ABOLITION of Serfdom in the Russian Empire - 1861 - 2011 -

Serfdom and its Origins

Serfdom was a type of slavery that existed in Europe at a time when slavery itself went out of favour with the coming of Christianity. According to Church Canons, Christians could not be enslaved. And yet, the Byzantine economy could not survive without the exploitation of manual labour. Thus, a new type of slavery evolved — serfdom. Ultimately, serfdom was counterproductive to the imperial economy because a huge part of the Byzantine tax base was eliminated as more and more peasants were forced into serfdom.


HT865 .R6713 2009X
During the Middle Ages serfdom replaced slavery in Europe. Except for the Scandinavian countries, serfdom existed in one form or another throughout Europe. But as it was being eliminated in Western Europe, following the Renaissance, it was becoming increasingly institutionalized in Central and Eastern Europe. As England eliminated serfdom in 1574, the Russian peasant was being placed under the complete control of the landowner. By the middle of the 17th century, serfdom became hereditary when Russia’s Sobornoe ulozhenie (Code of Law, 1649) attached all serfs to the estate.


HT 781 .H5
Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

As Russia became an empire, serfdom was introduced throughout all the territories it conquered or annexed. Millions of people were enslaved during a period of more than 200 years. The French Revolution brought an end to serfdom in France in 1789. The Spring of Nations brought an end to serfdom in Austro-Hungary in 1848. Yet there were more than 23 million private serfs in the Russian Empire by the mid-19th century. And this did not take into account the serfs that were attached to the State or the Russian Orthodox Church. Serfs accounted for nearly 50% of the population, if not more.

HT807 .W57 2008
Abolition of Serfdom in Imperial Russia

Many factors forced Tsar Alexander II (1818-1881) to consider the emancipation of serfs. The greatest opposition came from the Russian Orthodox Church, which argued that freedom from sin was more important than freedom as a human right. Finally, the Church agreed — if the top hierarch, Metropolitan Filaret (1782-1867), could write the text of the Tsar's decree. Even though private serfs were freed on March 3, 1861, those belonging to the State and the Church had to wait another five years before receiving their freedom in 1866.
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*Manifest of Emancipation (1861)*
Nevertheless, the *Manifest of Emancipation* (1861) was commemorated by a medallion designed by Count Fedor P. Tolstoi (1783-1873). The reverse of the medallion featured the Orthodox cross (reversed in error) and a message in Old Cyrillic admonishing everyone to labour with God’s blessing. The Russian Orthodox Church continued to hope that people would remain God-fearing and servile in their lives.

To mark the 50th anniversary of emancipation in 1911, a luxurious 6-volume set titled *Velikaia Reforma (The Great Reform): 1861-1911* was published.
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Self portrait (1860), etching.
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Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

Following the Second Russian Revolution (1917) interest in the emancipation of serfs as an academic topic faded even though many of the secret archives from the tsarist period were declassified. The 100th anniversary was not celebrated at all in the Soviet Union. Who among the Communists wanted to glorify Tsar Alexander II and the Russian Orthodox Church?


HD1165 .R9 K74
Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

In the Country

I bid thee welcome, oh, sequestered nook,
Refuge of quietude, of toil and inspiration,
Wherein my days meander like an unseen brook,
   Sunk in oblivious elation.
I’m thine — I have exchanged those shameful Circe’s yokes,
Luxurious merriment, carousal, dissipation,
For the quiescent fields, the peace of murmurous oaks,
For heedless idleness, the friend of inspiration.
   I’m thine — I love this garden dim,
   By bloom and morning cool anointed,

Mikhail K. Klodt
Oak Grove (1863)
This pastureland with aromatic hayricks pointed,
Where in the spinneys freshets purl and gleam.
The scene before my gaze abounds in lively graces:
On this side twofold lakes extend their azure spaces,
Where every now and then a fisher’s sail will shine,
Behind them quilted fields and rows of hillocks swelling,
And farther, here and there a dwelling,
On luscious water-meadows wandering herds of kine,
Mills with their wings spread,
  drying-sheds with smoke-plumes welling,
Toil and contentment showing sign on sign…

Mikhail K. Klodt
Riverside Farm (1858)
Here, freed from bonds of idle fuss and clutter,
I teach myself to taste of bliss without a flaw,
With spirit truly unconstrained to worship law,
To pay no heed to the untutored rabble’s mutter,
With fellow-feeling to respond to bashful pleas,
    And not to grudge their fated ease
To fool or evildoer in their ill-got grandeur.

Oracles of the ages, here I question you!
    In solemn and secluded splendour
Your solace rings more clear and true.
Sloth’s sullen slumber is forsaken,  
To toil my ardent senses leap,  
And your creative thoughts awaken  
To ripeness in the spirit’s deep.

But then a daunting thought casts gloom on mankind’s lover:  
‘Mid flowering crops and slopes  
At every step his soul is saddened to discover  
The infamy of ignorance that blights all hopes.  
Purblind to tears, deaf to entreaty,  
By destiny ordained for man’s distress,

Mikhail K. Klodt  
*In the Field* (1872)
A barbarous barondom, devoid of law or pity,
By usurpation and the knout of ruthlessness
Preys on the peasant’s goods and time and hardship.
Bent to a ploughshare not his own, subdued by rods,
Here hollow-chested servitude in furrows plods
   For an inexorable lordship.
Here all drag on the ponderous yoke unto the tomb,
Their souls too crushed to nourish hope or aspiration,
   Here in their freshness maidens bloom
   But for some brute’s capricious inclination.
The dear support that every aging father craves,
His adolescent sons, companions of his labours,  
Go from the native cabin but to join their neighbours  
And swell the rosters of exhausted manor slaves.  
Ah, that my voice could quicken hearts to indignation!  
Wherefore into my breast were idle embers cast  
Not to be bursting into fierce heroic blast?  
Shall I behold, friends, an unshackled population,  
And serfdom overthrown by an imperial hand?  
Upon enlightened liberty’s new fatherland  
Will there break forth a lovely dawn at last?

*Alexander S. Pushkin (1819)*

Mikhail K. Klodt  
*Evening* (1874)
In the Eyes of the Beholder

When Russian writer Alexander S. Pushkin (1799-1837) wrote his poem *In the Country*, he was exiled to the south of Ukraine for five years — he had dared to question the existing social order, i.e. serfdom. It could have been exile to the brutal Solovetsky Monastery (the site of the first Gulag labour camp in the U.S.S.R.), but Pushkin had influential friends who interceded on his behalf.

Western visitors to Russia were appalled by the social order in the land and the living conditions of the ordinary people. One such visitor was Giacomo Casanova in 1765.

Alexander S. Pushkin
Portrait (1827) by Vasily A. Tropinin, who was born a serf.
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Casanova (1725-1798) had come to see Catherine the Great (1729-1796) to promote his lottery scheme. Along the way he bought himself a peasant girl to keep him company and do his housekeeping. His memoirs are particularly vivid regarding this incident: *History of My Life* (2007, uncensored English version).

The buying and selling of serfs was commonplace in Imperial Russia. Gubernatorial newspapers like *Kievskiiia gubernskiiia vedomosti* regularly published summaries of real estate transactions, including the sale of individual serfs, whole villages, and entire manorial estates.

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Russian painter Nikolai V. Nevrev (1830-1904) depicted the sale of but one female serf in his 1866 painting titled: *Bargaining. A scene from the life of a serf. From the recent past.* In it he captured the cynical degradation of a human being.

Ukrainian-born Alexander V. Nikitenko (1804-1877) was a serf of the Sheremetev Family. He was freed from serfdom in 1824 and became a professor of literature and a rather liberal-minded censor. *Up from Serfdom. My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824* (2002) is the English translation of Nikitenko’s early diaries.
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Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

Rights and Privileges

Casanova’s memoirs reveal that the sovereign was the ultimate owner of serfs in the Russian Empire. When purchasing the peasant girl he was told that, “she is still first of all the slave of the Empress.”

When Catherine the Great came to the throne, she attempted to introduce a sense of Western European justice. There was the case of Daria N. Saltykova (1730-1801), an abusive noblewoman who murdered her female serfs. In 1768, Saltykova was found guilty and imprisoned for life at the Ivanovsky Convent in Moscow.
Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

The Russian Orthodox Church was also involved in meting out justice. Daniel H. Shubin provides insight into this aspect of the Church in his book: *Monastery prisons* (2001). The last Otaman of the free Zaporozhian Host, Petro I. Kalnyshevsyh (c1691-1803), was imprisoned in the Solovetsky Monastery for 25 years, until age 111.

Landowners, however, were free to do as they pleased with their serfs, as long as they did not kill them. Dramatist Nikolai N. Evreinov (1879-1953) wrote on the history of corporal and capital punishment in Russia: *Istoriia telesnykh nakazaniï v Rossii* (2010, reprint).

Shubin, D. H. (2001). *Monastery prisons: The history of monasteries as prisons, the inmates incarcerated there, religious dissenters and sectarians, political activists and criminals, the intolerance of imperial Russia, and the struggle for Orthodox supremacy.* [S.l.]: D. Shubin.

BX581 .S48 2001
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HV8621 .R9 E875 2010
Contemporary Scholarship

Soviet-era scholars did not devote much time and effort to the topic of serfdom. Western and non-Russian scholars are just beginning to study this period of Russian history. As early as 1970, Prof. Terence Emmons wrote: *Emancipation of the Russian serfs*. More recently Prof. Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter published her book: *Russia’s Age of Serfdom 1649-1861* (2008).


HD 715 .E47
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HT807 .S454 2008
Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

Inside the World of Serfs

Casanova and Pushkin described the lives of peasants who were serfs. Professor and spy Walter Arndt (1916-2011) translated Pushkin’s youthful poem *In the Country* (1819) into English: *Pushkin threefold: Narrative, lyric, polemic, and ribald verse* (1972).

In 1825, 52% of Russian factory workers were serfs. But serfs not only worked on farms or in factories, there were bureaucrats like Nikitenko, painters like Vasily Tropinin, writers like Taras Shevchenko, and performers like Mikhail Shchepkin and Praskovia Zhemchugova.


PG3341 .A7
Sometimes serfs (or slaves) became great owners of land and serfs themselves. Zofia Clavone (1760-1822) was a young Greek girl from Constantinople that was sold into the slavery of prostitution by her mother at age 12. She was bought by the Polish Ambassador for the Polish King. Because of her exceptional beauty she was freed from slavery and became the wife of Count Stanisław Szczęsny Feliks Potocki (1753-1805). The Count built a landscaped park for Zofia near Uman, Ukraine. On average, 800 serfs toiled to construct the most beautiful park in Europe according to Polish poet Stanisław Trembecki (1739-1812).

Zofia Clavone Potocki
Portrait from about 1785.
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Today the park is a national treasure — one of the “Seven Wonders of Ukraine”. A photographic album was published in 1990 by the Sofiiivka State Park: Osin’ u Sofiiivtsi = Osen’ v Sofievke = Autumn in Sofiyivka.

The Sheremetev Family was one of the wealthiest and most influential noble families in Russia. Their estates, peopled by serfs, were not unlike a state within a state. Sheremetev serfs worked on farms, in factories, as servants, bureaucrats, soldiers and entertainers. During WWII, Nadezhda A. Elizarova chronicled the Sheremetev’s private theatre: Teatry Sheremetevykh (1944).
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One of the serf singers in the Sheremetev theatre was Praskovia I. Zhemchugova (1768-1803). She sang in operas by Grétry, Monsigny, Paisiello, Piccinni, and Rousseau. Count Nikolai P. Sheremetev (1751-1809) fell in love with her. She became his mistress and then his wife in 1801. This scandalized Russian society.

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PN2728 .S5 S46 1984
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The life of another great actor is described by Laurence Senelick: *Serf actor: The life and art of Mikhail S. Shchepkin* (1984).


Rebels in the World of Serfs

From the very beginning there were numerous rebellions against serfdom, often in conjunction with Cossack uprisings, such as the uprisings of Ivan Bolotnikov (1606-1607), Stenka Razin (1667-1671), Kondraty Bulavin (1707-1709), and Emelian Pugachev (1773-1775).

In 1834, Pugachev (c1742-1775) was immortalized by Pushkin in his Istoriia Pugacheva (The History of Pugachev). The secret documents that Pushkin never saw were published by Sergeï A. Golubtsov in a three-volume set: Pugachevshchina (1926-1931).
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DK183 .P8
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Ukrainian writer Taras H. Shevchenko (1814-1861) immortalized Ivan Gonta (1705-1768) and the rebellions of 1768 in his epic poem *Haïdamaky* (1925, reprint). This inspired Soviet-Ukrainian film director Ivan P. Kavaleridze (1887-1978) to produce his *Koliïvshchyna* (1933).

Another Ukrainian serf rebel leader Ustym Ia. Karmeliuk (1787-1835) was immortalized in prose and film, as well as in oils by Vasily A. Tropinin (1776-1857).

*The Captain’s Daughter* (1958), a film by Vladimir P. Kaplunovsky.
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Taras H. Shevchenko
Self-portrait (1847), as a political prisoner, during his exile in Kazakhstan.
He was also born a serf.
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Ivan Gonta

Since the rebellions took place on lands administered by Polish nobles, Russia allowed Gonta to be sentenced to death by torture by the Catholic Church.
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Vasily A. Tropinin
Self-portrait.
Once a serf himself.
The USSR – 20th Century Russia

World War I and the Second Russian Revolution profoundly changed the State, which was Imperial Russia. Instead of the Tsar, it was now ruled by commissars and called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The class struggle eliminated the aristocrats, which had exploited serfs in the past. The middle-class was decimated. Peasants were spared, but only those who were reduced to the level of the lowest common denominator — the collective-farm worker. Instead of labouring for the Tsar or some wealthy magnate, peasants now toiled for the State.
How ironic the revolutionary posters must have appeared to the new proletarian class of farmhands — the workers of the *kolkhoz* (collective farms) and the *sovkhоз* (State farms) — posters that blamed White Guard Russians, Polish and Ukrainian nationalists, Zionists, disenchanted revolutionaries, so-called enemies of the people, etc. for planning to enserf those peasants who did not support the revolution. And yet the bright Communist future, the workers’ paradise, was nothing but a return to serfdom. For more than 70 years the *kolkhoz* and *sovkhоз* kept the peasants servile.
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Gulags and Sharashkas

From 1930 to 1960 the Gulag inmate became the backbone of Soviet labour. It was all too easy to arrest someone under false pretence and imprison them in one of the hundreds of Gulags (forced labour camps) that dotted the Soviet map. Everyone from common criminals to political dissidents were exploited thus.

The American Federation of Labour compared the Gulag system with outright slavery. In 1951 the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions published a book, *Stalin’s Slave Camps: An Indictment of Modern Slavery*. A 1951 map published by the Free Trade Union Committee of the American Federation of Labour. Even women and children of detainees were imprisoned and exploited by the State.
Gulags and Sharashkas

From 1930 to 1960 the Gulag inmate became the backbone of Soviet labour. It was all too easy to arrest someone under false pretence and imprison them in one of the hundreds of Gulags (forced labour camps) that dotted the Soviet map. Everyone from common criminals to political dissidents were exploited thus.


Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

Slave-like conditions were also to be found in top secret sharashkas or sharagas — prison labour camps for intellectuals. Stalin feared the worse if intellectuals were to be left to their own devices. Hundreds of the most brilliant minds were imprisoned in these secret facilities to work on projects for the State. The entire Soviet aeronautics industry and space programs were created and maintained from within sharashkas.

It was only under Boris Yeltsin (1931-2007), in the Post-Soviet era, that the last of these political prisoners were freed in the 1990s.

The Marfino Sharashka

This was one of the many special labour camps where intellectuals like Kopelev and Solzhenitsyn were imprisoned. It was located in a northern suburb of Moscow. Before WWI it was the site of a Russian Orthodox Church seminary.
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Unwittingly, Western countries often provided the resources to maintain the Soviet Gulag system. Transport ships from the U.S.A., repaired for free in Vancouver, helped ferry the prisoners to and from the labour camps in Siberia’s far northeast — Kolyma. Martin J. Bollinger describes this in his book *Stalin’s Slave Ships: Kolyma, the Gulag Fleet, and the Role of the West* (2003).

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In the First Circle

The title of Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn’s book *In the First Circle* (2009, uncensored English version) alludes to Dante’s first circle of Hell in *The Divine Comedy* where the philosophers of ancient Greece, and other non-Christians, live in a walled green garden. They are unable to enter Heaven, as they were born before Christ, but enjoy a small space of relative freedom in the heart of Hell. Allegorically, this represents life in a Soviet *sharashka*. Unlike Gulag prisoners, *sharashka* inmates were adequately fed and enjoyed better working conditions.

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**Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011**

**Stalin’s Aviation Gulag**

The first edition of *Sharaga* (1971), published anonymously, was Leonid L. Kerber’s (1903-1993) first attempt to describe life in a *sharashka*. Eventually, he wrote *Stalin’s Aviation Gulag* (1996, English version) in which he describes the life and work of the great Soviet aircraft designer Andrei N. Tupolev (1888-1972). Arrested in 1937, Tupolev was not rehabilitated until 1955. He spent five years working in a *sharashka*. One of his achievements was to reverse engineer the American Boeing B-29 strategic bomber within a period of two years.

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From Assassins to Astronauts

In 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by a bomb constructed by a young Ukrainian rocket pioneer, Mykola I. Kybalchych (1853-1881), the son of an Orthodox priest. Soviet-Ukrainian rocket engineer Sergei P. Korolev (1907-1966) was inspired by Kybalchych’s scientific discoveries. Arrested in 1938, Korolev also spent five years working in a sharashka. He was rehabilitated only in 1957, just months before the launch of the first manmade object into space — Sputnik I. In 2001, his daughter Natalia published the biography: Otets (Father).
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Triptych of Conscience

Born in Kyiv, Lev Z. Kopelev (1912-1997) was a Soviet-Jewish writer and human rights activist who was arrested after he objected to the Red Army’s brutal treatment of civilians in East Prussia during WWII. At the Marfino sharashka he met Solzhenitsyn. Before the war, Kopelev witnessed and participated in the NKVD’s forced grain requisitioning, which resulted in the Holodomor (1932-1933). His three-part memoirs consist of: *The Education of a True Believer* (1976), *To Be Preserved Forever* (1976), and *Ease My Sorrows* (*Utoli moia pechali*, 1991) published in 1981.

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Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

Principles of Persecution

Nikolai E. Lansere (1879-1942) was a Russian architect of French descent. As early as 1920 Lansere was detained by Soviet authorities. In 1931, he was arrested for espionage — his sister the painter Zinaida E. Serebriakova (1884-1967) was living in exile in France. Lansere was assigned to the Leningrad architectural sharashka. He was released in 1935, but rearrested in 1938 and sent to a Gulag labour camp. Lansere died in captivity. He was rehabilitated in 1957. His daughter Natalia (1910-1998), with fellow architect Galina A. Ol’ (1910-1993), published her father’s biography: N. E. Lansere (1986).
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NA1199 .L35 O4 1986
Ether Music and Espionage

Leon S. Theremin (1896-1993) was a Soviet scientist known as the inventor of the first electronic musical instrument, the theremin, and a passive covert listening device. He travelled to Europe in 1927 and arrived in the United States later that year. Upon his return to the U.S.S.R. in 1938, Theremin was arrested and sent to the Kolyma labour camps. Soon, however, he was transferred to work in the same sharashka as Tupolev, Korolev and other famous Soviet scientists. Theremin was rehabilitated in 1956. His amazing life is the subject of Albert Glinsky’s book: *Theremin: Ether Music and Espionage* (2005).
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Abolition of Serfdom in the Russian Empire: 1861-2011

The Post-Soviet Era

In 2011, the Russian Federation commemorated the 150th anniversary of the emancipation of serfs. President Dmitry Medvedev laid a wreath at the tomb of Tsar Alexander II and Patriarch Kirill convened a Church conference on the subject. Also, the Russian government issued a 1000-rouble gold coin. Nevertheless, official Russian historiography continues to whitewash these facts. History books by Aleksandr S. Barsenkov and Aleksandr I. Vdovin, like *Istoriia Rossii: 1938-2002* (2003), are designated as official course textbooks in Russia’s schools.
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