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978-0-521-19448-8 - The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom

Tracy Dennison

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The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom

Russian rural history has long been based on a 'Peasant Myth', originating with nineteenth-century Romantics and still accepted by many historians today. In this book, Tracy Dennison shows how Russian society looked from below, and finds nothing like the collective, redistributive, and market-averse behaviour often attributed to Russian peasants. On the contrary, the Russian rural population was as integrated into regional and even national markets as many of its west European counterparts. Serfdom was a loose garment that enabled different landlords to shape economic institutions, especially property rights, in widely diverse ways. Highly coercive and backward regimes on some landlords' estates existed side by side with surprisingly liberal approximations to a rule of law. This book paints a vivid and colourful picture of the everyday reality of rural Russia before the 1861 abolition of serfdom.

TRACY DENNISON is Associate Professor of Social Science History at the California Institute of Technology. Her work has received numerous prizes, including the Pollard Prize awarded by the Institute for Historical Research at the University of London, and the Economic History Association's Alexander Gerschenkron Prize.

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 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to
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It is a very bad policy to want to change by laws what should be changed by customs.

—Article XXIX of Catherine II's *Nakaz*

This article seems to make norms (*moeurs*) independent of laws. I think that norms derive from laws . . . Norms are good when the laws which are observed are good and bad when the laws which are observed are bad. There are no norms when good or bad laws are not observed.

—Diderot on Article XXIX of the *Nakaz*

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Preface

The revolutionary popular movements that led to the collapse of the Soviet empire, and eventually of the Soviet Union itself, began about two decades ago. These events were accompanied, for the first few years, by millennial hopes on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Such hopes for changes in the real world have, of course, been more and more disappointed since then, but that very disappointment has left one deep and lasting change in the intellectual world. In the subdiscipline of development economics, and in a number of subfields connected with it, a lesson has been learned. It has been recognised that institutions matter; indeed, this has become a slogan repeated by many who have little interest in the fate of eastern Europe or the particular problems of transition associated with that part of the world.

The presumed lesson has been to remind us of the degree to which the assumptions made by development economists were not so much assumptions about human behaviour as such, but rather assumptions about human behaviour in an institutional structure that guaranteed property rights and contract enforcement. ('Remind' since of course these conditions had been spelled out long ago by David Hume and Adam Smith at the dawn of classical economics.) This reminder has been very fruitful and has led research in development economics, political economy, and economic history in many new and interesting directions. This book can be regarded as one product of this general trend.

But it also differs from many other products of this trend, in one critical respect: it makes no attempt to develop, or even to test, any new or interesting theory of institutions or institutional development. On the contrary, it was driven to some degree by a certain frustration with the lack of connection between such theories as we have and anything concrete or identifiable. This book has nothing of the sublimity of theory. Instead, it takes a worm's eye view of institutions, looking at them through the eyes of provincial villagers in all their boring drudgery and everyday concerns. It sketches its view of pre-Emancipation Russia on 'two inches of ivory' rather than painting a grand panorama on a large canvas.

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It should be emphasised that this book shares the concerns of Hume, Smith, and the new institutional economics to understand how institutions shape economic and social life. It is inspired by the same questions. They are what motivated its subject: Russia before the Emancipation Act of 1861 – the paradigm of a society lacking the institutions of private property and judicial rule of law. But it approaches this subject without any prior assumptions about the categories in which to locate what it finds. Of course, it is impossible to escape preconceptions; if ever there was a society veiled in massive accretions of ideological fog, it is Russia. This is impossible to ignore; nearly all the literature we have on this society is coloured by these preconceptions, especially the one I call the ‘Peasant Myth’ and, try as we might, we historians find it impossible to leave our predecessors behind altogether. But this book does its best to let the voices of the villagers themselves penetrate this modern fog. It seeks to develop categories that are as close to the immediate sources as possible, without assuming that we already know what a commune was, for instance, or what serfdom meant in a specific local context.

The aim of this book, then, is not to solve the grand problems this field is wrestling with, but to put some solid ground under our feet. It is widely assumed that we know exactly what we are talking about when we use terms like ‘serfdom’, ‘credit’, ‘commune’, or ‘family’ (or even ‘institution’), but in fact, things get rather vague once the generalities are left behind and specific situations are addressed. There is little agreement on what we are actually supposed to be explaining, how the societies in question actually worked, on the ground, or how they developed over time. So it is hardly surprising that, as things stand now, the institutional, geographical, and cultural explanations contending for researchers’ attention are often not empirically distinguishable. They co-exist side by side, often in uneasy combinations, without being related to sufficiently concrete cases to enable us to relate their theoretical predictions with empirically robust concepts and categories.

This confused state of affairs is, in my view, due to the ideological myths mentioned above, especially the ‘Peasant Myth’, a hydra-headed monster that has fed generations of Russian and eastern European nationalisms and served a variety of political masters over the years without being subjected to serious empirical scrutiny. The urgent need to cut this undergrowth away before we can get a clear view explains the focus on that myth in parts of this book. Not only does the book attempt to sharpen up this hazy myth – very much against the grain of its historical articulations – into a group of empirical theories, but it also uses its findings, in the course of investigating the different aspects of pre-Emancipation rural life, to refute those theories. This focus reflects the dominance of the Peasant Myth

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specifically in the historiography of Russia and eastern Europe. (If some other unexamined tradition had been so dominant, that would undoubtedly have been the focus of specification and refutation.) To get the facts across, it has to be made clear that they are sharply at variance with what has been largely taken for granted up to now.

It was fortunate that the time when I became interested in the institutional structure of Russia coincided with the time when Russian archives were becoming more accessible to foreign researchers. Until fairly recently, foreign scholars were not even allowed unrestricted access to the archive catalogues. This alone would have made it difficult to carry out a local study of the sort undertaken here. But while Russian archives are more accessible than they once were, they still pose certain challenges to the foreign researcher. There are, for example, stringent limits on the amount of material one can photocopy and/or microfilm. This is particularly unfortunate since random closings and countless public holidays significantly reduce the time one can spend in the archive reading room. But these and other challenges of Russian life were more than compensated by the many people – more than I can list here – who helped to make my research time in Russia both pleasant and productive. The following should be singled out for their significant contributions to this research: Svetlana Romanovna Dolgova and the staff at the Russian State Archive for Old Documents (RGADA) in Moscow; Yevgenii Leonidovich Guzanov and the staff at the State Archive of Yaroslavl' Province (GAYaO); Yuri Aleksandrovich Tikhonov, who often acted as a surrogate advisor in Moscow; Boris Nikolaevich Mironov, who assured me many years ago that a project like this one could be done; and Igor Fedyukin, who cheerfully accompanied me on a long, cold journey to the former Voshchazhnikovo estate in October 2002. The Russian State University for the Humanities provided institutional support for numerous archive trips.

Special thanks are due to the late Charles Feinstein for his guidance and support when I was in the earliest stages of planning this project. I am sorry that I cannot present him with this evidence that his encouragement was put to good use. In Cambridge, the History Faculty's Ellen MacArthur Fund provided much appreciated research funding, as did an Earhart Studentship and the IHR/EHS Postan Fellowship. I have also benefited from a research fellowship at the Centre for History and Economics and Robinson College. I am grateful to colleagues at both institutions for memorable conversations and good advice, in particular to Bernhard Fulda, William O'Reilly, Emma Rothschild, Gareth Stedman-Jones, and Chris Ward. Ian Blanchard provided much more than his statutory external perspective. The Cambridge Department of Slavonic Studies offered a welcoming home during the academic year 2004–5. And

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I am grateful to the Economic History Association for recognising an earlier version of this book with the Alexander Gerschenkron Prize in 2004.

The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure provided a stimulating and supportive environment for graduate research. I have especially profited from conversations with Chris Briggs, André Carus, Peter Kitson, John Landers, Alysa Levene, Julie Marfany, Beatrice Moring, Sheilagh Ogilvie, Roger Schofield, Leigh Shaw-Taylor, Rhiannon Thompson, Richard Wall, Paul Warde, and Tony Wrigley. Jim Oeppen and Ros Davies were generous with much-appreciated methodological advice. The late Peter Laslett was characteristically enthusiastic about my initial Russian household findings, and would equally have appreciated this book; I am grateful to him, Tony Wrigley, and Roger Schofield for instigating the Cambridge Group to begin with. The ideal apprenticeship in its research ethos and exacting standards was provided by my dissertation advisor, Richard Smith, who was an invaluable source of guidance and encouragement, thereby balancing out the bracingly rigorous treatment he meted out to my ideas and drafts.

This book was completed in California – far from Russia and England, where it was begun. Caltech has proven the ideal environment for an interdisciplinary project of this sort; the book has benefited enormously from discussions with my colleagues in the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences, and with those in the wider California economic history community. In particular, I should like to thank Warren Brown, Jean Ensminger, Philip Hoffman, Morgan Kousser, and Robert Rosenstone. I am especially grateful to Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and Sheilagh Ogilvie, both of whom generously provided detailed comments on a penultimate draft. Thanks are also owed to Tom Willard, who provided invaluable assistance in generating a map. Others who have provided helpful suggestions along the way include Timothy Guinnane, Hubertus Jahn, Naomi Lamoreaux, Steven Nafziger, Matti Polla, Douglas Smith, the participants in the meetings of the Caltech Early Modern Group, and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press.

A note on the value of the rouble

A number of different kinds of roubles circulated in imperial Russia in this period, posing a considerable challenge to the historian wishing to undertake a longitudinal study of prices and wages.¹ Although no such attempt is made in this book, another, not unrelated problem has presented itself. It has been surprisingly difficult to determine which of the two currencies in use in rural Russia in this period – the silver rouble and the paper rouble (*assignat*) – is being referred to in the estate documents. It is especially surprising given how large the difference was: the official exchange rate from 1839 was 3.5 *assignat* to 1 silver rouble (the real exchange rate at the local level is unclear). Feudal levies were set in silver roubles, as explicitly noted in the estate instructions. But no other prices were systematically recorded in a specific currency. Some cases – casual references to salaries of communal officials, disputes over loans, and prices for goods – refer explicitly to *assignat*, while other references to similar things refer explicitly to silver. In more than half of the cases cited in this book, it is not clear which rouble is being used.

I have decided against educated guesses, since there are ambiguous cases, where either value is plausible in the context. Instead, I have reported the values as given in the documents, specifying the currency where known and referring only to ‘roubles’ where unknown. This has in a few cases been somewhat inconvenient, as I have been careful to avoid any claims that might have depended on this difference. However, it is a serious issue that requires close attention before historians can adequately address questions of standards of living or changes in real incomes in rural Russia, and especially comparisons of pre- and post-Emancipation conditions.

Some baseline figures are offered below, to provide some context for the price and wage data given in the text.

¹ For more on the different roubles and the problems they present, see the discussion in T. Owen, ‘A standard rouble of account for Russian business history 1769–1914: a note’, *Journal of Economic History* 49 (1989), pp. 699–706.

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xvi A note on the value of the rouble

- In the nineteenth century, the soul tax stood at 86 silver kopecks per year.²
- Quitrent levies (*obrok*) per *tiaglo* of land remained at 15 silver roubles per year throughout the period under investigation.³
- In the 1796 instructions, Sheremetyev notes that a female labourer in the textile industry could earn 15 to 25 silver roubles per year.⁴

² J. Blum, *Lord and peasant in Russia from the ninth to the nineteenth century* (Princeton, NJ, 1961), p. 434.

³ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 2320, l. 3 ('Descriptions of estates, 1858').

⁴ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 555, l. 26 ('Instructions, 1796–1800').

A note on transliteration

Russian words have been transliterated in accordance with the Library of Congress system with certain exceptions for conventional English usage. Quotations from archival sources have been transliterated exactly as they appear in the original documents, which were written before the standardisation of spelling and punctuation.

Abbreviations

GAYaO	Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Yaroslavskoi Oblasti (State Archive of Yaroslavl' Oblast')
RGADA	Rosisskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Drevnikh Aktov (Russian State Archive of Old Documents)
f.	<i>fond</i>
op.	<i>opis</i>
ed. khr.	<i>edimitsa khraneniia</i>
d.	<i>delo</i>
l.	<i>list</i>

Glossary

barshchina corvée labour; feudal obligations in labour services
obrok quitrent; feudal obligations in money or kind

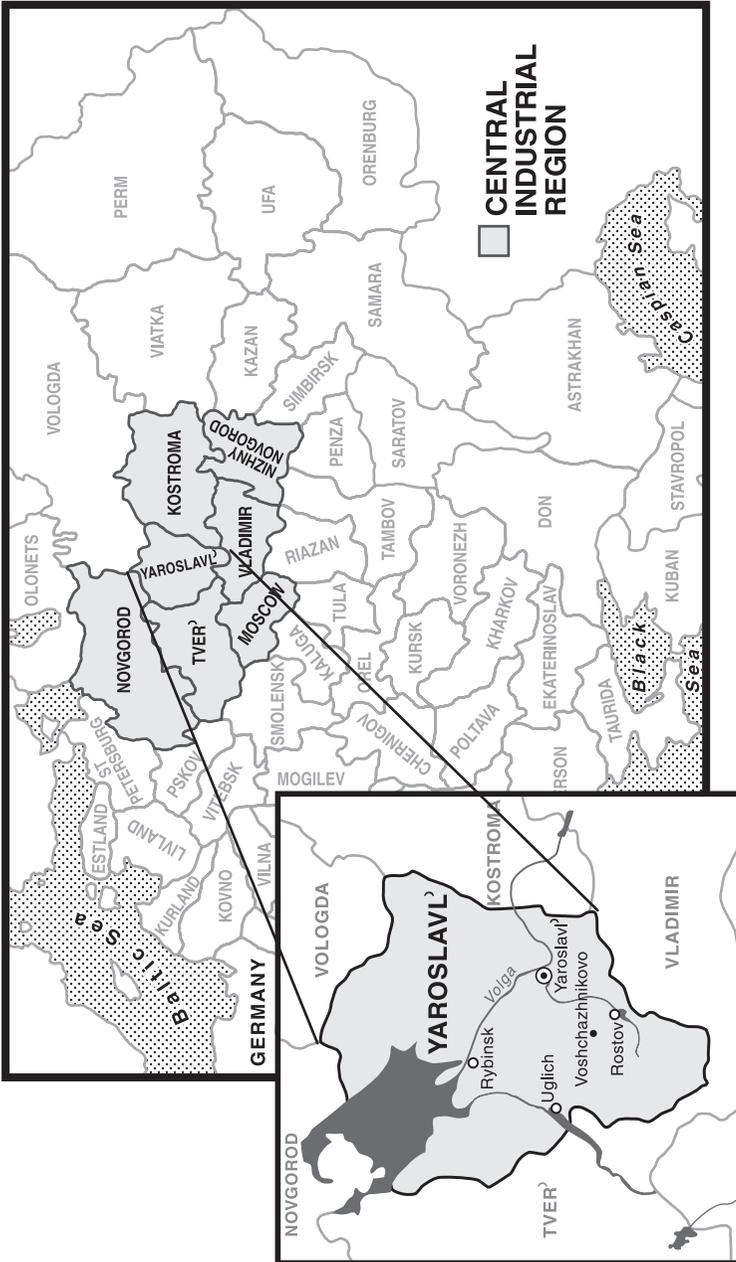
Land units

desiatina roughly equal to 2.7 acres
sazhen' roughly equal to 2.134 meters
tiaglo conventional measure referring to the amount of land that could be cultivated by a male–female work unit with one horse

Weights and measures

pood roughly equal to 16.38 kilograms
funt' 1/40 *pood* (roughly equal to 409.5 grams)
chetvert' 8 *poods* (roughly equal to 130 kilograms)
chetverik 1/8 *chetvert'*

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Yaroslavl' and surrounding provinces