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978-0-521-08919-7 - The Russian Landed Gentry and the Peasant Emancipation of 1861

Terence Emmons

Excerpt

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PART I

THE LANDED GENTRY,
SERFDOM, AND FIRST STEPS
TOWARD EMANCIPATION

Non, Monsieur, soyez-en bien persuadé, il n'y a pas d'aristocrates, il n'y a que des serviteurs à Saint Pétersbourg.

Il faut dire cependant que, parmi ces nobles russe et surtout parmi les jeunes gens, il y en a déjà un assez grand nombre qui ont des tendances plus élevées . . . Ceux-la suivent avec amour les progrès de la civilisation et de la liberté en Europe, et se donnent toutes les peines du monde pour se rapprocher du peuple, chose extrêmement difficile, parce qu'ils en sont séparés par un abîme. Ils tâchent de conserver et de cultiver en eux-mêmes, et d'allumer dans les autres le feu sacré des grands et des nobles instincts.

MICHAEL BAKUNIN, JANUARY 1845

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I

Introduction. Some Social and Institutional Characteristics of the Landed Gentry before 1861

By the mid-nineteenth century, the hereditary gentry of European Russia numbered as an official estate (*soslovie*) nearly 610,000 persons—men, women and children.¹ According to the Tenth Revision (1857–8), there were within this class 106,391 gentry proprietors whose lands were populated by 10,694,445 ‘revision souls’ (male serfs), or a total serf population of about 22,000,000.² In European Russia, in the central black soil and non-black soil provinces of the greatest population density, serfs represented well over half the total population.³

According to the figures compiled by Troinitskii from the Tenth Revision, serf-holding among the gentry proprietors was distributed as shown in table 1.⁴

Thus, 81 per cent of the serfs were owned by 22 per cent of the

¹ ‘European Russia’ included the fifty established provinces, or that territory of the Empire excluding Poland, Finland, the Caucasus and Siberia. A. Romanovich-Slavatinskii, *Dvorianstvo v Rossii ot nachala XVIII veka do otmeny krepostnogo prava* (St Petersburg, 1870), p. 509. On the peculiarities and insufficiencies of Russian population statistics in the first half of the nineteenth century, see V. M. Kabuzan, *Narodonaselenie Rossii v XVIII-pervoi polovine XIX v.* (Moscow, 1963).

² P. A. Zaionchkovskii, *Otmena krepostnogo prava v Rossii* (2nd ed. Moscow, 1960), p. 18. The more than 25,000,000 additional peasants who were ‘serfs’ of the state and Imperial family were emancipated by legislation based on the Act of February 19 and promulgated in 1863 and 1866. The civil and administrative status of these latter groups was thereby fused with that of the former landlords’ serfs. The total population of the Empire c. 1861 was about 74,000,000.

³ I. I. Ignatovich, *Pomeshchich'i krest'iane nakanune osvobozhdeniia* (2nd ed. Moscow, 1910), p. 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62. It should be noted that the actual number of estate owners was probably considerably smaller than indicated by these figures, since they are not corrected to allow for the frequent ownership of more than one estate by an individual *pomeshchik*. They come nearer to representing the number of estates, rather than of estate-owners.

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gentry land-holders—those with estates of more than 100 souls. Nearly half (44 per cent) of the serf-owners had estates of less than 21 souls, while a mere one per cent of them—those with estates of more than 1,000 souls—owned 29 per cent of the total serf population.

TABLE I

	No. of gentry	Percentage of gentry	No. of souls	Percentage of souls
Gentry without estates but serf-owning	3,633	3.5	12,045	0.1
Gentry owning land inhabited by serfs:				
Less than 21 souls	41,016	39.5	327,534	3.1
From 21–100 souls	35,498	34.2	1,666,073	15.8
From 101–500 souls	19,930	19.2	3,925,102	37.1
From 501–1000 souls	2,421	2.3	1,569,888	14.9
More than 1000 souls	1,382	1.3	3,050,540	29.0

These figures show that the gentry was, in terms of economic circumstances, an extremely varied class with a large predominance of petty smallholders. (Granting regional variations, it is clear from state legislation that estates of less than 21 souls were completely insufficient to support a gentry family, and that an estate of less than 100 souls was generally considered inadequate.) Prince Vasil'chikov,¹ one of the earliest investigators of gentry landholding in Russia, came to the conclusion—based partly on the statistical information of the Eighth Revision (1834) and partly on his personal experiences as a provincial gentry official in the 1850s—that the gentry constituted not one, but three socio-economic classes. He noted that the 1,453 great serfholders who owned, in 1834, more than 1,000 souls each, together with the owners of more than 500 souls, numbered in all 3,276 persons and owned about half the total serf population.² According to Vasil'chikov's observations, many of these people had virtually nothing to do with the provincial life of the gentry: From their

¹ A. Vasil'chikov, *Zemlevladienie i zemledelie v Rossii i drugikh evropeiskikh gosudarstvakh*, 1 (2nd ed. St Petersburg, 1881), 422–5.

² Vasil'chikov's observations were made, of course, within the framework of quantitative groupings used in the official Revisions.

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ranks came the high dignitaries of state and court; they lived in the capitals or abroad and rarely visited their estates.

The second 'class' of gentry, according to Vasil'chikov, was formed primarily from among the owners of 100–500 souls. In 1834 there were 16,740 of them, owning some 3,634,000 souls. These, he observed, were the *gentry* (*pomeshchiki*) properly speaking, who generally had provincial ties and at the same time service connections, an education in one or another of the cadet schools and, increasingly in the last decades before emancipation, in universities. The differences between this group and the first were not differences of blood: Many a provincial *pomeshchik* was of ancient lineage and princely origin, while many of the great landholders owed their circumstances primarily to the favor—expressed in huge grants of 'populated land' or access to the state treasury—that had been shown their fathers or grandfathers by Elizabeth I, Catherine II or Paul I.¹ Rather, these were the differences between the great *sanovniki* (courtiers) and high nobility of the capitals, and the ordinary *pomeshchiki* who had no entrance at court.

The third group designated by Vasil'chikov were 'gentry' by official designation only. These were the smallholders, those owners of less than 100 souls who constituted 84 per cent of the total number of serf owners in 1834. Of these 106,000 smallholders, 17,000 had no land at all, but only a few serfs ascribed to their households; 31,000 had holdings averaging 49 souls each; while 58,000 owned an average of 77 souls each. For many of this group who lived on the land, the manner of life was often nearer to that of the peasants than to the great landholders who were their legal peers. But most of them, Vasil'chikov observed, pursued careers, serving in the civil administration or the army.²

Vasil'chikov's conclusions find remarkable confirmation in a study of gentry involvement in the peasant emancipation. The

¹ Cf. J. Blum, *Lord and peasant in Russia from the ninth to the nineteenth century* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 355–8. Between 1740 and 1801 the Russian rulers turned over to private proprietors more than 1,304,000 adult male peasants with their families. These peasants came from the lands of the state and the holdings of the Imperial family. Catherine and Paul were the most generous, giving away between them some 1,400,000 peasants. This prodigality, though not the practice itself, ceased with the ascension to the throne of Alexander I.

² Vasil'chikov, *Zemlevladienie*, I, 424–5.

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owners of less than 100 serfs especially stand out as a distinct group, for since the major review and revision of the legal status of the gentry in 1831–2 these petty-holders had suffered certain corporate disabilities in relation to their wealthier peers: In particular, they had lost the right of direct participation in the local assemblies of gentry.¹ For this reason, and as a result of very widespread absentee ownership,² virtually nothing in the provincial gentry assemblies and committees of the time is heard from these petty gentry who made up the large majority of the official gentry class. Thus they took little, if any, part in the gentry's discussion of peasant emancipation.

Vasil'chikov's distinction between the middling gentry of the provinces and the great landholders is also confirmed in the study of the gentry in the reform period, although it is impossible to draw a firm line between them on the basis of estate-size. The 'active' gentry of a province, those who both possessed and exercised the right to participation in class affairs, usually numbered a few hundred individuals.³ In most gentry assemblies and

¹ See below, pp. 14–15.

² No general figures are available on this question, but absentee ownership of estates was extremely common in this period, and was probably the practice of the majority of landowners. In some provinces (e.g. Tver, Vladimir, Nizhnii Novgorod), contemporary sources indicate that rarely did more than a quarter of the gentry (and sometimes a much smaller proportion) maintain residence on their estates for even part of the year. (See the detailed discussion of these provinces in the text.) There were regional variations in the pattern, usually related to the extensiveness of demesne holdings (the more demesne, the less absentee ownership) and estate size. If a sizeable majority of the gentry did not live on their estates, meaning that most smallholders did not, probably it can be assumed that most of them were in state service since only large landowners could maintain residences in town with their estate incomes. This supposition is supported by figures on the noble contingent in urban population, as well as by what is known of the extent of noble participation in the civil administration and the officers' corps. (See the immediately following pages and: A. Povalishin, *Riazanskie pomeshchiki i ikh krepostnye* (Riazan, 1903), pp. 26–8; Ignatovich, *Pomeshchich'i krest'iane*, pp. 64–6.)

³ The right of direct, individual voting in gentry assemblies was restricted by a property qualification (100 serfs or 3,000 *desiatiny* of unpopulated land). As the figures introduced by Blum indicate, this qualification severely restricted the number of active participants in gentry affairs: In 1858, only 635 out of 3,926 registered *pomeshchiki* of Riazan province had the right to vote; in Chernigov, 476 out of 6,268; in Kaluga, 463 out of 3,406. (*Lord and peasant*, p. 354.) As a rule the number of 'active' gentry was further reduced by widespread absenteeism. Thus in Tver province, a highly important provincial assembly meeting called in the midst of a period of heightened gentry interest in corporate affairs (1862) was attended by only 140 persons, although the number of qualified estate-holders in the province was in excess of 900 (and the total number of gentry registered as landholders in the province exceeded 3,500!). (See below, pp. 340–4.)

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committees these were the middling gentry, owners of several hundred serfs, and only in a relatively few cases—primarily in the capital provinces of St Petersburg and Moscow—were great landholders heard from.

State dignitaries and great landholders in general tended to congregate in the gentry assemblies of Moscow and Petersburg because they preferred to participate in gentry affairs, if at all, in the capitals where they resided, although their landed wealth often lay mainly elsewhere.¹ In these assemblies they exercised an important though not always predominant influence, and it is for this reason that the assemblies of the capitals acquired, as will be seen, much more than a ‘provincial’ significance.²

For the most part, therefore, the ‘provincial gentry’ were the middling gentry, and it was they who in most provinces carried on the debates and issued the declarations in the committees and assemblies which will be referred to in this study.

It is well known that the Russian gentry did not have the ties to the land, and lacked, in particular, the regional orientation of their western European counterparts: Permanent habitation in the country was relatively rare, and few were the Russian gentry families that had maintained a fixed domain for more than two or three generations.³ These circumstances were related to the recent service origins and continuing service-orientation of large numbers of the Russian gentry.

As a legally defined ‘estate’, the Russian gentry of the nineteenth century was of very recent origin: It had, in fact, been created by Peter the Great, or, more exactly, by the Table of Ranks established by Peter in 1722. To be sure, it was not created from nothing: The framework constructed by the Table of Ranks (a hierarchy of 14 ranks each for the military services and the civil administration) was at first filled primarily by the *sluzhilye*

¹ A nobleman could participate in the assemblies of any province where he could fulfill the standard property requirements.

² See the comments of Bismarck, who was Prussian ambassador in Petersburg from 1859 to 1862; cited in B. Nol'de, *Petersburgskaia missiia Bismarka, 1859–1862* (Prague, 1925), p. 256.

³ See the comparative comments by Marc Raeff: *Origins of the Russian intelligentsia. The eighteenth century nobility* (New York, 1966), ch. 3.

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liudi, the numerous group of state servitors which had emerged as Russia's 'upper class' in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹

With the Table of Ranks, gentry status had been made directly dependent on service, either in the military or in the civil administration: Status was obtained by the acquisition of rank and, until the 'emancipation' of the gentry from obligatory service in 1762, had to be maintained the same way. After 1762, families possessing gentry status at that time retained it regardless of service, but the Table remained operative for entrance into the gentry (with certain modifications, until 1917). The Russian gentry remained a class that was 'open-ended' at the bottom. (Ennoblement through service was, of course, practiced in other European states, but only in Russia was it organized into a formal system in which nobility was granted automatically by attainment of relatively low rank in the administrative or military hierarchies.)²

Despite its hierarchial arrangement, the new system gave to the holders of rank as a group the shared attribute of gentry status and attendant privileges, a circumstance contributing to the development, for the first time in Russia, of a sense of cohesiveness or corporate self-awareness within the privileged serving class. (The pre-Petrine 'nobility' had been atomized in an infinite hierarchy of privilege and social status according to the curious combination of family origins and service records embodied in the *mest-nichestvo* system.)³ The results of this new corporate consciousness were abundantly apparent in the post-Petrine eighteenth century, which saw the steady increment and growing exclusivity of gentry privilege, culminating in the emancipation of the gentry from service in 1762, its monopoly on serf-holding and greatly increased authority over the serfs, and the creation in 1785 of gentry 'estates' in the newly-established provinces.⁴

¹ Cf. N. Pavlov-Sil'vanskii, *Gosudarevy sluzhilye liudi. Proiskhozhdenie russkogo dvorianstva* (St Petersburg, 1898).

² Cf. H. Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, aristocracy and autocracy. The Prussian experience, 1660-1815* (Cambridge, Mass. 1958), pp. 142-3.

³ Cf. V. O. Kliuchevskii, *Kurs russkoi istorii*, II (Moscow, 1957), 145-56.

⁴ The frequent tendency of historians to refer to the events of Russia's 'golden age of the nobility' as part of the eighteenth-century pan-European noble resurgence or 'feudal reaction' should be viewed with some reservation. There were in Russia, after all, no

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At the same time, the Table of Ranks helped to prevent the development of a tight-knit hereditary aristocracy with all the political and social attributes thereof, for the gentry was constantly subjected to infusions of parvenus who had climbed up the ladder of rank. Particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, under Alexander I and Nicholas I, this process advanced at an accelerating rate: The creation of the ministerial system of state administration (1803, modified and expanded in 1811) marked the beginning of a period of rapid expansion in the size and functions of the civil and military bureaucracies which continued throughout the reign of Nicholas I. In this period, Russia acquired a huge 'civil service'¹ and the largest standing army in Europe.² Since officer status and all but menial administrative posts automatically granted ennobling rank (until 1845), this process resulted in a considerable numerical growth in the gentry, over and beyond its natural increase or the incorporation of the Polish *szlachta* in those regions acquired by the partitioning of Poland during the reign of Catherine II.³ Entrance into the

'estates' (*Stände, états*) to be revived, and the historical continuity between the old territorial princelings and boyars (whose power had been destroyed by the centralizing grand princes of the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries) and the eighteenth-century gentry was exceedingly tenuous, if existent at all in any useful sense.

¹ The first modern census in Russia (1897) revealed that approximately 260,000 persons served in the state civil administration (including police and judiciary). According to some rough calculations, there were 195,300 'civil servants' of gentry status (including dependents) living in the towns of the Empire in 1811. In 1843, in Petersburg alone, there were 32,467 active 'civil servants' of gentry status (also including dependents). (Both estimates apparently included 'personal gentry', the status of civil servants occupying the lowest five of the fourteen ranks of the Table.) In 1858, 291,700 persons ascribed to the category 'gentry and [gentry] civil servants' (families included) were living in the cities of European Russia. A. Edeen, 'The civil service: its composition and status', in C. Black (ed.), *The transformation of Russian society. Aspects of social change since 1861* (Cambridge, Mass. 1960), (pp. 274–91), p. 276; A. Rashin, *Naselenie Rossii za sto let (1811–1913 gg.)*. *Statisticheskie ocherki* (Moscow, 1956), pp. 119, 121, 127–8.

² At the end of 1852, before its considerable expansion during the Crimean War, the Russian army stood nearly a million strong, including 27,716 'officers and generals'. *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (Brokgauz-Efron), xxviii a (St Petersburg, 1899), 173.

³ According to the figures introduced by Kabuzan, the gentry population of the old state territory (excluding left-bank Ukraine, the Baltic provinces and the territories acquired during the partitioning of Poland) nearly quadrupled from the Second (1744) Revision to the 10th Revision, rising at the same time from 0.50% to 0.76% of the population in that territory (from 37,326 males to 142,118 males). Kabuzan notes a particularly rapid increase in the relative weight of the gentry population in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, i.e. roughly the years of the establishment and elaboration of the ministerial system. Kabuzan, *Narodonaselenie Rossii*, p. 154. (See notes immediately preceding.)

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gentry was opened to increasing numbers of commoners, *raznochintsy*, and especially to the seminary-educated sons of priests to whom the state so frequently turned in its search for literate servants.¹ The ranks of the gentry proprietors were swollen from this source, too, for the acquisition of gentry status brought with it the right to purchase ‘populated lands’, and many newcomers apparently availed themselves of this right.²

The standard histories of the gentry³ demonstrate, with frequent reference to contemporary opinion, that the gentry as a group, even after their ‘emancipation’ in 1762, continued to think of themselves as members of a serving class and, in fact, regularly continued to serve, either in the military or in the civil administration. Most gentry continued to measure individual achievement and social status in terms of rank and office, and it was generally accepted that every nobleman, upon completion of his education, bore the obligation to serve for at least a few years.⁴ This outlook was, of course, encouraged by the state, especially during the reign of Nicholas I, whose emphasis on the ideal of ‘service’ for all inhabitants became legend.

By all evidence, the majority of the gentry preferred life in town (in the capitals if possible) and/or in state service to the life of the country squire. Although a sizeable minority of the gentry apparently could afford to maintain residence in town (at least in the provincial towns) without serving,⁵ for the majority

¹ S. Korf, *Dvorianstvo i ego soslovnnoe upravlenie za stoletie 1762–1855 godov* (St Petersburg, 1906), pp. 362–3 *et passim*; M. Raeff ‘The Russian Autocracy and its Officials’, *Harvard Slavic Studies*, iv (Cambridge, 1957), 77–92.

² See Haxthausen’s remarks on this subject: Baron A. von Haxthausen, *Etudes sur la situation intérieure, la vie nationale et les institutions rurales de la Russie*, I (Paris, 1847), 103.

³ That is, Romanovich-Slavatinskii, *Dvorianstvo*; and Korf, *Dvorianstvo*. Both large books, being the work of juridical scholars, are devoted largely to the history of legislation pertaining to the gentry. Nevertheless, both are generous, if not replete, with reference to contemporary testimony on the gentry’s ‘style of life’.

⁴ For a recent discussion which places much emphasis on the service-orientation of the nobility (applicable to the nineteenth century, although its general focus is on the eighteenth), see Raeff, *Origins*.

⁵ A German observer at the end of the eighteenth century noted the considerable winter–summer fluctuations in the population of Moscow produced by the summer exodus of 5,000 gentry families. M. Beloff, ‘Russia’, in A. Goodwin (ed.), *The European nobility in the eighteenth century* (1953), p. 182. As early as 1811, more than 112,000 members of the gentry class apparently lived in the towns without serving. Rashin, *Naselenie Rossii*, p. 119.

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the escape from the country was coupled with service to the state. Thus, in addition to the force of inclination and prestige, the preponderance of smallholdings (not to mention the situation of those newly-ennobled persons who may have lacked either serfs or land) apparently made service a practical necessity—or at least the only opportunity to escape the ‘idiocy of rural life’—for a great many gentry.¹ The high rate of absentee proprietorship indicates that this alternative was not considered an unattractive one.

These general characteristics of Russia’s ‘first estate’ must be kept in mind when considering the gentry, both in their corporate affairs and in their activities as land and serf-owners.

In 1785 Catherine II had granted the ‘Charter to the Gentry’. Modeled in part after the corporate institutions of the Baltic nobility and certain English institutions,² the Charter granted to

¹ It would be useful to have some studies of income and budgets among the smallholding gentry, but such do not, apparently, exist. As noted earlier, it is clear from state legislation that estates of less than 21 souls were completely insufficient to support a gentry family, and that anything less than 100 souls was generally considered inadequate. Since the average annual *obrok per tiaglo* (peasant man and wife, usually) was in the neighborhood of 20 silver rubles at mid-century, it may be assumed that the gross income from the estates of the majority of gentry (and most smallholders collected *obrok* from peasants) was below 2,000 rubles. The more than 40% of gentry proprietors whose holdings were less than 21 serfs in 1858 must have had gross annual incomes from their estates of less than 400 rubles. (Neither additional peasant obligations nor the problem of arrears are considered in such a calculation, of course.)

Service salaries were not large except, of course, at the highest levels, but ranking civil servants and officers generally received considerable additional allowances for food, lodging and other expenses. Moreover, there were periodic raise scales and retirement pensions. Some idea of the importance of service salaries in the life of the gentry can be gotten from the following information, taken from the *kniga shtatov*: In 1824, 1,137 persons were employed in the chanceries of the various departments of the Ruling Senate. Salaries ranged from 4,000 rubles *per annum* for the Procurator-General, 3,000 rubles for each of 36 senior department secretaries, 1,500 rubles for each of 78 department secretaries down to much smaller sums for menial posts. The total annual salary budget was 934,880 rubles. *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, XLIV, *chast’ 2. Kniga shtatov. Otdelenie III i IV* (St Petersburg, 1830), 117–19. On military salaries and allowances at mid-century, see J. S. Curtiss, *The Russian Army under Nicholas I, 1825–1855* (Durham, N.C., 1965), pp. 192–4.

² A detailed account of the origins and early development of the gentry institutions can be found in Korf, *Dvorianstvo*. As Korf shows, the Charter in fact gave formal recognition and some elaboration to already existing institutions. The first local assemblies of gentry and the appearance of gentry marshals can be traced to the preparation by the gentry for representation in the great legislative commissions of 1767–8.