

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On 19 February 1861 Tsar Alexander II signed into law the Statutes abolishing serfdom in the Russian Empire. The reform directly affected around 22 million peasant men, women and children, and around 100,000 noble estate owners to whom they belonged as serfs. The magnitude of the reform is demonstrated by the fact that, on the eve of the reform, serfs of noble estate owners made up around 35 per cent of the Empire's total population. The abolition of serfdom was not, however, a single 'event' that took place in early 1861 and led to the immediate 'emancipation' of the serfs. Rather, it was a process spread out over several decades (Kolchin, 1996: 52–5; Mironov, 1996: 335–46). It is argued in this book that the process of abolishing serfdom in the Russian Empire lasted almost a century and a half, from 1762 to 1907.

In 1762 Tsar Peter III enacted two reforms that, with the benefit of hindsight, can be seen as precursors to the end of serfdom 99 years later. The first was the abolition of compulsory noble state service, sometimes called 'the emancipation of the nobility' [*Doc. 1*]. This measure ended the original rationale behind serfdom. For at least two centuries prior to 1762 nobles had been obliged, at least in principle, to serve the state. Most nobles served either as officers in the armed forces or officials in the civil bureaucracy. In return, state servitors had originally been paid in land. Between the late sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, the Russian state had ensured its servitors had a labour force to cultivate their land – and thus provide them with an income – by binding peasants to it, thereby creating the institution of serfdom. Peter III's act in 1762 ended this hierarchy of service in which nobles served the state and serfs served the nobles. After 1762 noble state service was voluntary, and nobles were free to live where they chose. The peasants on their estates, however, remained bound to the land, and were still serfs.

Peter III's other act in 1762 that indirectly concerned serfdom was the secularization of the estates and peasants of the Russian Orthodox Church [*Doc. 2*]. Peasants who lived on nobles' estates – the serfs – were only a part of the total peasant population. Another part were peasants who lived on church estates. They served monasteries and churches in much the same

way as serfs served nobles. In 1762 Peter III converted the church's land and peasants into state lands and peasants. Thus – and this was Peter III's motive – the immense landed wealth of the Russian Orthodox Church now belonged to the state. However, if the state could take land and peasants from the church, then in theory it could also take the nobles' estates and serfs away from them, thus abolishing serfdom.

Throughout the rest of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, the 'peasant question' – in particular the future of serfdom – was the subject of considerable discussion inside the government and among wider society. Over the same period the government enacted further reforms that touched on serfdom directly or indirectly.

The culmination of this process of discussion and reform was the Statutes of 1861, which set in motion a complex, three-stage process to undo the ties that bound the serfs and noble estate owners to each other. The details will be explained later. Suffice to note here that during the first two stages, relations between the freed serfs and estate owners were regulated by law. In the third stage, the former serfs bought part of the land from the estate owners in a process known as 'redemption'. The government paid compensation to the estate owners, and the former serfs repaid the government in 'redemption payments' spread over 49 years. The 'redemption operation' came to an end when Tsar Nicholas II's decision to write off the freed serfs' outstanding redemption payments came into effect on 1 January 1907 [Doc. 28]. The previous year, the former serfs – or more likely their children and grandchildren – had regained the legal right of freedom of movement, which their forebears had lost in the late sixteenth century with the onset of serfdom.

HISTORIANS AND THE ABOLITION OF SERFDOM

The majority of the works cited in this book were published in the former Soviet Union, Western Europe and North America in the second half of the twentieth century (Gleason, 1994). Historians working in the Soviet Union from the early 1920s until the end of the 1980s were constrained by an official interpretation of history that was imposed by the ruling Communist Party. It was based, crudely, on the writings of Karl Marx and Vladimir Ilich Lenin. As a result, most Soviet historians emphasized social and economic rather than political and intellectual history, stressed the role of 'class struggle', and presented the history of tsarist Russia as leading inevitably towards revolution and the triumph of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the revolution of 1917.

Nevertheless, a number of Soviet historians produced important work on the subject of this book. The most prominent was Peter Zaionchkovsky. His major book, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia*, has been translated

into English (Zaionchkovsky, 1978). In contrast to many Soviet historians, Zaionchkovsky paid due attention to political history and the role of the state bureaucracy in the abolition of serfdom (Saunders, 2000a). In addition, Zaionchkovsky supervised a number of postgraduate students, Russian and Western, who went on to produce significant work on the abolition of serfdom. Zaionchkovsky's students included such prominent scholars as Terence Emmons, Daniel Field, W. Bruce Lincoln and Larisa Zakharova (Zakharova, 1998: 16–17).

Both Soviet and Western historians drew on the considerable scholarship of historians working in the Russian Empire in the decades prior to 1917. Historians such as Vasilii Semevskii and his colleagues and students produced pioneering studies of the peasantry and the 'peasant question'. In 1911 a six-volume work entitled 'The Great Reform', which contained essays by many major scholars, was published in Moscow to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Statutes (Dzhivelegov, 1911).

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In order to understand the abolition of serfdom, it is necessary to consider the origins of the institution, the ways it linked the nobility and the state, and how it operated in the villages. Although the main focus of this book is on the Russian part of the multinational empire, some attention is paid to the non-Russian western borderlands (the Baltic provinces, Lithuania, Belorussia and Ukraine). All these are discussed in Chapter 2. The range of motives for reforming and abolishing serfdom are analysed in Chapters 3 and 4. Rural reforms enacted between 1762 and 1855 are discussed in Chapter 5. One of the major concerns of the tsars was their empire's international status and the armed forces that supported it. The connection between Russia's defeat in the Crimean War of 1853–56, the need for military reform, and the decision to abolish serfdom is explored in Chapter 6. Once the decision had been taken, it took several years to prepare the reform. This is the subject of Chapter 7. Chapter 8 seeks to explain the terms of the Statutes of 19 February 1861. Responses to the reform and its implementation in 1861–63 are the subject of Chapter 9. The reform process over the years 1863–1907 is examined in Chapter 10, and the wider impact of the reform on the economy, society and politics of the Russian Empire is discussed in Chapter 11. Concise conclusions and an assessment of the reform process and its aftermath are presented in Part Three.

Throughout the book, more attention is paid to peasants than nobles, but the treatment of the nobility is still out of proportion to their small numbers. While the book discusses social and economic aspects of the process of abolition, centre stage is taken by the relationship between the imperial Russian state and its nobles and peasants.

CHRONOLOGY

All dates in this book are in the Julian calendar, which was used in Russia from 1700 to 1918. In the nineteenth century, it was 12 days behind the Gregorian calendar, which was used in most of the rest of Europe. It is not possible to include trends in social, economic and intellectual aspects of the history of the abolition of serfdom in a chronology.

1762

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| 12 February | Peter III announced his intention to withdraw the Russian Empire from the Seven Years' War. |
| 18 February | Abolition of compulsory noble state service. |
| 21 March | Secularization of the estates and peasants of the Russian Orthodox Church. |
| 28 June | Catherine the Great succeeded to the throne after Peter III was deposed and murdered in a coup. |
| 1765 | Foundation of the 'Free Economic Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture and Good Husbandry'. |
| 1766 | Catherine's Instruction to the Legislative Commission hinted at need to reform serfdom. |
| 1772-95 | Annexation of Belorussia, Kurland, Lithuania and right-bank Ukraine by the Russian Empire in the Partitions of Poland. |
| 1773-74 | Revolt led by Pugachev, who claimed to be Peter III. |
| 1775 | Provincial reform, which included some provisions to protect serfs from cruel and exploitative nobles. |
| 1785 | 'Charter to the Nobility' codified nobles' rights and privileges. |
| 1789 | Outbreak of the French Revolution. |
| 1790 | Radishchev published <i>A Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow</i> , which attacked serfdom. |
| 1796 | Paul succeeded to the throne on the death of Catherine. |
| 1797 | |
| 5 April | Proclamation banning labour services on Sundays and recommending that work on the other six days of the week be divided equally between noble and peasant land. |
| 1801 | Alexander I succeeded to the throne after Paul was deposed and murdered in a coup. |

1803

20 February Decree on 'Free Agriculturalists' permitted nobles to free their serfs and sell them land.

1804 Regulation by law of relations between nobles and serfs in Baltic provinces of Estonia and Livonia.

1807 Start of abolition of serfdom in Prussia.

1814–15 Russian army occupied Paris at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

1816–19 Landless abolition of serfdom in Baltic provinces of Estonia, Kurland and Livonia.

1825

14 December Nicholas I succeeded to the throne after the death of Alexander I.

Failed 'Decembrist' revolt in St Petersburg by army officers who aimed to abolish the autocracy and serfdom.

1829 Start of Perovskii's reforms of the appanage peasantry.

1830 Outbreak of a Polish nationalist revolt in the Russian Empire's western provinces in November.

1837 Start of Kiselev's reforms of the state peasantry.

1842

2 April Decree on 'Obligated Peasants' permitted nobles to regulate their relations with their serfs.

1847

January Publication of the first of Ivan Turgenev's 'Sportsman's Sketches', which indirectly attacked serfdom, and Gogol's *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, which defended serfdom.

26 May Ratification of the 'inventory regulations', which governed relations between nobles and serfs in right-bank Ukraine.

8 November 'Auctions Decree' permitted serfs to buy their land and freedom under certain circumstances. Effectively repealed in 1849.

1848–49 Revolutions in many European states, but not in the Russian Empire. Agrarian reform in the Austrian Empire.

1849 Decree permitted peasants in Livonia to buy land from nobles.

1853–56 Crimean War. Russian Empire defeated by Turkish Empire, Great Britain and France.

1855

18 February Alexander II succeeded to the throne on the death of Nicholas I.

1856

- 29 March Dmitrii Milyutin presented a memorandum to a committee on military reform, arguing that serfdom needed to be abolished in order to reform the system of recruitment.
- 30 March Alexander II told Marshals of the Nobility in Moscow that it was better for serfdom to be abolished from above than below.
- April Alexander II issued a secret directive to Minister of Internal Affairs Lanskoï to draw up proposals to abolish serfdom.
- October Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna presented her plan to free the serfs on her estate of Karlovka to Alexander II.
- Decree (published in April 1858) permitted peasants in Estonia to buy land from nobles at prices set by the latter.

1857

- 1 January Alexander II set up the 'Secret Committee on the Peasant Question' under the chairmanship of Orlov.
- August Secret Committee proposed gradual reform.
- 20 November Alexander II's Rescript to Governor-General Nazimov of Lithuania laying down principles for the abolition of serfdom.
- Late 1857–
summer 1858 Provincial nobles elected committees to draw up plans for reform on the basis of the principles in the rescript to Nazimov. They submitted their proposals to St Petersburg in 1859.

1858

- January The 'Secret Committee' renamed the 'Main Committee on the Peasant Question'.
- April The Main Committee produced its 'April Programme', based on the rescript to Nazimov. This was the government's first programme. It did not ensure the freed serfs would have land.
- Spring Wave of disturbances among peasants in Estonia after the publication of the 1856 decree (see above).
- Summer Alexander II toured the provinces.
- August–September Rostovtsev sent four letters to Alexander II arguing for freed serfs to acquire land.
- 4 December The Main Committee adopted a new programme for reform, with a guarantee that the freed serfs would acquire land.

1859

- February Alexander II approved the creation of the Editing Commissions, under the chairmanship of Rostovtsev, to draft the Statutes abolishing serfdom. Members included several 'enlightened bureaucrats', e.g. Nicholas Milyutin.
- 5 March Rostovtsev presented his programme for reform, based on that of the Main Committee of 4 December 1858, to the Editing Commissions.

Late summer	First convocation of deputies from nobles' provincial committees in St Petersburg.
1860	
6 February	Death of Rostovtsev. Replaced as chairman of the Editing Commissions by Panin.
February	Second convocation of deputies from nobles' provincial committees in St Petersburg.
October	The Editing Commissions sent the draft statutes to the Main Committee, under the chairmanship of Grand Duke Constantine Nikolaevich, which approved them with minor amendments in January 1861.
1861	
January	The draft statutes approved by the State Council with minor amendments.
19 February	Alexander II signed into law the Proclamation and Statutes abolishing serfdom.
5 March	Publication of the Proclamation and Statutes.
21 April	Dismissal of Minister of Internal Affairs Lanskoi and his acting deputy Nicholas Milyutin.
April	Massacres of peasants protesting against the terms of the reform in Kandeevka, Penza province, and Bezdna, Kazan province.
15 July	Publication of the first part of Ogarev's very critical article on the Statutes in <i>The Bell</i> .
Early summer	Peace mediators began to arrive in the villages to oversee the implementation of the reform.
Winter 1861–62	Campaign of 'noble liberalism'.
1863	
19 February	Formal start of 'Temporary Obligation'. Polish nationalist revolt. The Russian government revised the terms of the abolition of serfdom in the formerly Polish western provinces in favour of the peasants. Reform of the appanage peasants throughout the Russian Empire. They were permitted to redeem their land from 1865.
1866	Reform of the state peasants. They were transferred to the equivalent of 'temporary obligation'.
1874	
1 January	Military service reform. All males liable to serve in the ranks for a maximum of seven years.
1881	
1 March	Assassination of Alexander II, succeeded by Alexander III.

28 December	Transfer to redemption made compulsory for all peasants still temporarily obligated to nobles with effect from 1 January 1883. Reduction of the redemption payments paid by peasants and the compensation received by nobles.
1883–87	Abolition of the Poll Tax in the European provinces of the Russian Empire.
1886	State peasants permitted to redeem their land.
1889	The post of land captain created to supervise the peasants.
1894	Nicholas II succeeded to the throne on the death of Alexander III.
1905	
January	Outbreak of Revolution.
3 November	Announcement of the end of redemption payments, with effect from 1 January 1907.
1906	
5 October	Peasants granted freedom of movement.
9 November	Stolypin's decree permitted peasant households to leave village communes.
1907	
1 January	The end of the Redemption Operation.