masters (Pushkarev, 1968). However the outcomes of these uprisings were dependent upon not the peasants, but the government officials handling of the situation. An intelligent official would be able to carry out 'pacification' without the need for violence (Pushkarev, 1968). Indeed, this was the role of the newly established peace mediators, whose job involved explaining the complex legislation to the ex-serfs in a manner which was understandable to them, thus aiding the transition from serf to peasant (Field, 1994). Despite this, it is important to note that these so called 'uprisings' were generally nothing of the sort. In modern day terms the refusal of the peasants to carry out their 'temporary obligations' is most comparable to peaceful strike action, not violent protest (Pushkarev, 1968). Indeed the transition from serf to free peasant was carried through with incredible calm (Field, 1994), especially when compared with the emancipation of the slaves in America (which culminated in the civil war).

The impact of communal life on peasants was profound. The commune became incredibly important to the ex-serfs as a result of the emancipation terms. Indeed, the commune was itself in control of the land, not the individual peasants. In addition, the commune was responsible for a great many aspects of peasant life, as well as being a recognised administrative body of the state (Mironov, 1985). As a result of this the commune became both an organisation for the peasant and for the state. The commune itself was made up of peasant 'elders', who were subordinate to the township and district administration of the state (Mironov, 1985). Indeed these peasant elders become agents of the state (Wcislo, 1990). The removal of the *pomeshcik* (serf-owning lord) left a void within Russian rural society. This void was filled by the commune (Wcislo, 1990). Despite this, it is also important to

note that the commune could also be a highly charitable organisation, unlike the *pomeshchik*. Central to the whole idea of the commune was this concept of charity. When one neighbour was unable to sustain themselves, or meet redemption payments, it fell upon the better off peasants to offer charity towards them. The commune ensured this was the case, though this may be seen in either a positive or negative light. On the one hand it ensured that no peasant would starve while others prospered. Despite this, it may also have inhibited the development of a strong yeoman (Saunders, 1992). However the general point to make about the issue of communal life is that the commune left room for originality and diversity among the peasants (Mironov, 1985), offering a chance for peasants to improve their social and economic status, while still ensuring that the majority could survive.

The period during (and after) the Great Reforms coincided with a massive increase in the population of Russia (Robinson, 1932). This was not the fault of the reforms, but it did have an effect on the peasants who had been emancipated. As the population increased, the amount of land per peasant decreased (Robinson, 1932). Thus peasants were forced to meet the same redemption payments with less land to work and therefore less income. In combination with this the demands of the market would have increased, as food was now in greater demand (Robinson, 1932). The result was the constant risk of famine. One could also suggest that as a result of problems in the countryside, people were more likely to migrate to the cities looking for work. If this is the case then we can state that the problems of the emancipation forced Russia to industrialise.

We must consider the reforms effect on the social hierarchy. F. W. Wcislo (1990) suggests that the emancipation led to a total transformation of rural society. Talk of such a transformation conjures images of the total downfall of the Old Regime and the rise of a new peasant order. It almost appears like the revolution of 1917. However, this simply was not the case. The truth is that a great deal of the Old Regime survived the reforms (Robinson, 1932). Indeed Robinson (1932, p. 116) is correct in his statement that “serfdom was gone, but poverty remained” and in his assertion that this poverty was still held by the peasants. However, there does seem to be some evidence to suggest that some peasants became successful, even very successful entrepreneurs after the emancipation. Serfdom had prevented the serfs from pursuing competitive business enterprise since any profit they made could be easily ‘creamed off’ by their masters (Blackwell, 1970). But now they had more freedom there was the opportunity to make their own money, especially if they managed to buy land outside the commune’s jurisdiction. A rapidly growing third estate began to emerge out of the peasants. The

emancipation saw the rise of the urban and rural capitalist (Zenkovsky, 1961). Perhaps this is best reflected by the fact that this new social group was officially recognised as “merchants and honorary citizens” (Robinson, 1932, p. 133). However it is also important to note that though serfdom had constrained the capitalist tendencies of the peasants, it had not inhibited them completely. Indeed, there were wealthy serfs before the emancipation (Gatrell, 1994). For the majority of peasants little changed. The process of ‘temporary obligations’ ensured that no sudden change occurred. Once this finally came to an end many peasants were forced to rent land from the nobility, ensuring that the nobility maintained its superior position over the peasants (Gatrell, 1994). In combination with this, various forms of sharecropping emerged, ensuring that the lords even maintained a cheap labour force (Field, 1994). It has even been suggested that the new bourgeois estate formed a bloc with the nobility (Robinson, 1932).

The emancipation of the serfs also had numerous economic effects. By assessing the economic effects of the emancipation we can attempt to reach a conclusion as to whether the ex-serfs and their masters were better off before or after the reform.

The rise of the new third estate provided a stimulus to industrialisation. Prior to the emancipation there had been an absence of middle-ranking figures to fulfil certain roles, such as factory managers, perhaps even in some cases, factory owners (Blackwell, 1970). With the emergence of these figures in the nineteenth century (as a result of the reform) Russian industry was at last given an opportunity to catch up with its Western counterparts. Industrialisation was also spurred on by population growth. The population of Russia increased by 60 percent between 1800 and 1863, and the urban population grew even faster than this (Blackwell, 1970). Land shortage drew people away from the countryside in to the cities and urban centres seeking work (Robinson, 1932). Russian trade grew significantly through this period, both in domestic markets and foreign ones (Blackwell, 1970). The beginnings of this change and development were apparent in 1860 (Blackwell, 1970), but were no doubt spurred on by the newly available workforce. On the other hand, Gatrell (1994) is keen to point out that the reforms of 1860 did not induce any major organisational or structural changes to the economy. Indeed, it appears that there was a significant variation of the amount of change felt by different sectors of industry (Gatrell, 1994). There were large changes in the metalwork industry for example, but lesser effects upon the cloth industry (Gatrell, 1994). It is also important to

remember that one-fifth of the nobility's enterprises which operated in 1903 had already been in operation in the pre-reform era (Gatrell, 1994).

The agricultural sector saw a shift towards commercial farming, especially in Siberia (Gatrell, 1986). There was an increased shift towards farmers specialising in particular crops (Gatrell, 1994), and peasant farmers not just farming for subsistence, but for a profit too. There was a gradual increase in the amount of land cultivated by peasant farmers during this period (Gatrell, 1994). What emerged was a far more positive agrarian economy. Perhaps this is best reflected by the fact that there was not massive grain shortage in Russia, even in 1917 (Gatrell, 1994). The problems which led to famine and starvation in Russia were often not the fault of the farmer, more frequently there were issues with the transportation of produce across Russia's vast landmass (Gatrell, 1994).

The effect of the emancipation of economic growth may give us some indication as to the effect of the reform upon the economy. Indeed industrial production increased at an average rate of 4.6 percent between 1860 and 1900, gradually gathering pace towards the end of the nineteenth century (Gatrell, 1994). However one must point out that this was not a sudden surge in production and growth. It was a slow and steady process (Gatrell, 1994). The same can be said for the agricultural sector, however growth and production here was shakier than in the industrial sector (Gatrell, 1994). Perhaps we should also note that growth had already been noticeable in the pre-reform era, owing much to the erection of the railway (Gatrell, 1994). Indeed it seems that in general that the Great Reforms did not play a huge role in the growth of industry during this period, and though it may have provided a partial stimulus, other factors, such as the railway, played a more important role (Gatrell, 1994).

Perhaps one of the less expected outcomes of the reform was the extension of the consumer market. Prior to the reforms no consumer market existed for the peasants (Blackwell, 1970). However, specialisation of certain crop in farming forced peasants in to the market as they would have to sell their own produce and buy other produce. For example, a wheat farmer may sell all of his wheat and purchase oats and rye for his own consumption. This made economic sense as wheat was generally worth more than oats or rye, which were acceptable foods for most peasants. However as time passed peasants were also drawn in to the market by their own desire (Robinson, 1932).

Now that we have assessed the various economic changes that occurred during the period of the emancipation of the serfs we can assess whether or not the peasants were better off before or after the reform. It is clear that life certainly remained difficult for the majority of peasants, whilst it is also clear that the terms of the emancipation were favourable to the nobility. The plots received by many were not large enough for them to survive on, let alone make a profit. This forced many to rent land from the nobility, either through money dues or labour dues, ensuring that the peasants remained subservient to the nobility. This was made even worse after the population rose and the amount of land per peasant decreased, forcing peasants to rent from their former masters in an attempt to offset this decline (Gatrell, 1994). This greatly inhibited any opportunity the peasants may have had to save funds in order to purchase land. The peasants also had to bear the new burden of redemption payments, which alone exceeded their receipts (Gatrell, 1994), as well as former burdens, often in the form of indirect taxes (Robinson, 1932). Evidence for this can be seen in the presence of peasant arrears throughout this period. The general pattern of accumulation of these, along with the fact that the presence of peasant arrears can be seen across most of Russia, indicates that this was an issue of continual distress in the village (Robinson, 1932). The constant redistribution of land carried out by the commune also prevented the peasants from increasing their wealth, as well as its promotion of communal behaviour and somewhat forced charity (Mironov, 1985). This was the case because as land constantly changed hands there was little incentive to improve the land, with improved drainage for example. There was also the risk that increased profits would simply be 'creamed off' by the commune and used to pay the redemption payments of less industrious peasants through the system of mutual responsibility (Field, 1994). Indeed it seems that the terms of the emancipation were not sufficient to stimulate the massive growth in agricultural output required by the peasants to meet outgoings (Gatrell, 1986). In general it is apparent that the peasants remained in a position of extreme economic weakness (Acton, 1995). However, as noted above, some peasants managed to build substantial farms and enterprises in the wake of the reform, emerging as a new third estate. Despite this, it is important for us to note that this was not the experience of the majority.

We should also consider the effect the emancipation had upon the nobility. Perhaps the most obvious response to this would be to suggest that the nobility fell in to immediate decline after the

reform. They certainly lost their sole claim to the soil and the profits which could be taken from it (Robinson, 1932). Indeed, by 1904 one-third of all noble landholdings were mortgaged in the Nobles' Land Bank (Robinson, 1932). However, smaller, less wealthy nobles could actually benefit from the emancipation. It provided them with a quick and easy way to liquidate their holdings through instant redemption (Wcislo, 1990). This allowed them to invest their funds elsewhere, such as the railway or the newly growing industry. Despite this, the majority of nobles were critical of the reform, suggesting that they felt its effects were primarily negative (Wcislo, 1990). However, perhaps we should expect nothing more of those who had lived their entire lives as serf owners (Wcislo, 1990).

The speed at which the effects of the reform were felt will allow us to comprehend the extent to which these changes were felt by society. In terms of social changes this is difficult to assess. The account of Luker'ia suggests that perhaps that the initial feelings of joy over the emancipation may not have been felt by all (Field, 1994). Indeed, even if they were, this may well have only been a short term reaction to the reform. Indeed it seems that the effect of reform may well have been felt gradually. This was the plan of the government, in an attempt to minimise disruption in the countryside (Field, 1994). In terms of the economic effects of the reform it is important to note the fact that it was a gradual transition (Gatrell, 1994).

By taking into account all of these factors we can assess the impact of the emancipation of the serfs upon the Russian society and Russian economy. The key social implication of the legislation was that the serfs were now free from their masters. Indeed a minority even evolved from serf in to a new Russian third estate. However, it is also important to remember that for the majority the social order remained much the same as before the reform. In terms of the emancipations' impact upon the economy of Russia we must judge it with a great deal of caution. This was a period where a great number of aspects were contributing to a growing economy; to a large extent through growth in the industrial sector. It is likely that other factors contributed to a larger extent to the growth of Russia's economy. It is also important to note the evolutionary nature of the reform. The emancipation of the serfs must remain one of the most important events in Russian history as it highlights a major shift away from the past traditions of Russia. However, its impact upon the society and economy of the country were perhaps not as great as one may first have assumed.

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