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A Means to an End:
August von Haxthausen, Russian Serfdom and Emancipation in
Nineteenth Century Russia

By
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I would like to thank Dr. Aaron J. Cohen and Dr. John Rector for their patience and support throughout the writing of this paper. Their academic excellence and scholarly advice saw me through the toughest times. Gentlemen, Thank you.
The agrarian reforms in Russia under Tsar Alexander II effectively created the institution of the peasant village commune. Part of these "great reforms" was a new law which released the peasantry from serfdom on gentry-owned estates and organised them into village communes (Mir). This act created a segregated peasant class which could now own land and buildings and who were freed from their former dues of servitude. Unfortunately for the peasants they were now considered tax-paying citizens. The creation of the village commune was a way for the state to simplify the tax-collection process while at the same time keeping tabs (albeit loosely) on the peasants' whereabouts. But the emancipation of the Russian peasantry was no arbitrary act: it had been taken into consideration by most of Russia's rulers since Peter the Great.

August von Haxthausen, who visited Russia in 1843, thought the village commune held the key to freeing the serfs. He felt that since serfdom had been built up slowly in Russia it should be abolished in stages. In 1847, Haxthausen wrote that if Russia embarked upon the emancipation process in a timely fashion, peasant uprising and revolution could be averted\(^1\). While the Russian government engaged in ineffectual hand-wringing over the emancipation problem, this intrepid German had come up with a plan that would suit both serf and noble but its success
depended on its immediate initiation. In this plan the Russian communal village, the Mir, figured prominently as a way to offer both peasant and government some degree of security within a bureaucratic system of checks and balances. In 1847, Haxthausen's suggestions were not acted upon by the State and the rebellions and uprisings he feared did come to pass. In fact, it took the Russian government over a decade to devise a workable plan for the emancipation of the serfs and the similarities to Haxthausen's plan (the gradual rate of emancipation; the prominence of the village commune within the plan) are undeniable. But why did the Russian government drag its feet on emancipation for ten more years when Haxthausen's plan, which they would eventually revise and use, already existed? There are two answers, first, serfdom played a powerful role in the definition of the Russian state and of the Russian nobility, which could be overcome only in the desperate need for reform after the Crimean War. Second, Haxthausen needed an influential patron at the Russian court. He found one, in the 1850's, in the Grand duchess Elena Pavlovna. Without her as an advocate, Haxthausen's ideas could never have been as influential as they were in the emancipation process.

Russian serfdom had its beginnings in Muscovite Russia during the reign of Vasily II in 1497. Civil war raged and agricultural production of grain and root crops was in danger of being disrupted. The law code of that year, the Sudebnik of 1497, allowed the peasantry to move at just one
time of year, at the time of St. George's day in late November, and only after paying their landlord a small sum of money. While not exactly serfdom, and hardly effective, this early law required a centralized government with a long judicial arm to enforce it. Muscovy had neither, being loosely governed in a medieval European manner. This new law coincided with the formation of a middle service class or pomeshchiki, cavalrymen given conditional land grants by the government in return for their military support in times of war.

By the mid-sixteenth century, the middle service class undertook the majority of military affairs for the Muscovite state and so it was imperative that their lands be populated with peasant renters as a way of supplying the necessary income for military expenditures. The average member of the middle service class had six peasant households to support him and the loss of just one of these would result in severe financial strain due to the shortage of labor.

During the reign of Ivan IV (the Terrible), due to warfare and political strife, a number of hardships befell the peasants who subsequently fled certain areas of the Muscovite kingdom for the relative safety of estates controlled by the Boyars and the monasteries. The fact that most of the areas the peasants fled from were lands controlled by the middle service class was not lost upon the government. Consequently, in 1581, the peasantry were forbidden to move for any reason. The dynastic crisis after
Ivan IV's death created a power vacuum in which many players competed. While merely a temporary measure under Ivan, the prohibition on peasant movement was made permanent in a 1593 decree by throne-seeker Boris Godunov, who desired the support of the military class.  

During the infamous Time of Troubles, with its slave revolts and peasant uprisings, the lot of the peasantry remained pretty much the same. They were still bound to the land of their masters with little hope of moving to a better (or at least a different) locale. And it was at this time that the status of the peasant took a legal turn for the worse. The peasant's social standing under the eyes of the law was reduced to the point that he resembled a slave rather than a bound agriculturalist. It was also important to the middle servicemen that they, mere soldiers in reality, have some social caste and superiority. It was a case of "psychological security" for them to have the need of a class lower than themselves to control.

1648 was also marked by a series of civil disorders. The petty landowners who were the middle service class closed their ranks to those most recently elevated to their own status and so increased the gulf between themselves and the peasants that tilled their land. The stratification of Russian society came to the fore in 1649, when the Ulozhenie or law code of that year made it illegal for the peasantry to ever move and, if they did move, they were forever subject to forcible return.  

In fact, the entire eleventh
chapter was devoted to the codified enserfment of the Russian peasant.

By 1658 peasant flight was recognised as a criminal offense. Thousands of serfs had fled from their masters in hopes of escaping crop failures and the plague both of which, along with increased taxation, military recruitment, and general oppression, were becoming increasingly common in the 1650's. The peasants saw that serfdom was the chief cause of most of their troubles and the period of 1650 through the 1680's saw many unsuccessful peasant uprisings and general rebellions.  

With the crowning of Tsar Peter I in 1689, a new, Imperial Russia felt its first stirrings and the fate of the peasant within that empire became more codified than ever. An intensified government campaign was begun to return fugitive peasants to their former masters. Freemen and wanderers were given criminal status, and a universal census (for the purposes of taxation) fixed all peasantry to the location where they were placed on the rolls, usually their home village or commune (obshchina). It was made illegal to employ fugitive serfs and this, as well as the relocation clause did little to help Russia's fledgling industrial base. In response to this, a decree was issued in January of 1721 that allowed private industry to purchase peasants to work in their factories. The peasants were to be acquired from the government or from private landlords. This act effectively gave Russian industrial enterprise a sort of
feudal landlord relationship with its workers. This type of forced labor within an industrial setting helped perpetuate the inherent "backwardness" of Russian industry well into the nineteenth century\textsuperscript{13}.

While emancipation of the serfs may have provided both Russian industry and agriculture with workers who could provide a higher standard of workmanship as well as a more secure tax base, that option was not open to Peter I, though he did consider it briefly. Institutionalized serfdom had been established long before his time and had been deeply imbedded in the psyche of the Russian people. There were now various social classes of serfdom: state peasants, industrial serfs, and privately owned, mainly agricultural, serfs\textsuperscript{14}. To dismantle serfdom would be to destroy his political and, possibly, his financial base which was in reality a stratified mountain of feudal-style obligation and human bondage.

Catherine II, who ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796, also had her hands full when it came to the disposition of the peasants. Peasant rebellions in 1763 and 1773 were not revolts against her royal personage but rather were an expressed dissatisfaction with the modern state as a whole. The state taxed them incessantly, sold them at will, and conscripted them into the army and the navy. It would seem that the peasants merely wanted to enjoy occupation of the land, unfettered by the officials and landowners who interfered with the relationship between themselves and
their good-hearted tsarina. Catherine however did not attempt to free the serfs, nor did she enact laws that would regulate the relationship between serf and landlord. During her reign though there was no significant increase in the power of the nobility over the serfs, and there was no wholesale movement of state serfs into the private sector.

Catherine's son Paul, who ruled until his assassination in 1801, did little to improve the lot of the serfs. His reign was marked by odd outbursts and decrees that alienated most of his subjects, peasant and noble alike. After four years of Paul's despotic and destructive behavior the Russian nobility had him struck down in an effort to preserve the country's gains, both foreign and domestic, from the Catherine period.

There was talk during Alexander I's reign of possible peasant emancipation yet though he was a great constitutional tinkerer, he allowed nothing to challenge his absolute autocracy. It was one thing to grant the serfs their freedom, but it was entirely another to do this without causing severe and potentially devastating political upheaval. The questions posed by emancipation and constitutional reform were bandied about during Alexander's stint as Tsar but it was his successor, Nicholas I, who really set events in motion for the eventual freeing of the serfs.

At the time Nicholas took the throne, in December 1825, there was an uprising staged by many Russian army officers
in the name of peasant emancipation and constitutionally guaranteed civil rights for all.\textsuperscript{19} While the "Decembrists" were put down and over 500 officers arrested, the point they had tried to force was not entirely lost upon the stiff and reactionary new ruler. Tsar Nicholas felt however, that the serfs could be emancipated in a gradual fashion\textsuperscript{20}. This would be accomplished on an individual basis through voluntarily entered contracts between serf and landlord. The basis of this was a law written during Alexander's time, the Law Concerning Free Agriculturists of 1803 and the later \textit{Ukhaz} of April 2, 1842, both of which provided for the freedom of individual serfs upon their payment of their market value to the landlord.\textsuperscript{21} These laws weren't very successful because few serfs had the monetary resources to purchase their freedom. Fewer still wished to leave the relative safety of their communal village.

A visitor to Russia in 1843, Baron August von Haxthausen, saw the institution of the communal village as both admirable and necessary. Though his observations were written years before emancipation, he described the communal village in glowing terms. Von Haxthausen saw the \textit{mir} as "...the real foundation of the entire social order, ..."\textsuperscript{22}. Von Haxthausen presented various anecdotes and examples concerning his experiences with the \textit{mir} and its effect on, and its regulation of, the peasantry. In a manner that is typical of his conservative leanings, von Haxthausen
compared communal village to a patriarchal familial organization.23

A Prussian land-owning noble, Baron von Haxthausen found Russian agriculture fascinating. He was a trained social scientist and economist who laid the blame for most of western Europe's troubles largely on the rapid advance of industrialization and an ever-increasing secularism.24 An ardent Catholic, the simple faith of the Orthodox Russian peasant touched Haxthausen deeply and appealed to his sense of romantic pastoral agrarianism.25 He published an article on Russian agriculture which was brought to the attention of Nicholas I, and in 1843 he was invited by the Tsar to spend a year in Russia to continue his studies. There he saw firsthand the manner in which the peasant agricultural system operated, a system he likened to medieval western agriculture.26 Von Haxthausen found much in the Russian Mir system that he admired, though the institutionalized slavery that was Russian serfdom troubled him greatly. What was it about a system that, by western standards, was decidedly backward, that so appealed to such an intelligent and thoughtful scholar?

The answer to this question seems to lie, for the most part, in the very manner that the mir were administered, both from within and from without. Before emancipation, serfs were bound to the land of a particular nobleman. The mir, with the aid of the gentry, served many functions: it was a type of social welfare system and support in hard
times as well as a protector and shield from outside threats.27

Yet von Haxthausen saw that the communal village could assume many more functions in the absence of the gentry: administration of the communal land-holdings; the overseeing of agricultural production including all the pertinent dates concerning sowing and harvest, the administration of justice and the dispensation of binding legal verdicts for its inhabitants; the collection of taxes owed communally to the state; and all the assorted ministrations and decisions that keep a community up and running in a daily, productive manner.

Baron von Haxthausen's ruminations on the Russian serf and the communal village were in part a direct result of another of his projects: uniting the eastern and western Catholic churches (Haxthausen in fact wanted to unite all churches, catholic and protestant, under a common Christianity).28 The Eastern Orthodox Church did not emphasize the individual, except as he or she supported, and was held in check by, the collective group. The collective group, in turn, reinforced and supported individuals in their quest for spiritual harmony. Only within the group was the individual validated. Haxthausen was intrigued by the Mir because to him it was a perfect working example of his personal view that only within the harmony of a group held together spiritually can the individual attain true freedom.29
In the book that Haxthausen published as a result of his travels within Russia, he elaborated upon the overt patriarchal principle that he saw in every Russian institution. According to Haxthausen, the peasant viewed the Tsar, the village elder or headman, and the father of the family unit as the legitimate conveyers of God's will who must be obeyed faithfully. This put Russia far ahead of the western European secular states in Haxthausen's estimation. He viewed the communal village as a natural bonding together of the Russian peasant rather than a convenient way for the state to collect taxes. Furthermore, he had high hopes that the reform of the provincial administration systems that was being undertaken in 1843 (based on granting a higher level of autonomy to the Mir) might well serve as a model for all of the Western European nations, who had peasant troubles of their own.

The Ukaz of April 2, 1842 gave Haxthausen the impression that serfdom was all but finished in Russia. This important legislation gave the serfs the right to enter into contracts. Haxthausen feared abolition, believing that the sudden freeing of the serfs would have disastrous repercussions for Russia. He did advocate the ability of "certain classes or categories" of serfs to purchase their freedom after meeting "certain conditions". This would introduce the concept of gradual emancipation throughout serfdom, thereby causing little stress on the landed gentry who would, at all times, be in control of the process.
Regarding the village communes and their agricultural methods, Haxthausen felt that much could be done to improve cultivation and yield. When he saw that the Russian serf was still practicing the medieval, three-field system of farming with little or no fertilization or irrigation he was shocked. He felt that it would take state legislation to achieve any great changes as the increased labor involved would be more than the serfs would bear and the increased cost more than the nobles would care to. Haxthausen endorsed the idea of governmental financial assistance to private landowners to help expedite the required changes and improvements to the agricultural system. He envisioned governmental guidance with little, or no, bureaucratic interference.

Haxthausen also outlined what he thought should be Russia's future goals in regards to transportation and trade. He suggested that Russia develop an adequate and reliable overland transportation network in order to facilitate the supply of the major cities and seaports. Russia's overland communication routes were often impassable, with the result that major population areas were often cut off from food and outside news. Timber products from the north and agricultural products from the south were often delayed due to the transportation problem. Haxthausen believed that many of Russia's financial difficulties, famine, low agricultural productivity, and depressed land prices resulted from poor or nonexistent transportation.
This problem, which was never addressed by the Russian government, had a profound effect on their disastrous performance in the Crimean war in 1854.

The good Baron also saw Russia as a future facilitator of trade between Europe and Asia.\textsuperscript{36} He saw Transcaucasia as the area that Russia needed to develop in order to become a sort of middleman in the movement of east-west trade goods.\textsuperscript{37} Haxthausen felt that this could be accomplished with the help of a few hundred German colonists, a notion that must have struck Nicholas I, who disliked most things foreign, as particularly repugnant. Not too surprisingly, this idea also fell upon deaf ears.

Baron von Haxthausen was not immortalized, however, for his grand scheme of Christian unity, his suggestions for serf emancipation, or his designs for Russia's trade and communications system. Rather, it is his descriptions of the Mir that the world finds unique. In the Mir, where he found a version of the ideal Christian cosmography, Haxthausen thought he saw both the past and the future of Russia.

Russia's 1855 defeat in the Crimean War found a new Tsar, Alexander II, on the throne. It also brought home the fact that, technologically and economically speaking, the country lagged many years behind the western European nations\textsuperscript{38}, which had become increasingly industrialized throughout the 1800's. In order to gain a strong industrial footing, capital had to be generated in some manner and there had to be a free and trainable labor force.
Agricultural exports, which had always been a traditional Russian money-maker, needed to be stepped up but this was only possible if more modern farming methods were introduced. The traditional Russian village commune system of farming was woefully out of step with the modern agricultural system that commercial farming required. In essence, serfdom stood in the way of Russia's industrial modernization.

Alexander II, in a speech to the nobility on March 30, 1856 concluded, "It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until the serfs begin to liberate themselves from below." Ten months later he created the Secret Committee on Peasant Affairs which was to review the various emancipation projects and theories advanced by liberal politicians and intelligentsia. In reality the Committee was made up of noblemen who were resistant to most forms of peasant emancipation. The Tsar, in 1857, appointed a well-known abolitionist as chairman of the Secret Committee. This man, Constantine Nikolaevich, succeeded in getting committee approval for an emancipation plan where his predecessor could not.

Prior to the formation of the Committee and well before Nikolaevich's appointment, Nicholas A. Miliutin, the Director of the Economic Section of the Ministry of the Interior, submitted a document entitled "Preliminary Ideas on the Organization of Relationships Between the Gentry and the Peasants." This imposing-sounding document, presented in
the summer of 1856, outlined a plan where the serfs would be
granted their freedom and then be allowed to purchase vast
tracts of farmland with the State's help. Miliutin's
proposal would allow the State to take the initiative
concerning a general emancipation of the serfs. Alexander II
balked at the plan due to its heavy price tag. He would hold
out for a way in which to spur the gentry into taking action
on the emancipation issue themselves and wait for the
Committee to decide upon a course of action.

The Committee's plan called for the gradual
emancipation of the serfs over a period of many years. The
serfs would redeem their houses and garden plots while
renting the fields they tended from the landlord. Once the
private land and buildings were paid for in full the peasant
could be considered able to purchase the arable land. The
plan was to be carried out in three stages. The first stage
was dedicated to the submission of projects and claims by
committees formed of the landowning gentry under the
guidelines of the plan. The second stage entailed the
drafting of regulatory laws and the establishment of
appropriate governmental bureaucratic controls over both
peasant and gentry. The third stage was reserved for the
actual enactment of the emancipation legislation. In
November of 1857, the Committee made its findings public and
no time was lost in forming the appropriate local boards of
landowners. In 1859 the gentry committees had reported to
the Main Committee and finally, on February 19, 1861,
Alexander decreed legislation regarding the emancipation of the Russian serf.

Though the serfs were technically freed by the emancipation process they were still bound to the land by law. Part of the Committee's deliberations concerned the possibility of a mobile post-emancipation peasantry and the subsequent loss of production and tax-base that would result. Then too, there was the traditional romantic notions held by the Russian nobility about the nature of the noble agrarian peasant, his simple existence and his strong ties to his village community.

The solution then was to reorganize the communal village system in such a way that it would be self-governed on the local level yet responsible, as a production-unit, to a higher centralized authority. This decision effectively saved that traditional Russian institution, the communal village or Mir.

While the communal village put an end to the tyranny and brutality of serfdom it exposed the peasant to the far more civilized tyranny of bureaucracy and majority vote. Individuals and families ceased being of prime consideration in the decision-making process: it was the mir that figured most prominently in any equation. The mir was taxed as an entity, sparing the individual peasant that singular brand of grief that tax-time brings while at the same time assuring the state of a successful collection.
Similarly, while individual peasants or families owned their own homes and the land they sat on, all farmland was in the possession of the mir; the decisions on crop and field rotation, planting schedules, the number of land shares each family was responsible for, and the like, were made by the village chief(s) with the assistance, and input, of the whole community. In this manner production quotas and work schedules were (in theory) initiated and kept.

These were ideas that Haxthausen had espoused in 1847. In 1857, the Secret Committee consulted Haxthausen about some of the finer points of emancipation. Haxthausen reversed himself on some of the proposals he outlined in his book. He no longer felt that only certain classes of serfs should be freed. All serfs, he said, household and industrial, agricultural and non-agricultural, should be freed. Many of these ideas were eventually adopted by the Committee and the Tsar when they had previously been rejected out of hand. Much of the reason Haxthausen's ideas and opinions were considered at all was a direct result of Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna and her circle of influence.\textsuperscript{40}

After his journey through Russia, it took Haxthausen three years to compile and edit his book. The Russian government was in a hurry for him to publish his impressions as it would probably do much to dispel many of the myths and bad press about the country already circulating in the west.\textsuperscript{41} When Haxthausen took years to publish, the Russians (especially the Tsar) became rather doubtful, though the
book, when published, was quite flattering to both Tsar and people. While Haxthausen was rewarded for his work (the Tsar gave him a large diamond ring and paid all the publishing costs) he never returned to Russia\textsuperscript{42}.

Haxthausen did maintain correspondence with many members of the Russian nobility however, and among them were many abolitionists. Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna was one and her influence within government circles helped Haxthausen's ideas on emancipation to be considered by those who might implement them. In 1856 she set about freeing the serfs on her lands (with the Tsar's approval) in much the same manner that the Committee approved a year later. The advice and influence of Haxthausen on Elena Pavlovna's emancipation experiment is documented in a series of letters they exchanged from the 1850's until his death in 1866\textsuperscript{43}.

Elena Pavlovna was highly influential among the abolitionist salons in Moscow and St. Petersburg and counted among her friends Nicholas A. Miliutin. The Grand Duchess was a critical conduit of information to and from the Committee. Indeed, it was through her energetic commitment to abolition that Haxthausen's ideas were considered by the Russian state.\textsuperscript{44} Haxthausen's beloved concept of a communal village of free and landed peasants, living in Christian faith and agrarian harmony, was finally given its chance.

That the institution of the communal village was so fascinating to Haxthausen surprised many westerners. Other contemporary writers never failed to remark on the oppulence
of the court, the heavy-handedness of the Tsarist state, or the perceived backwardness of Russia as a whole, but few probably examined the mir more closely than von Haxthausen. Perhaps within the communal village he saw a model way of dealing with the agrarian-based peasants in his own country. Perhaps he saw the positive aspects of a socially-isolated peasant class that paid their taxes in full and on time. Haxthausen most likely came away from his Russian experience with little inkling of the true efficiency of such a system in terms of crop production and/or revenue generated. He was more likely enamoured with the notion of a self-sufficient, agrarian, lower class that lived in a manner closely resembling his Christian ideal. This also would have appealed to his romantic and pastoralist concepts of the "noble peasant" which was common in western art and thought during the mid-1800's.

But the new-style Mir was a short term solution, partially developed by Haxthausen, in response to the government's problem of controlling the peasantry after emancipation. Census and taxation were made easier for the state, but the peasant's pre-existing economic and social problems were often increased. Their backwards agricultural techniques provided poor yields with little profit. In some areas agricultural production actually declined after emancipation. The social isolation of the peasants offered them little hope for social justice within the new system. Peasant revolts became common in the late 19th and early
20th century and eventually took on the appearance of class warfare.

After the 1905 revolution and during Russia's short constitutional period, Prime Minister Peter Stolypin initiated a series of land reforms. One result of these was the abolition of the village commune in 1910. Stolypin felt that the Mir was one of the things holding Russia back from industrial greatness and world power. This reform created a class of yeomen farmers who worked their own land. Unfortunately, the First World War began four years later. The war, and the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, cheated the peasant land owners of this new chance to improve their social and economic fortunes.

It is ironic that the Mir, that quintessential Russian institution that Haxthausen worked so hard to preserve, was eventually condemned as archaic and backwards. It also speaks volumes on the changes that Russia was struggling with at the beginning of the 20th century. But Haxthausen knew a good idea when he saw one, as did the Russian government, and in 1861 the village commune had helped to make the emancipation of the serfs a reality.
4 Ibid. 47. and also Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 5.
5 Hellie, 47.
7 Ibid. 8.
8 Hellie, 47.
12 Ibid. 322-326.
14 Ibid. 94-95.
16 Ibid. 220-221.
18 Ibid. 299-303.
19 Ibid. 376-380. and Blum, 564-565.
22 Haxthausen, 277.
23 Ibid. 277-279.
24 Beer, 250.
25 Ibid. 246.
26 Haxthausen, 280.
28 Beer, 251.
29 Ibid. 250-253.
30 This is the previously cited *Studies on the Interior of Russia*, published in 1847.
32 Ibid. 449.
33 Ibid. 449-451.
34 Ibid. 451.
35 Beer, 326-328.
36 Ibid. 257.
37 Ibid. 259.
38 Hosking, Geoffrey *Russia, People and Empire 1552-1917*,
(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997)
315-316.
39 Beer, 327.
40 Beer, 363-364.
41 Hosking, 88, 94. and Beer, 253-254.
42 Beer, 252-255.
43 Beer, 331-340.
44 Beer, 363.
45 Hosking, 162-163.
46 Cracraft, 616.
47 Hosking, 431-437, 441-442.
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