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 978-0-521-08941-8 - The Enserfment Russian Peasantry
 R. E. F. Smith
 Excerpt
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INTRODUCTION

A certain number of documents relevant to the study of social relations in what we now know as European Russia are available in west European languages. These include Professor G. Vernadsky's translation of Russian Law (*Russkaya Pravda*) and a number of other medieval legal enactments.¹ This gives us the opportunity to see some of the earliest evidence on the social structure of the East Slavs. The various *Pravdas* and their parts dated to different periods show us something of the changes which took place in social relations in the centuries preceding the Mongol invasions of the early thirteenth century. They also let us see something of the structure of administration on estates of princes and great noblemen, the boyars, and of the categories of dependants in the labour force on such estates. A number of early charters were translated into French by Alexander Eck,² and certain other documents including some ecclesiastical statutes are also available in French.³ The Beloozero (White Lake) Charter, a local statute, is available in English in a translation by Dewey.⁴

The documents translated here have been selected in order to give the English reader some idea of the process by which peasants in the core of Russia came to be legally enserfed in the mid-seventeenth century. As far as possible the documents are presented in full. In this way the change from the frequently laconic and obscure nature of the earliest documents to the

¹ *Medieval Russian Laws*, no. XII of the Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies (Columbia U.P., N.Y., 1947).

² *Le moyen âge russe* (Paris, 1933), pp. 475–93; this book also contains a useful index of Russian terms, pp. 564 f.

³ M. Szeftel, *Documents de droit public relatifs à la Russie médiévale* (Bruxelles, 1963).

⁴ H. W. Dewey, 'The White Lake Charter', *Speculum*, xxxii (1957), 79–83.

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repetitive legalisms of the seventeenth century becomes quite clear. Moscow itself was originally a settlement of minor importance in the Rostov–Suzdal’ area and the emergence of what is often referred to as a ‘centralised state’ in Russia was also the rise of Moscow to the headship of the Russian lands. The documents selected relate mainly to this central and northern area of European Russia (see the map on p. xiv) which the sixteenth-century English merchants knew as Muscovy. The reports of these merchants remain useful sources of information for some aspects of Russia at that time.¹ The western and southern areas lost to the Polish and Lithuanian states for most of the period under review are not dealt with here.

The glossary is intended to explain the main terms found in the texts and to enable those who wish to do so to learn what was the original Russian. About some terms, as Professor Vernadsky wrote, ‘there still exists no consensus of opinion among scholars’, but he was surely right when he rejected shifting the responsibility for translation from the translator to the reader. Russian history has too long been unfamiliar to readers of English; a sprinkling of Russian terms only helps to maintain the unfamiliarity and therefore an English expression has been used in preference to a Russian one, even when the former is used with a somewhat unusual meaning. The aim is to provide a translation of documents which will illustrate the process of enserfment in Russia. This little book is not intended as a critical text of the documents or an examination of the terminology, but the references given will, it is hoped, provide a starting-point for those who would like to pursue such matters.²

¹ See especially Richard Chancellor’s account of Russia in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation*, (Glasgow, 1903), II, 224 f.; and Giles Fletcher, *Of the Russe Common Wealth in Russia at the close of the sixteenth century*, Hakluyt Society, 1st series, no. 20 (London, 1856). A recent facsimile edition with variants is: Giles Fletcher, *Of the Russe Commonwealth, 1591* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966).

² Some references to materials relating to terminology are given on pp. 164–5.

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The historian who is more or less familiar with the history of serfdom in western Europe finds himself in a territory with few recognisable landmarks when he studies the documents of Russian serfdom. It should, however, be recognised that this unfamiliarity may to a considerable extent be due rather to the relative scantiness of the documentary evidence than to the strangeness of the phenomena which the documents describe or reflect. Peasant servility is a condition about which many sophisticated distinctions have been made, based, one sometimes feels, on variations of nomenclature rather than of reality. As a social phenomenon, however, its features are fairly straightforward and should not be difficult to recognise. Servile peasant families are to be distinguished from slaves, because the servile peasants have their own landed holdings from the produce of which they and their families live. True slaves possess no holdings and are fed and housed by their owners. Their labour is individual rather than family labour, and indeed the family itself is incompatible with full slavery. However, although the servile peasant family is economically self-sufficient, sharing this condition with the free peasant families, its servility is a product of a social system in which it is essential that part of the unfree peasants' time should be spent working for somebody else. It does not require much imagination to see that the payment of rent to a landlord, or taxes to the state, or the expenditure of labour on the lord's demesne, the king's highway or defence works, must be taken under the immediate or ultimate threat of force. Moreover, in so far as the relationships between social classes in stable societies are expressed in juridical terms, the enforced payment of rent or *corvée* from peasants who get nothing in return that they really need, will as likely as not be legitimated by the designation of the peasants as dependants, subordinates, that is serfs, of the superior power. Serfdom, therefore, is the legal expression of one of the means by which the ruling groups in a peasant society make sure that they get as big a share as they can of the product of peasant labour.

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The documents which illustrate the history of the growth of Russian serfdom are largely concerned with the problems of limiting peasant movement and reclaiming peasant families who have fled. They are much less concerned with the actual mode of the exploitation of the peasants by the landowners, though such aspects of lord-peasant economic relationships as share-cropping and indebtedness do figure in these documents. On the other hand, the western European material on medieval serfdom is much more concerned with the exact form in which the product of peasant labour is turned into the income of the landlord. This does not mean of course, that the western lords and the western state powers did not concern themselves at all with the problem of peasant flight. Indeed, one of the interesting themes of twelfth and thirteenth century agrarian history in the West is the offering of relatively favourable terms of tenure, by lords who wanted to open up uncultivated land for colonisation, to peasants who might be dissatisfied with their too small holdings or too heavy rents and services. But the colonisation movement in the West should not be exaggerated. The amount of available land in no way compared with that in Russia. If England (to quote the late Mr R. V. Lennard) was in 1086 'an old country' so was the rest of western Europe. Compared with Russia it was (given the level of productive techniques) almost overpopulated. At this time the East Slav colonisation north of a line roughly from Ladoga to Murom was just getting under way. By the end of the thirteenth century in the West symptoms of peasant overpopulation recognisable in the contemporary third world were widespread—dwarf holdings, shortage of meadow and pasture, shortage of livestock, shortage of manure.

The problems therefore for western landowners, at any rate before the demographic collapse of the mid-fourteenth century, was not to keep tenants, but how to get the most out of them. Correspondingly, the way in which the western peasants tried to defend themselves was not by flight but by organisation. By

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this we do not mean simply the deliberate organisation of the occasional refusal of rents and services. Such refusal was the outcome of a social institution which, perhaps due to the small size and scattered nature of settlements, seems to have been comparatively weak in medieval Russia, however strongly it may have developed later. This was the village community. In the West it was not strong enough to prevent the enserfment of peasants by landowners, but was strong enough to limit severely the degree of exploitation, as the manorial custom of England, the *chartes-lois* of France and *Weisthümer* of western Germany demonstrate. These limitations, however, were imposed at the end of a very long and complex history of enserfment, going back through the dark ages and the imperial Roman era to prehistoric times when (as we assume from the archeological record) warrior aristocracies emerged to dominate tribal communities.

The beginnings of serfdom in western Europe are found in the dark ages, when the chaotic conditions of the times strengthened a domination by landowners of peasants who were already burdened by the legacy of ancient slavery. The authority of the state had little to do with this stage of enserfment.

The core of medieval serfdom was composed of the descendants of the slaves of Romanised western Europe. Even before the political collapse of the Empire these were being turned into servile peasants by being given holdings instead of being used as day-workers on the land which the landowners directly exploited. At the same time as economic advantage brought slavery nearer to serfdom, the descendants of the once free peasant farmers of the Romanised world, the *coloni*, were being deprived of freedom of movement and treated by the aristocracy and by the state as virtually servile. The upheavals of the barbarian invasions may have resulted in an increase in the number of those enslaved through war, but most of these were bound to be assimilated as peasant serfs rather than as real

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slaves, since the economies of the barbarian successor states to Rome could not have employed vast masses of slaves in their antique role. Some slaves were partially emancipated, other freemen were obliged to accept the domination of great landowners, and a fairly homogeneous servile peasant class was formed. This general process is analogous to that in the Kiev state. Even so, western Europe under the hegemony of the Franks was not so dominated by the great noble and church estates as documentary survivals have led some historians to suppose. The *villa* organisation, it is true, with the close association of dependant peasant tenures and the large demesnes cultivated by tenants' labour services, was the main way in which the Frankish monarchy and aristocracy organised its economic resources. But evidence of land transfers during the feudalisation of European society between the tenth and twelfth centuries shows that there must have been many villages where the majority if not all of the peasant families were still legally free, even if economically much differentiated. For Russia we lack this sort of evidence, but the social situation of the peasant appears to have been similar.

The main form of serfdom in western Europe, then, up to about the tenth century was that which seemed to have as its main object the exaction of rents in labour, money and kind from peasant holdings organised within the framework of the big estates. The documentary evidence enumerates in great detail the pennies, the eggs, the hens, the loaves, the ale and so on that each peasant household had to provide for the lord; the number of days a week the men of the household had to work at ploughing, sowing, harrowing, reaping, mowing on the lord's demesne; and even the household goods that the women had to manufacture. But this system had to be considerably modified owing to a number of factors, such as the growth of production for the market, the devaluation of money rents, the fragmentation of peasant holdings, and the disintegration of the big estates. The modifications might have led to a reduc-

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tion in the amount of peasant serfdom since demesne production was reduced in scale and tended to be done by hired rather than by servile labour (though to a lesser degree in England than on the continent). This, however, was not to be, for the feudal reorganisation of the period by no means reduced, but rather increased the power of the landlords as a class. This was in some ways a complex and contradictory process, because, whilst some of the feudal rulers were developing *their* power, the aristocrats, lay and ecclesiastical, were also increasing their private jurisdictions. This, in fact, was the means by which serfdom got a new lease of life, especially from the eleventh century. Again, we see a similar process from the fourteenth century in Russia, though modified by the defence needs of the state. If in the West peasants were no longer expected to hand over their surplus product as rent, roughly proportionate to their holding, they were now obliged to do so in the form of fines paid in the lord's private court, fees for the use of the lord's oven, mill, winepress, etc. (*banalités*), even labour services on the lord's land exacted by him now not from peasants as his tenants but from peasants as subjects to his jurisdiction. Indeed, a peasant could find himself paying these sums to an overlord whilst he paid a rent for his land to a different person.

This changed form of serfdom was characteristic particularly of Europe from the Rhineland westward. Conditions in Italy were peculiarly affected by the advanced degree of urbanisation; those in Spain by the Reconquest. The situation in England was again peculiar and deserves a little extra space. What has been said about Frankish Europe was probably generally true of pre-Conquest England, that is manorially organised estates supporting the Crown and the great nobles co-existing with a good deal of free peasant family property. On the big estates, as far as one can see, the tenants were geared to the cultivation of the demesne as in Francia. In addition, the Old English law codes suggest that there were still many household slaves who formed the core of the demesne labour. The conquest by the

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Normans made little immediate difference, but in the first half of the twelfth century the same tendencies to the disintegration of the old estate organisation as on the continent began to be apparent. This did not go far, and the relationship between demesne and peasant tenures was maintained even if in practice landlords often preferred to take the money equivalent of the services owed. There was, however, an intensification of legal serfdom as on the continent, with an important difference in that on the continent this was done by the strengthening of the jurisdictional power of the lords. In England, although the lords did strengthen their jurisdictional powers at the manorial (or village) level the full extension of enserfment was achieved by the close co-operation of the landowners and the state, operating mainly through the justices in the common law courts.

The intensification of serfdom, with a special emphasis on the jurisdictional power of lords, took place between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. The power of the state assisted the lords in England but was not particularly active (except that the kings were also landowners) on the continent. This was a period when, in spite of the colonisation movement, peasant flight was not a problem owing to the shortage of land. After the population collapse of the mid-fourteenth century, the situation completely changed. The relative abundance of holdings encouraged peasant mobility, so that there was a real problem for landowners who were short of both wage labour and tenants. How did they face the problem of peasant flight? In western Europe landowners neither by themselves nor with state aid were able to impose the eastern European solution of strengthened serfdom. They attempted to retain and attract tenants by reducing rents and by practically abolishing labour services. Two factors are prominent here. First, estate owners either leased out demesnes or used hired labour, often preferring to turn over to pastoral farming with its low labour costs. Hence forced labour services were not required. Second, the peasants themselves seem to have been able to exercise

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enough resistance to make a forcible solution, that is the re-imposition of the stringent conditions of earlier serfdom, impossible. The nearest that the landowners and the state got, working in conjunction, was in the English wage legislation of 1349 and after, aimed at keeping the cost of hired labour down. This legislation also embodied restrictions on movement, but of wage labourers, not of tenants. By the sixteenth century, when the land/labour ratio began once again to militate against peasants of the traditional type, serfdom was still no solution. By now the development of the capitalist elements in the economy encouraged evictions, and instead of state-sponsored serfdom as in Russia, we have a continuation of the control of the wage labour force as expressed for instance in the labour legislation of Tudor governments.

When we turn to the Russian evidence, despite certain analogues, we are faced with many differences. The earliest section of Russian Law (*Russkaya Pravda*), generally regarded as dating from the first half of the eleventh century, shows us the blood feud with the alternative of a uniform money payment (forty grivnas) in cases of murder.¹ The term for 'man' (*muzh*) seems to have been analogous to the medieval law-Latin use of *homo* as a synonym of *baro*; thus the phrase 'If a man kills a man', with which *Russkaya Pravda* opens, relates only to lords in a broad sense. Later sections of this Law, dated to the late eleventh century, show a graduated series of money payments in murder cases. These are of interest as they tell us something of social structure. A similar series is found in sections of the law dated to the late twelfth century (see p. 10.)

At about A.D. 1000 East Slav colonisation was still proceeding, particularly in the north and north-east, and in the next two centuries vast territories in this area were brought within Novgorod's sphere of influence and gradually settled. At the

¹ For a commentary in English on *Russkaya Pravda* and the terminological problems involved see Professor G. Vernadsky's *Medieval Russian Laws* referred to on p. 1 n. 1.

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Bloodwites and Offices

Amount in grivnas	Late eleventh century	Late twelfth century
80	Steward, tax-collector, prince's servant, senior groom	Prince's man or servant, steward, groom
40		Merchant, boyar servant, administrator, a man without a commune, a person (<i>lyudin</i>), prince's retainer, groom or cook
12	Rural and arable over- seers, slave tutor, nurse	Artisans, rural servant of prince, arable servant of prince, (slave) tutor or nurse
5	Contract man, dependent peasant, slave	Contract man. slave

same time as the bounds of Slav colonisation were being extended, internal colonisation and the extension of settlement were also taking place. Little is known about the means by which these processes occurred; there was princely encouragement in some cases, but much extension of settlement was probably due to natural increase in numbers of population and the pressure on resources which this involved. The custom of early marriage [see 46] was probably a major factor in this. There is also some slight evidence that as early as the tenth century some slaves were being put to work on the land.¹ Early in the eleventh century a new term appears in the sources, *kholop*, which is here translated as villein. This usage has been adopted from Fletcher, an English merchant in Russia in the sixteenth century, who translated the term as villein or bond slave; it should be remembered that in England villeins were not slaves in earlier centuries. The appearance of this category of slaves 'was connected with the growth of a feudally dependent peasantry' according to Cherepnin.² In the course of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries a number of measures

¹ Zimin, *Istoriya SSSR* (1965), VI, 53-4.

² *IZ*, LVI, 257.