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American Slavery and Russian Serfdom: A Preliminary Comparison*

ASIDE FROM occasionally noting that Russian serfs and American slaves were emancipated within less than two years of each other, historians—especially American historians—have made little effort to compare the development, treatment and status of the two servile labor groups.¹ It apparently has been concluded *a priori* that there was no solid basis for such a comparison. American slaves were, after all, a race apart—Africans who had been uprooted from their homeland and brought to the New World in chains where they were systematically exploited and degraded in a peculiarly vicious form of involuntary servitude. Conversely, Russian serfdom has been generally accepted as an anachronistic legacy of medieval Europe that had finally run its course by the mid nineteenth century.²

Thus the assumption that there was no common ground for a useful comparison of the two labor systems has meant the absence of any such comparative study. What follows is a preliminary and brief attempt to take the first steps toward filling that historical void.

The proximity of emancipation dates merely represents one relatively insignificant aspect of bondage that the American slaves and Russian serfs shared. Indeed, it appears that the two groups of bondsmen experienced similar treatment and conditions despite the disparity between the two societies. The chronological development of the two institutions even follows a roughly parallel course. Though the serfs were not removed from a distant continent as a separate people, Russian serfdom had emerged as a mature institution at very nearly the same time that American slavery was beginning a rapidly accelerated growth. The serfs, it should be pointed out, originally had been attached to the land on which they lived and worked. That is, the serfs and the land were inseparable. But with the increased legal restrictions placed on the serf population in the Code of 1649, Russian serfdom firmly embedded itself in the fabric of Russian society; and the connection of the serfs with the land was no longer as significant as it once had been. The Code was a rigid and cruel set of restrictions that denied the peasantry virtually

*This article was completed prior to publication of *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* by Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, 2 vols. (Boston, 1974) and *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* by Eugene D. Genovese (New York, 1974).

¹ The emancipation of Russian serfs was proclaimed on March 5, 1861. In the United States, the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. For their parts in freeing the serfs and slaves, Tsar Alexander II and President Lincoln were almost immediately enshrouded in myth and legend. Alexander became the "Tsar Liberator" and Lincoln was designated the "Great Emancipator."

² There has been much written on and a considerable controversy resulting from comparisons of Latin American and West Indian slavery to bondage in the United States. For a good anthology see Laura Foner and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Slavery in the New World: A Reader in Comparative History* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969).

any legal escape from their status.³ Increasingly, serfs were sold without regard to their attachment to the land. It was little more than a decade after the promulgation of that Code when the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1661 enacted its first legislation pertaining to slavery by providing that certain Negroes would serve for life.⁴ And even the most superficial inquiry shows that slavery and serfdom initially served precisely the same purpose: to furnish a large force of cheap, manageable and immobile labor. There never would have been serfdom or slavery without an overwhelming economic need.⁵

It is vital to stress, however, that the pattern of serfdom that developed in Russia was incredibly more varied and complex than its American counterpart. The two major categories of serfs were those that were state owned and those that were privately owned.⁶ Within each category were numerous sub-categories, each bound and defined by legal stricture. The main thrust of this essay is toward an examination of the so-called private serf. This segment of the serf population comprised somewhat less than half of the total number of serfs, though it is generally conceded that the restrictions on the private serfs were more rigid and binding than those on the state serfs.⁷

Both the Russian serf and the American slave were under the total domination of their respective masters. By the nineteenth century when both institutions were fully developed, neither serfs nor slaves had any civil or legal rights. They could not acquire property nor contract a loan. Marriages were sanctioned by the masters, as was any effort to "hire out." They were chattels subject to whatever whims, idiosyncrasies and duties the masters might desire the bondsmen to carry out. Serfdom and slavery were systems of absolute control.⁸ Institutions such as the church not only condoned but actually encouraged serfdom and slavery. Many men of the cloth in both nations were unembarrassed possessors of servile laborers.⁹ Immense sets of restrictions were imposed by the state to control the conduct and behavior of the slave and serf populations. In the United States slave codes were enacted in all states that permitted slavery. In Russia the central government issued decrees (like the Code of 1649) proscribing the behavior of the serfs and establishing penalties for misconduct. Moreover, it was a visionary serf or slave who entertained any realistic thoughts of freedom or manumission. The two systems were essentially closed and any serf or slave who legally escaped from that status was truly the exception.

³ Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 264-65. This is a superb and thorough study of Russian serfdom. See also James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York, 1966), pp. 119, 198.

⁴ Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), p. 81.

⁵ Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 265, and Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁶ Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 475.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 476-77, 489.

⁸ Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, *Russia on the Eve of War and Revolution*, Vintage Books (New York, 1961), pp. 254, 294, 298-99. The first edition was published in 1877. Billington, *op. cit.*, p. 198. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery*, Universal Library (New York, 1963), pp. 48-52.

⁹ Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 480; Elkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 52, 66-72.

Only in the rarest of instances were masters punished for the mistreatment of slaves or serfs.¹⁰ Scarce indeed was the serf or slave who had been successful in seeing legal action taken against the arbitrary acts of a misguided or ruthless master. Any serf or slave could be sold at the discretion of the owner. Bondsmen of both nations were advertised in newspapers; families were cruelly split as their members were sold at public auction.

Patterns of ownership were also quite similar. As a rule, most masters owned only a few bondsmen. The landlord who possessed more than 100 serfs was atypical. In Russia in 1834, 84 percent of the serf owners held fewer than 101 male serfs, and a large number of these held fewer than ten serfs.¹¹ By comparison, in the United States in 1860, 88 percent of the slave owners possessed less than twenty slaves.¹² Though most serf and slave holders owned only a few serfs or slaves, a minority of masters held a majority of the total number of bondsmen.¹³ Certainly one of the most astounding and dramatic examples of ownership of human beings in all history was Count D. N. Sheremetev's possession of over 300,000 serfs—nearly one third of a million people!¹⁴

It follows then that one of the notable dissimilarities between the Russian and American systems of bondage involved the sheer number of people emeshed in serfdom as compared to slavery. Serfdom, as a whole, developed on a much vaster scale than slavery in the United States. By 1858 there were 10.7 million male serfs in Russia out of a total male population of 24 million. Thus serfs represented nearly 45 percent of the male population.¹⁵ When emancipation did come to Russia, over 20 million people were affected. By contrast, when Lincoln proclaimed emancipation, it involved less than four million people.¹⁶

The bulk of the slaves and serfs were subjected to comparable agricultural duties. Each labor system featured the gang and task methods of extracting work.¹⁷ With the gang system, work was assigned collectively to a group of men or women. It was evidently the more popular of the two systems in both countries. The task system, on the other hand, permitted an individual laborer to quit when he or she had accomplished the task that had been assigned.

Two Russian concepts—the *obrok* and the *barschina*—that were unfamiliar to American slavery were, however, of critical importance to Russian serfdom.¹⁸ The *obrok* was a quitrent paid in cash or kind by the serf to the master while the *barschina* was a labor obligation to

¹⁰ Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 423-24, 429, 438-39. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, Vintage Books (New York, 1956), pp. 216-24.

¹¹ Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 367-68.

¹² Stampp, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹³ Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 368-69; Stampp, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁴ Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

¹⁶ Lincoln's proclamation did not emancipate the slaves in the border states, but only those in the states that had actually seceded from the Union.

¹⁷ Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 448, and Stampp, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁸ Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 444-52.

work the owner's land for a specified period of time, usually on a three day per week basis. Almost all serfs undertook one of the two obligations. Both these features of serfdom were a legacy of an earlier period in Russian history when serfs were at least semi free and attached to the land.

Aside from the mass of field hands, both labor systems were characterized by significant numbers of domestic servants: cooks, butlers, maids, seamstresses, gardeners and tailors. Even though there were advantages to such an existence, life in the big house was usually not easy and often it could be desperately degrading and humiliating. Writing on the lot of the house servant in Russia, Jerome Blum observed that: "Life as a house serf was often the harshest and the most demoralizing of all peasant experiences. Living as they did in constant contact with their lords who had complete control over them, they were much more liable than other serfs to frequent — and sometimes frightful — punishments from captious lords and mistresses, while the women among them were often misused by lecherous masters."¹⁹ Without changing so much as a syllable, Blum's words could serve as a description of the plight of many American slaves.

Yet it is also true that some house servants were personally attached to their masters and fond of their roles. They successfully created a niche for themselves in the master's home and took every possible advantage of their position and master. Some serfs apparently developed intimate and warm relationships with their masters. "They were often," according to one nineteenth century account of Russia, "sincerely attached to the family they served, and occasionally proved by acts their fidelity and attachment."²⁰ Kenneth Stampp has cited instances of similar relationships in the pre-Civil War American South.²¹

Just as some serfs and slaves grew close to their masters, others proceeded to plot and cleverly conspire behind the owner's back. More often than not, it was the house servants who were most feared as the potential rebels. At a time when the specter of Nat Turner and his cohorts still haunted the Southern white mind, Tsar Nicholas I (1825-1855) was gravely cautioning nobles not to discuss politics in the presence of house servants, lest they might be incited to incendiary activity.²²

Serfs and slaves responded to their lack of freedom in comparable ways. Perhaps the most obvious and most frequent reaction was the attempt to escape. American slave holders plagued by runaways characterized this unfortunate tendency as a disease — "drapetomania."²³ In the United States, slaves' efforts to reach the "free" Northern states by way of the underground railroad are well known. Likewise Russian

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 457.

²⁰ Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

²¹ Stampp, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-53.

²² Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 459.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 266-68, 552-54; Stampp, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-24.

serfs ran away, but they commonly headed east to desolate, sparsely settled areas. Slaves and serfs also responded to their status and treatment by destroying property, beating their masters, feigning illness and injury and sometimes committing suicide.²⁴

Surely the best known and most feared reaction to the two forms of involuntary servitude was violent and massive resistance. Instances were not uncommon of lords and masters losing their lives at the hands of their bondsmen. Uprisings and insurrections occurred in both societies although probably with greater regularity and more severity in Russia. Certainly the most enormous of any serf or slave revolt was led by Emelian Pugachev in 1773. The Pugachev rebellion began in the Ukraine and won the support of thousands of peasants as it spread. It very nearly succeeded in toppling Catherine II from power and was only put down when the full resources of the Russian army were mobilized to crush Pugachev and his followers.²⁵

In the first half of the nineteenth century demands for the abolition of serfdom in Russia and slavery in America aroused considerable and vociferous support, though the great majority of owners of bondsmen were adamantly opposed to such an eventuality. In both nations, the utilization of a servile labor force was defended as nothing less than a positive virtue. Masters and owners in both societies not only eagerly defended their respective "peculiar institutions," but sought to expand those institutions into unsettled territories and frontier regions.

Most importantly, those defending serfdom and slavery claimed that their bondsmen received salutary benefits from their status in the society. John C. Calhoun, slavery's most able defender, denied that slaves were capable of appreciating the advantages of liberty and thus need not be granted it in the foreseeable future. Ultimately, Calhoun was to insist, slaves would benefit from their bonded condition. Slavery was a civilizing experience.²⁶ Any scheme to free the slaves would only have a harmful impact on that inferior race. And in Russia, the reaction to the calls for abolition stirred a strikingly similar chord. "They [serf owners] earnestly believed that emancipation would ruin the moral fibre of the peasantry, and lead to the violent destruction of the *dvorianstvo* [nobility] as a class."²⁷ By this point in their histories, both institutions having reached their ascendancy, serfdom and slavery had become ideological and even psychological necessities for the dominating class. Serfdom and slavery were perhaps the most important cogs in the wheels of Russian and American Southern cultures. Hence, the defense of them for social and economic reasons explains only in part why that defense

²⁴ Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 558-60; Stamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-29.

²⁵ Blum, *op. cit.*, pp. 555-57. Between 1826 and 1874, there were 712 recorded uprisings among Russian serfs, p. 557.

²⁶ John C. Calhoun, "Disquisition on Government" and "Speech on the Reception of Abolition Petitions," in *Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South*. Edited by Eric L. McKittrick (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), pp. 7-11, 13-14.

²⁷ Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 570.

was so vigorous. In the end, it was a way of life and a society that was at stake.

Therefore, in some important respects, the development of serfdom and slavery as well as the treatment, obligations and responses of those caught up in the two systems seem to have followed along similar lines. However, were there not critical differences separating the two institutions? Of course there were, and at first glance, they appear imposing enough as to suggest that the two servile systems may have been quite different in nature and operation. In addition to the greater scope and complexity of Russian serfdom, easily the most obvious difference was race. Russian serfs were of the same ethnic stock generally as their masters. American slaves were not. If Russian and American bondsmen received approximately the same treatment and had about the same status (or lack of it) in their respective societies, then how important was race in determining the treatment of the American slave? Is it possible that it was negligible? If Africans had not been available for enslavement in America, would whites have been exploited in an oppressive fashion much in the manner of Russian serfs? In point of fact, white Europeans were not enslaved in America and black Africans were for reasons that were clearly racial.²⁸ One might speculate that had another racial group been readily available to them, then Russian land owners seeking exploitable labor would have taken full advantage of that situation and defended their actions on the basis of racist reasoning. It is almost an axiom of human nature that men who are inclined to exploit other men will resort to almost any imaginable rationale to defend their actions as strongly and as enthusiastically as possible. Consequently, both Russian and American masters proclaimed and accepted the natural inferiority of their laborers — even though race was not a factor in Russia.

Besides the matter of race, there were other apparent and sharp differences between serfdom and slavery. No American slave had any obligation to the central government, which most certainly was not the case with the Russian male serf. Every adult male in Russia, after the time of Peter the Great, owed the state an annual soul tax as well as military service.²⁹ Yet a practice evolved whereby not the serf paid the tax, but rather his master did. Thus Donald Mackenzie Wallace concluded that such a system only served to “sanction the idea that they [serfs] were part of his goods and chattels.”³⁰ What, at first impression, appears to have been a decisive difference between the two systems may not have been so crucial after all. The impact on the serf may have been somewhat akin to what the Three-fifths Clause of the American Constitution was on the American slave. Slaves and serfs were chattels whose taxability merely served to reinforce their degraded status in the society.

²⁸ Jordan, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-98.

²⁹ Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 463.

³⁰ Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

As for service in the Russian army, here again the difference may not have been as clear cut as it would first appear. Military service was no pleasant escape from the drudgery of serfdom. The Russian army was regarded as possibly the worst fate that could befall a serf. "What they [serfs] feared infinitely more than the birch or stick was the proprietor's power of giving them or their sons as recruits."³¹ Except for running away, the designated serf had little way to avoid the dreaded military service.³²

When all factors are considered, it is reasonable to conclude that Russian serfdom was virtually as oppressive as well as physically and psychologically debilitating as American slavery. The vast mass of Russian serfs and American slaves were regarded as property with no rights but only as an exploitable labor force that anchored not only an economic system but a whole way of life as well. When historian Eugene Genovese suggested that slavery was the central factor in ante bellum Southern culture, he could well have been elaborating on serfdom's place in Russian society. "Slavery," Genovese pointed out, "gave the South a special way of life because it provided the basis for a regional social order in which the slave labor system could dominate all others."³³ So it was with serfdom, a basic feature of Russian culture that moulded mightily the Russian way of life. Had it not been for the overriding consideration of race, the similarities between the two institutions would have been explained long ago.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³² Ironically, once in the Russian army, peasants served their nation with courage and valor. Napoleon, to his dismay, learned that Russian serfs did not welcome him as a liberator.

³³ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, Vintage Books (New York, 1965), p. 3.

