
CHAPTER 6

THE PEASANTRY

The reason for beginning a survey of the social classes in old regime Russia with the peasantry does not call for elaborate explanation. As late as 1917, four-fifths of the empire's population consisted of people, who although not necessarily engaged in farming, were officially classified as peasants. Even today, when the census shows the majority of Russia's inhabitants to be urban, the country retains unmistakable traces of its peasant past: a consequence of the fact that most of the inhabitants of Soviet cities are one-time peasants or their immediate descendants. As will be shown later, throughout its history the urban population of Russia has preserved strong links with the countryside and carried with it rural habits into the city. The Revolution revealed how tenuous the urbanization of the country had been. Almost immediately after its outbreak, the urban population began to flee to the countryside; between 1917 and 1920, Moscow lost a third of its population and Petrograd a half. Paradoxically, although it had been carried out in the name of urban civilization and against the 'idiocy of rural life', the 1917 Revolution actually increased the influence of the village on Russian life. After the old, westernized élite had been overthrown and dispersed, the ruling class which had replaced it consisted largely of peasants in their various guises: farmers, shopkeepers and industrial workers. Lacking a genuine bourgeoisie to emulate, this new élite instinctively modelled itself on the village strong man, the *kulak*. To this day it has not been able to shake off its rural past.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, when they were being fixed to the soil, the peasants began to abandon the slash-burn method of cultivation in favour of the three-field system (*trekhpol'e*). Under this farming pattern the arable was divided into three parts, one of which was sown in the spring with summer crops, another in August with winter crops, and the last left fallow. The following year, the field which had been under winter crops was sown with spring crops, the fallow with winter crops, and the spring-crop field was set aside for fallow. The cycle was

completed every three years. It was not a very efficient method of utilizing land, if only because it placed a third of the arable permanently out of commission. Already in the eighteenth century agrarian specialists criticized it and much pressure was exerted on the peasant to abandon it. But as Marc Bloch has shown in the instance of France and Michael Confino has confirmed in that of Russia, agricultural techniques cannot be isolated from the entire complex of peasant institutions. The muzhik fiercely resisted pressures to abandon the three-field routine and it remained the prevalent pattern of cultivation in Russia well into the twentieth century.¹

Observers of the Russian village had often commented on the extreme contrast in the tempo of its life during the summer months and the remainder of the year. The brevity of the growing season in Russia calls for the maximum exertion during a few months which are followed by a long period of inactivity. During the middle of the nineteenth century in the central provinces of Russia 153 days in the year were set aside for holidays; most of them fell between November and February. On the other hand, from approximately April to September there was time for nothing else but work. Historians of the positivist age, who had to find a physical explanation for every cultural or psychic phenomenon, saw in this climatic factor an explanation of the Russian's notorious aversion for sustained, disciplined work:

There is one thing the Great Russian believes in: that one must cherish the clear summer working day, that nature allows him little suitable time for farming, and that the brief Great Russian summer can be shortened further by an unseasonal spell of foul weather. This compels the Great Russian peasant to hustle, to exert himself strenuously, so as to get much done quickly and quit the fields in good time, and then to have nothing to do through the autumn and winter. Thus, the Great Russian has accustomed himself to excessive short bursts of energy; he has learned to work fast, feverishly, and extensively, and to rest during the enforced autumn and winter idleness. No nation in Europe is capable of such intense exertion over short periods of time as the Great Russian; but probably also nowhere in Europe shall we find such a lack of habit for even, moderate, and well distributed, steady work as in this very same Great Russia.²

Spring comes to Russia suddenly. Overnight, the ice breaks on the rivers, and the waters, freed from their confinement, push the floes downstream, crushing everything in their path and spilling over the banks. White wastes turn into green fields. The earth comes to life. This is *ottepel'* or thaw, a natural phenomenon so striking in its suddenness that it has long served to describe awakenings of spirit, thought or political life. As soon as it has arrived, the peasant faces a period of highly concentrated physical work: before the introduction of machinery, eighteen

hours a day were not uncommon. The rapidity with which field work had to be completed made for one of the most onerous features of serfdom. The serf could not schedule the duties he owed his master so as to have time in which undisturbed to carry on his own work. He had to do both concurrently. Landlords sometimes required serfs to attend to domainial land before allowing them to till their own. When this happened, it was not unusual for peasants to have to work round the clock, tilling the landlord's strips daytime and their own at night. Work reached its highest pitch of intensity in August when the spring harvest had to be collected and the winter harvest sown. The agricultural season allowed so little margin for experimentation that one is not surprised at the conservatism of the Russian peasant where any change in working routine was concerned; one false step, a few days lost, and he faced the prospect of hunger the next year.

As soon as the soil, hard as rock in the winter, softened, the peasant household went into the fields to plough and plant the spring crop. In the northern and central regions, the principal spring crop was oats, and the principal winter crop rye, the latter of which went into the making of black bread, the staple of the Russian peasant. In the nineteenth century, the peasant consumed on the average three pounds of bread a day, and at harvest time as much as five pounds. Wheat was less cultivated there, partly because it is more sensitive to the climate, and partly because it requires more attention than rye. To the south and east, rye yielded to oats and wheat, the latter grown mostly for export to western Europe. The potato came late to Russia and did not become an important crop in the nineteenth century, with only 1½ per cent of the cultivated acreage given to its cultivation (1875). The coincidence of a major cholera epidemic accompanying the introduction of the potato into Russia in the 1830s caused all kinds of taboos to be associated with it. In the garden plots attached to their houses, the peasants grew mainly cabbages and cucumbers which, next to bread, constituted the most important items in their diet. They were usually eaten salted. Vegetables were essential to the peasant diet because the Orthodox church prescribed that on Wednesdays and Fridays, as well as during three major fasts lasting several weeks each, its adherents were to abstain not only from meat but from all foods derived from animals, milk and its by-products included. The national drink was *kvas*, a beverage made of fermented bread. Tea became popular only in the nineteenth century. The diet was acrid and monotonous but healthy.

Peasants lived in log cabins called *izby* (singular, *izba*). (Plates 3-4, 6-8.) They furnished them sparingly with a table and benches and little more. They slept on earthen stoves which occupied as much as a quarter of the *izba*'s space. As a rule, no chimneys were constructed, and the smoke

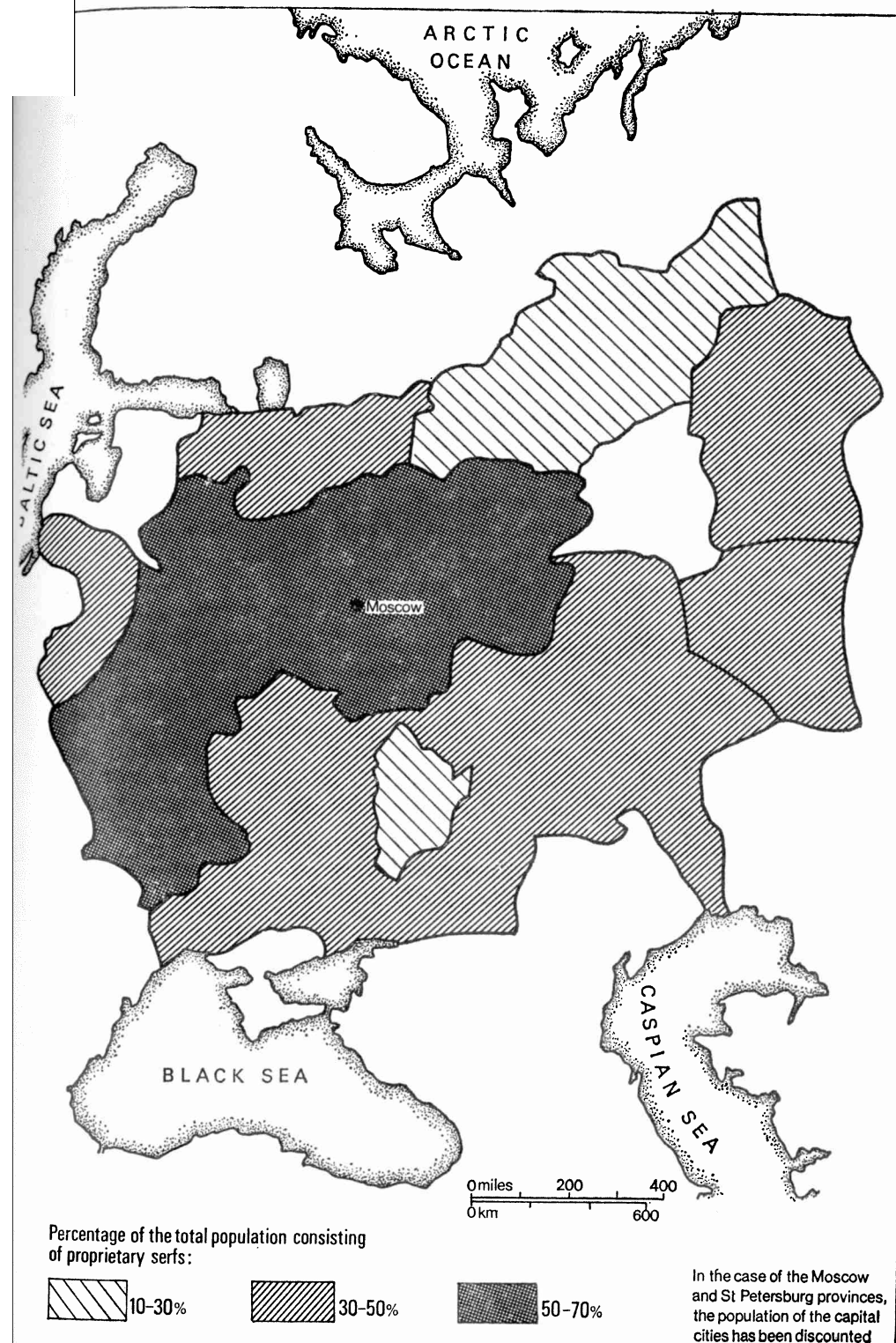
drifted into the huts. Each izba had its 'Red' or 'Beautiful' corner (*krasnyi ugotok*), where hung at least one ikon, that of the patron saint, most commonly St Nicholas. No guest spoke until he had made obeisance to the icon and crossed himself.* Hygienic provisions were rudimentary. Each village had a bathhouse (*bania*), copied from the Finnish sauna. (Plate 40.) Peasants visited it every Saturday afternoon to wash and put on fresh linen. The rest of the week they went unwashed. The everyday clothing was simple. Poorer peasants wore a combination of Slavic and Finnic dress, consisting of a long linen shirt, tied at the waist, and linen trousers, with boots made of bark or felt, all of home manufacture. Those who could afford to buy their clothing, tended towards oriental fashion. In the winter, the peasant wore a sheepskin coat called *tulup*. The women tied on their heads a kerchief, probably a legacy of the veil.

The Great Russian village was built on a linear plan: a wide, unpaved road was flanked on both sides by cottages with their individual vegetable plots. Farm land surrounded the village. Individual farmsteads located in the midst of fields were mainly a southern phenomenon.

We now come to serfdom, which, with the joint family and commune, was one of the three basic peasant institutions under the old regime.

To begin with, some statistics. It would be a serious mistake to think that before 1861 the majority of Russians were serfs. The census of 1858-9, the last taken before Emancipation, showed that the Empire had a population of 60 million. Of this number, 12 million were free men: *dvoriane*, clergy, burghers, independent farmers, Cossacks and so forth. The remaining 48 million divided themselves almost equally between two categories of rural inhabitants: state peasants (*gosudarstvennye krest'iane*), who, although bound to the land, were not serfs, and proprietary peasants (*pomeshchich'i krest'iane*), living on privately owned land and personally bonded. The latter, who were serfs in the proper sense of the word, constituted 37.7 per cent of the empire's population (22,500,000 persons).³ As Map 31 indicates, the highest concentration of serfdom occurred in two regions; the central provinces, the cradle of the Muscovite state, where serfdom had originated, and the western provinces, acquired in the partitions of Poland. In these two areas, more than half of the population consisted of serfs. In a few provinces the proportion of serfs rose to nearly 70 per cent. The farther one moved away from the central and western provinces, the less serfdom one encountered.

* The communist regime has made interesting use for its own purposes of such peasant symbols. *Krasnyi*, which to the peasant meant both 'beautiful' and 'red' has become the emblem of the regime and its favourite adjective. The coincidence between the words '*bol'shak*' and Bolshevism – in both instances the source of authority – is self-evident.



tered. In most of the borderlands, including Siberia, serfdom was unknown.

The state peasantry was made up of a variety of disparate groups. Its nucleus consisted of inhabitants of crown estates and the remnant of 'black peasants', the majority of whom the monarchy had distributed to its service personnel. Both these groups had been bound to the land in the second half of the sixteenth century. To them were added in the eighteenth century: peasants from secularized monastic and church holdings; sundry non-Russians, among them Tatars, Finnic peoples inhabiting central Russia, and the nomads of Siberia and central Asia; and individual farmers unattached to any of the regular estates, including *déclassé* dvorians. Because they neither paid rent nor performed labour on behalf of landlords, state peasants were required to pay a higher soul tax than proprietary peasants. They were not allowed to leave their villages without authorization of officials. Otherwise they were quite free. They could inscribe themselves in the ranks of urban tradesmen by paying the required licence fee, and indeed from their ranks came a high proportion of Russia's merchants as well as manufacturers and industrial workers. Although they did not hold title to the land which they tilled, they disposed of it as if they did. Activity of peasant speculators moved the government in the middle of the eighteenth century to issue decrees severely limiting commerce in state land; it is doubtful, however, whether these had much effect. At this time, too, the authorities forced state peasants, who until then had held their land by households, to join communes. The bane of the state peasant's existence was the extorting official, against whom there was no recourse. It was to remedy this situation that Nicholas I instituted in the late 1830s a Ministry of State Domains charging it with the administration of state peasants. At this time, state peasants were given title to their land and allowed to form organs of self-government. From then on, they were, for all purposes, freemen.

Within the category of proprietary peasants, that is, serfs proper, a distinction must be made between peasants who fulfilled their obligations to the landlord exclusively or primarily by paying rent, and those who did so with labour services or *corvée*. The distribution of the two in large measure corresponds to the division between the forest zone in the north and the black earth belt in the south and south-east.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it shifted decisively to the black earth belt, the main area of agriculture in Russia lay in the central region of the taiga. It has been noted that the soil and the climate here are such that they normally allow the inhabitants to sustain life, but not to accumulate much surplus. It is for this reason that a large number of peasants in the forest zone, especially those living near Mos-

cow, remained farmers in name only. They continued to be attached to the commune in which they were born and to pay the soul tax and their share of rent, but they no longer tilled the land. Such peasants roamed the country in search of income, working in factories or mines, hiring themselves out as labourers, or peddling. Many of the cab drivers and prostitutes in the cities, for example, were serfs who turned over part of their earnings to their landlords. Rent-paying serfs often formed co-operative associations called *arteli* (singular, *artel'*) which worked on contract for private clients and divided the profits among their members. There were numerous *arteli* of masons and carpenters. One of the most famous was an association of bank messengers whose members handled vast sums of money, with their organization's guarantee, apparently with utmost reliability. In the 1840s, in the north-eastern provinces of Russia between 25 and 32 per cent of all male peasants were regularly living away from their villages.⁴ In some localities, the serfs leased their land to other serfs from neighbouring villages or to itinerant farmhands, and themselves went over to full-time manufacture. Thus there arose in the first half of the nineteenth century in northern Russia numerous villages where the entire serf population was engaged in the production of a great variety of commodities, headed by cotton fabrics, a branch of industry which serf manufacturers came virtually to monopolize.

Because agriculture in the north brought small returns, landlords here preferred to put their serfs on rent (*obrok*). Experience demonstrated that, left to their own devices, peasants knew best how to raise money; and rich peasants meant high rents. Masters of affluent serf merchants and serf manufacturers, of the kind we shall discuss in the chapter devoted to the middle class, imposed in the guise of rent a kind of private income tax which could run into thousands of rubles a year. On the eve of emancipation, 67.7 per cent of the proprietary serfs in seven central provinces were on *obrok*; here *corvée* tended to be confined to smaller estates with one hundred or fewer male serfs. The northern serf had more land at his disposal, because his soil being less productive the landlord was less interested in it. Unless very rich, the landlord here tended to turn over the estate to his serfs for a fixed rent and move into the city or enter state service. The average land allotment per male soul in the north was 11.6 acres, compared to 8.6 acres in the black earth belt.

In the south and south-east, proprietary peasants faced a different situation. Here the fertility of the soil encouraged landlords to settle down and take over the management of their estates. The process began in the second half of the eighteenth century, but it became pronounced only in the nineteenth. The more the northern landlords curtailed agriculture, the greater was the inducement to intensify it in the south, in so far as the northern provinces offered a growing market for food produce.

The inducement grew stronger yet with the opening of foreign markets. After Russia had decisively beaten the Ottoman Empire and established mastery over the northern shores of the Black Sea, Odessa and other warm-water ports were built from which grain could be shipped to western Europe. Once Britain repealed her Corn Laws (1846), the exports of wheat grown in the south of Russia rose sharply. The net result of these developments was a regional division of labour; in the 1850s, the black earth belt became Russia's granary, which produced 70 per cent of the country's cereals, while the northern provinces accounted for three-quarters of the country's manufactured goods.⁵ Landlords in the south began now to rationalize their estates on the English and German model, introducing clover and turnip crops, and experimenting with scientific cattle-breeding. Such proprietors were less interested in rents than in human labour. In 1860, only 23 to 30 per cent of the serfs in the south were on rent: the rest, representing approximately two-thirds of the serf population, were on *corvée* (*barshchina*). Ideally, the land worked under *corvée* was divided in two halves, one of which the peasant tilled on behalf of the landlord, the other for himself. But the norm was not legally fixed. A great variety of alternatives was possible, including various combinations of rent and labour services. The most onerous form of *corvée* was *mesiachina* (p. 19 above).*

What was the condition of Russian serfs? This is one of those subjects about which it is better to know nothing than little. The idea of men owning men is so repugnant to modern man that he can hardly judge the matter dispassionately. The best guidance in such problems is that provided by John Clapham, a great economic historian, who stressed the importance of cultivating 'what might be called the statistical sense, the habit of asking in relation to any institution, policy, group or movement the questions: how large? how long? how often? how representative?'⁶ The application of this standard to the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution has revealed that notwithstanding well-entrenched mythology, the Industrial Revolution from the beginning had improved the living standards of English workers. No such studies have as yet been carried out concerning living standards of Russian peasants. Enough is known, however, even now to cast doubts on the prevailing view of the serf and his condition.

To begin with, it must be stressed that a serf was not a slave and a *pomestie* was not a plantation. The mistake of confusing Russian serf-

* Because of the relative profitability of farming in the south it should come as no surprise that this area had a greater proportion of large farms than the north. In 1859, in four typical northern provinces (Vladimir, Tver, Iaroslavl and Kostroma) only 22 per cent of the serfs lived on properties of landlords who owned over a thousand serfs. In the black earth region (Voronezh, Kursk, Saratov and Kharkov) the corresponding figure was 37 per cent.

dom with slavery is at least two centuries old. While studying at the University of Leipzig in the 1770s, an impressionable young Russian gentleman, Alexander Radishchev, read Abbé Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Commerce of the Europeans in the Indies*. In the Eleventh Book of this work there is a harrowing description of slavery in the Caribbean which Radishchev connected with what he had seen in his native land. The allusions to serfdom in his *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) were among the first in which the analogy between serfdom and slavery was implicitly drawn by stressing those features (e.g. absence of marriage rights) which indeed were common to both. The abolitionist literature of the following decades, written by authors raised in the spirit of western culture, turned the analogy into a commonplace; and from there it entered the mainstream of Russian and western thought. But even when serfdom was in full bloom, the facile identification was rejected by keener observers. Having read Radishchev's book, Pushkin wrote a parody called *Journey from Moscow to St Petersburg* in which the following passage occurs:

Fonvizin, who [late in the eighteenth century] travelled in France, writes that in all conscience the condition of the Russian peasant seems to him more fortunate than that of the French farmer. I believe this to be true ... Read the complaints of English factory workers; your hair will stand on end. How much repulsive oppression, incomprehensible sufferings! What cold barbarism on the one hand, and what appalling poverty on the other. You will think that we are speaking of the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, of Jews working under Egyptian lashes. Not at all: we are talking about the textiles of Mr Smith or the needles of Mr Jackson. And note that all this are not abuses, not crimes, but occurrences which take place within the strict limits of legality. It seems there is no creature in the world more unfortunate than the English worker ...

In Russia, there is nothing like it. Obligations are altogether not very onerous. The soul tax is paid by the *mir*; the *corvée* is set by law; the *obrok* is not ruinous (except in the neighbourhood of Moscow and St Petersburg, where the diversity of industry intensifies and stimulates the greed of owners). The landlord, having set the *obrok*, leaves it up to the peasant to get it whenever and by whatever means he chooses. The peasant engages in whatever enterprises he can think of and sometimes travels two thousand kilometres to earn money ... Violations are everywhere numerous; crimes are dreadful everywhere.

Take a look at the Russian peasant: is there a trace of slavish degradation in his behaviour and speech? Nothing need be said of his boldness and cleverness. His entrepreneurship is well known. His agility and dexterity are amazing. A traveller journeys from one end of Russia to the other, ignorant of a single word of Russian, and he is everywhere understood, everyone fulfils his requests and enters into agreements with him. You will never find among the Russian people that which the French call *un badaud* [an idler or loafer]: you

will never see a Russian peasant show either crude amazement or ignorant contempt for what is foreign. In Russia there is not one man who does not have his *own* living quarters. A poor man who goes into the world leaves his *izba*. This does not exist in other countries. Everywhere in Europe to own a cow is a sign of luxury; in Russia not to have one is a sign of dreadful poverty.⁷

Even Pushkin's magisterial authority is no substitute for statistical evidence. But his judgement merits more than casual attention because he happened to have known the Russian village from firsthand experience and to have been endowed, in addition, with a very commonsensical outlook.

As Pushkin notes, unlike the slave of north or Central America, the Russian serf lived in his own house, not in slave quarters. He worked in the fields under the supervision of his father or elder brother, rarely under that of a hired steward. On many Russian estates, the land of the proprietor, cut into narrow strips, was intermingled with that of the peasants, creating a situation quite unlike that on a typical plantation. And most important of all, the product of the serf's labour was his own. Although, legally speaking, the serf had no right to hold property, in fact he did so throughout the existence of serfdom – a rare instance where the disregard for law prevalent in Russia benefited the poor.

The relationship of the landlord to the serf also differed from that of master to slave. The *pomeshchik* owed his authority over the serf in the first instance to his responsibilities as the state's fiscal and recruiting agent. In these capacities he could wield a great deal of arbitrary power, and in the reign of Catherine II his mastery over the serf indeed approximated to that of a slave owner. Still, he never had title to the serf; he owned only the land to which the serf was attached. In the Emancipation settlement, landlords received no compensation for their peasants. The law strictly forbade traffic in serfs. Some landlords did so anyway in defiance of the law, but basically the Russian serf had the assurance that if he so chose he could live out his days in his *izba* and in the midst of his family. The recruitment obligation introduced by Peter I was for the peasants such a calamity precisely because it violated this entrenched tradition, tearing away year after year thousands of young men from their families. The fact that immediately upon induction a recruit, his wife and children automatically received their liberty did not seem to make army service any more palatable. The peasants treated induction as a sentence of death.

As previously noted, nearly half of the serfs in the empire – roughly, a quarter in the south, and three-quarters in the north – were tenants on rent. These peasants were free to come and go, and to engage in any occupation they chose. Their lives were free of landlord interference. For them, serfdom meant essentially the payment of a tax, either fixed

or adjusted to income, to dvorians who happened to own the land to which they were ascribed. Whatever the morality of such a tax, it was not an institution related to slavery; rather, it was a 'feudal' relic.

Serfdom in any meaningful sense was confined to peasants who performed exclusively or mostly labour services, and especially to those who belonged to landlords with small or medium-sized estates inhabited by fewer than a thousand 'souls'. It may be roughly estimated that between seven and nine million of *corvée*-obligated peasants of both sexes were in the latter category. This group, representing in 1858–9, 12–15 per cent of the empire's population, were serfs in the classical sense of the word; bound to the land, subject to the direct authority of their landlords, forced to perform for him any services demanded.

It is, of course, quite impossible to attempt any generalizations about the condition of so large a group, the more so that we are dealing with some fifty thousand landlords (the approximate number of those who had peasants on *corvée*). Until more scholarly studies on the subject become available, all we can go by are impressions. These do not bear out the picture, derived largely from literary sources, of widespread misery and oppression. The obvious injustice of serfdom must not be allowed to colour one's perception of its realities. Several Englishmen who wrote accounts of their experiences in Russia found that the Russian peasant's condition compared favourably with what they knew at home, especially in Ireland, thereby confirming independently Pushkin's estimate. The following two excerpts come from such accounts. The first is by an English sea captain who in 1820 undertook a four-year journey on foot across Russia and Siberia which gave him unique opportunities to observe rural life at first-hand:

I have no hesitation ... in saying, that the condition of the peasantry here is far superior to that class in Ireland. In Russia, provisions are plentiful, good, and cheap; while in Ireland they are scanty, poor, and dear, the best part being exported from the latter country, whilst the local impediments in the other render them not worth that expense. Good comfortable log-houses are here found in every village, immense droves of cattle are scattered over an unlimited pasture, and whole forests of fuel may be obtained for a trifle. With ordinary industry and economy, the Russian peasant may become rich, especially those of the villages situated between the capitals.⁸

The second is by a British traveller who had gone to Russia for the express purpose of finding material which would cast on it a less favourable light than that found in the literature of the time:

On the whole ... so far at least as mere [!] food and lodging are concerned, the Russian peasant is not so badly off as the poor man amongst ourselves. He may be rude and uneducated – liable to be ill-treated by his superiors – in-

temperate in his habits, and filthy in his person; but he never knows the misery to which the Irish peasant is exposed. His food may be coarse; but he has abundance of it. His hut may be homely; but it is dry and warm. We are apt to fancy that if our peasantry be badly off, we can at least flatter ourselves with the assurance that they are much more comfortable than those of foreign countries. But this is a gross delusion. Not in Ireland only, but in parts of Great Britain usually considered to be exempt from the miseries of Ireland, we have witnessed wretchedness compared with which the condition of the Russian boor is luxury, whether he live amid the crowded population of large towns, or in the meanest hamlets of the interior. There are parts of Scotland, for instance, where the people are lodged in houses which the Russian peasant would not think fit for his cattle.⁹

The evaluation of these witnesses carries the more weight that they had no sympathy whatever with serfdom or any other of the disabilities under which the vast majority of Russian peasants were then living.

It is particularly important to be disabused concerning alleged landlord brutality toward serfs. Foreign travellers to Russia – unlike visitors to the slave plantations of the Americas – hardly ever mention corporal punishment.* The violence endemic to the twentieth century and the attendant ‘liberation’ of sexual fantasy encourage modern man to indulge his sadistic impulses by projecting them on to the past: but the fact that he longs to maltreat others has no bearing on what actually happened when that has been possible. Serfdom was an economic institution not a closed world created for the gratification of sexual appetites. Isolated instances of cruelty are no evidence to the contrary. It is simply not good enough to cite the notorious case of one Saltykova, a sadistic landlady immortalized by historians, who whiled away her idle hours by torturing to death dozens of her domestic servants. She tells us about as much about imperial Russia as does Jack the Ripper about Victorian London. Where statistics happen to be available they indicate moderation in the use of disciplinary prerogatives. Every landlord, for example, had the power to turn unruly peasants over to the authorities for exile to Siberia. Between 1822 and 1833, 1,283 serfs were punished in this fashion; an annual average of 107 out of over twenty million proprietary serfs is hardly a staggering figure.¹⁰

For the serfs, the most onerous feature of landlord authority seems to have been interference with their family life and working habits. Landlords were eager to have serfs marry young, both because they wanted them to breed, and wished to put to work young women, who were customarily exempt from *corvée* until after marriage. Many landlords

* Nor must it be forgotten that the Russian peasant did not share modern man's horror of this kind of punishment. When in the 1860s rural (*volost*) courts were empowered to impose on peasants either monetary fines or physical punishment, it was found that most peasants, given the choice, preferred to suffer a beating.

compelled their serfs to marry as soon as they were of age, if not earlier, and sometimes even chose partners for them. Sexual licence was not uncommon; there are enough authenticated stories of landlords who resented, and on occasion repaid with arson and murder. Landlord interference with the peasant's working routine was an even greater cause of discontent. The intention did not matter: a well-meaning landlord, eager, at his own expense, to improve the lot of his peasants was as disliked as a ruthless exploiter. ‘It is enough for a landlord to order that the soil be ploughed one inch more deeply’, Haxthausen reports, ‘to hear the peasant mutter: “He is not a good master; he torments us.” And then woe to him if he lives in the village!’¹¹ Indeed, a solicitous landlord, because he tended to meddle more with the working routine of his serfs, was often more despised than his callous neighbour whose only care was for higher rents.

[The impression one gains is that the serf accepted his status with the same fatalism with which he bore the other burdens of peasant existence. He was grudgingly prepared to set aside a part of his working time and of his income as tribute to the landlord because that was what his ancestors had always done. He also bore patiently his landlord's eccentricities, provided they did not touch what mattered to him the most: his family and his work. His principal grievance had to do with land. He was deeply convinced that all the land – arable, meadow, forest – was rightfully his. From the earliest times of colonization, the peasant carried away the belief that virgin land belonged to no one and that cultivated land was the property of him who cleared and tilled it.] This conviction was strengthened after 1762, when *dvoriane* were freed from compulsory state service. The serfs understood in some instinctive way the connection between the *dvorianstvo*'s service obligations and their own servitude. Word spread in the villages that at the same time that he had issued the Manifesto of *dvorianstvo*'s liberties in 1762, Peter III had issued another edict turning the land over to the peasants, but the *dvoriane* had suppressed it and thrown him into jail. From that year onwards the peasants lived in the expectation of a grand ‘black repartition’ of the country's entire private landholdings, and nothing would persuade them they were wrong. To make matters worse, the Russian serf had got into his head the totally mistaken notion that while he belonged to the landlord, the land – all of it – was his, whereas in fact neither happened to be true. This belief intensified tension in the countryside. Incidentally, it suggests that the peasant had no strong feelings against serfdom as such.

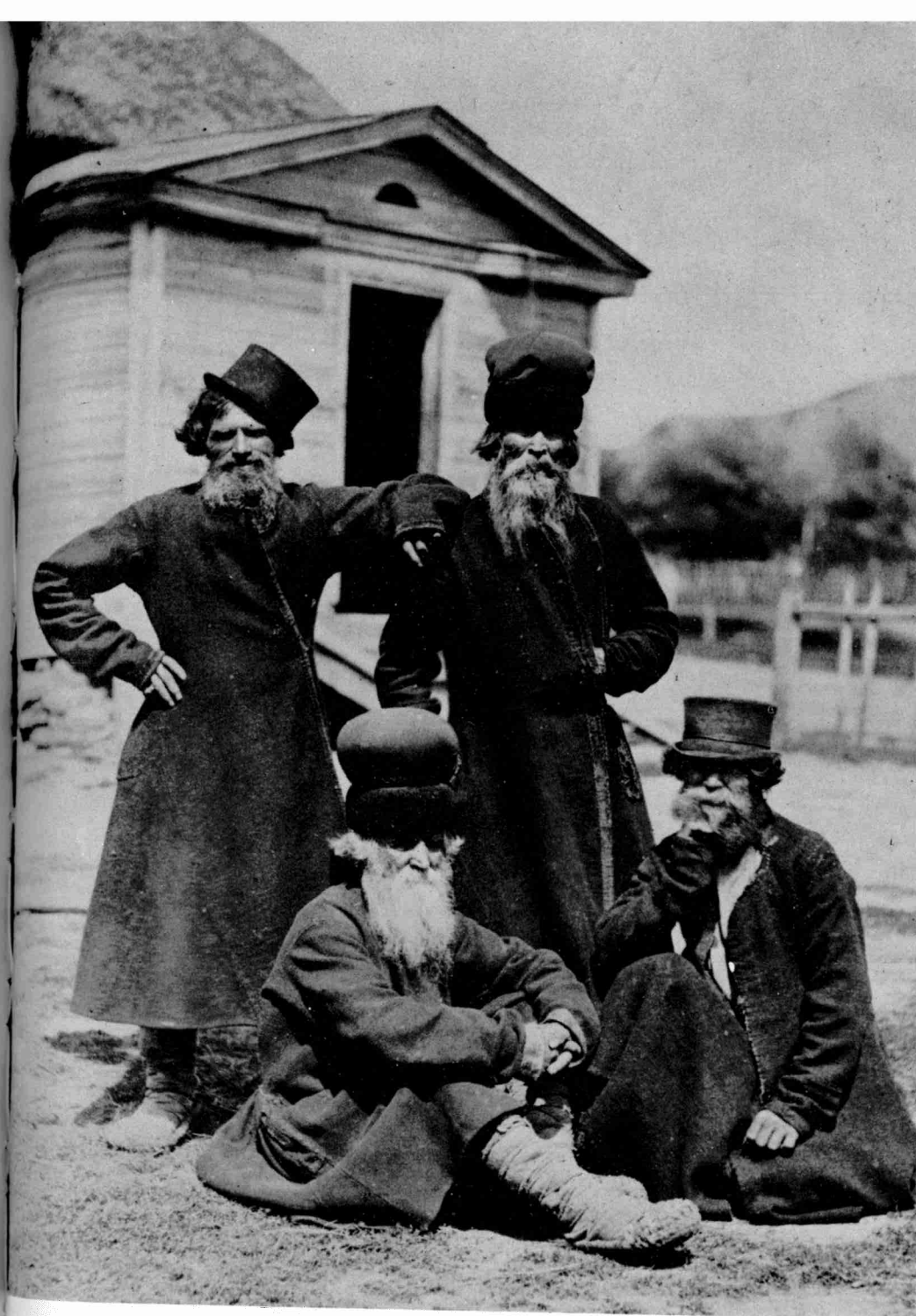
This de-emphasis of brutality and insistence on distinguishing serfdom

from slavery is not intended to exonerate serfdom; it is merely meant to shift attention from its imaginary to its real evils. It was unquestionably a dreadful institution, a disease whose scars Russia bears to this day. A survivor of Nazi concentration camps said of life there that it was not as bad as commonly believed and yet infinitely worse, by which he must have meant that the physical horrors meant less than the cumulative effect of daily dehumanization. *Mutatis mutandis*, and without drawing invidious comparisons between concentration camps and the Russian village under serfdom, we can say the same principle applies to the latter as well. Something fatal attends man's mastery over man, even when benevolently exercised, something which slowly poisons master and victim, and in the end disintegrates the society in which they live. We shall deal with the effects of serfdom on the landlords in the next chapter, and here concentrate on the influence it had on the peasant, especially on his attitude towards authority.

There exists broad agreement among contemporary observers that the worst feature of Russian serfdom was not the abuse of authority but its inherent arbitrariness, that is, the serf's permanent subjection to the unbridled will of other men. Robert Bremner, who in the passage cited above compared favourably the living standards of Russian peasants with those in Ireland and Scotland (pp. 151-2), goes on to say:

Let it not be supposed, however, that, because we admit the Russian peasant to be in many respects more comfortable than some of our own, we therefore consider his lot as, on the whole, more enviable than that of the peasant in a free country like ours. The distance between them is wide – immeasurable; but it can be accounted for in one single word – *the British peasant has rights; the Russian has none!*¹²

In this respect the lot of the state peasant was not much different from that of a serf, at any rate until 1837 when he was placed in the charge of a special ministry (p. 70). Russian peasants did enjoy a great variety of customary rights. Although generally respected, they had no legally binding force which meant they could be violated with impunity. Prohibited from lodging complaints against landlords and indeed forbidden to appear in court, the peasant was completely defenceless *vis-à-vis* anyone in authority. Landlords, as we happen to know, made exceedingly rare use of their right to exile serfs to Siberia; but the mere fact that they could do so must have served as a very effective deterrent. This was only one of many manifestations of arbitrariness to which the serf was subjected. In the 1840s and 1850s, for example, anticipating emancipation, and hoping to reduce the number of peasants working in the fields so as to have fewer of them to share the land with, landlords quietly transferred to their manors to work as domestics over half a million serfs.



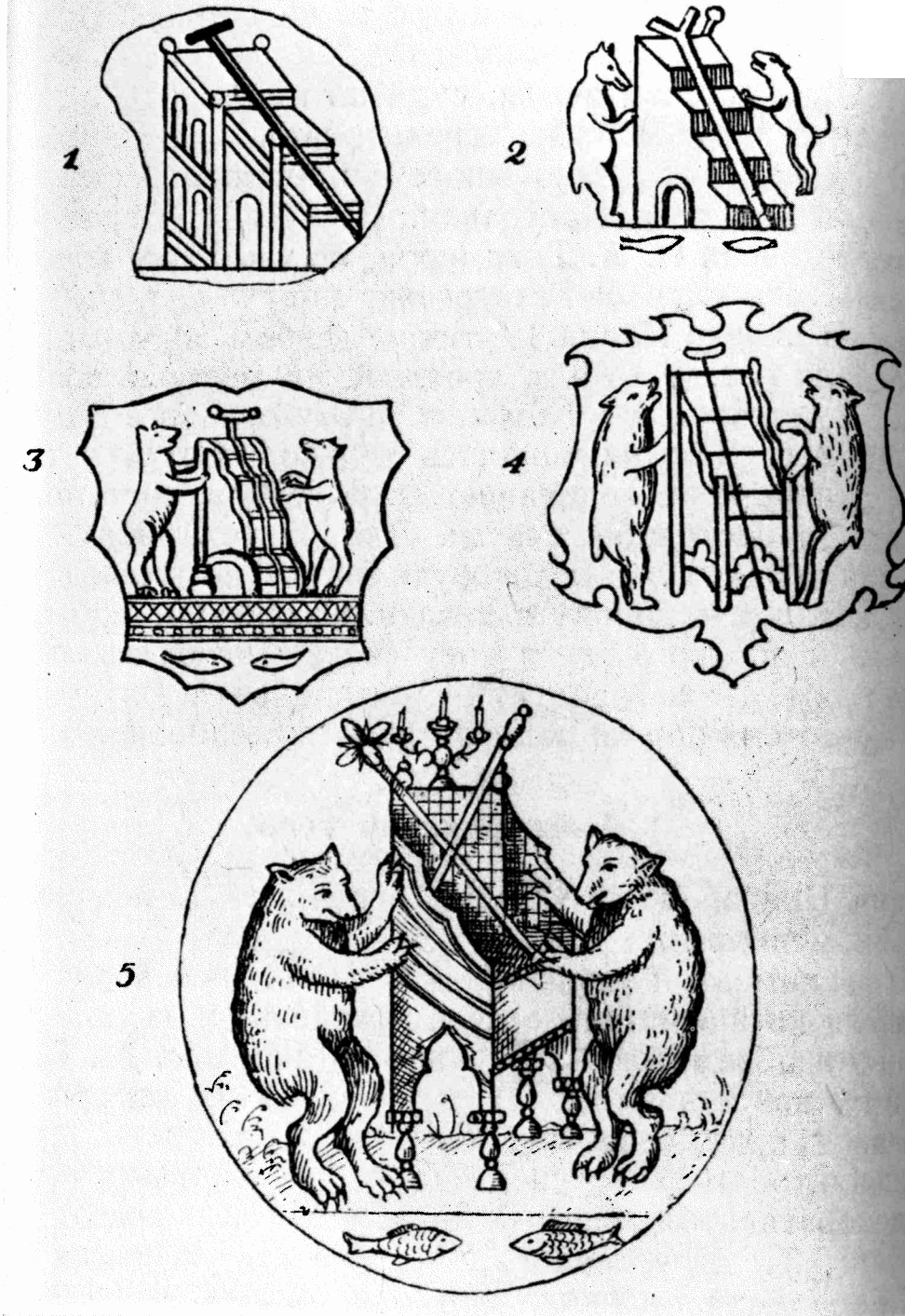
¹ 'Take a look at the Russian peasant: is there a trace of slavish degradation in his behaviour and speech?' (Pushkin): Russian peasants from the Orel region, second half of the nineteenth century.

There was no recourse against such measures. Nor could anything be done to thwart well-meaning pomeshchiks who forced peasants to use unfamiliar farm machinery imported from abroad or to alter their routine of crop rotation. When the government of Nicholas I, for the best of reasons, compelled some state peasants to set aside a part of their land for potatoes, they rebelled. From the peasant's viewpoint the master's motives were immaterial; good and bad intention alike appeared as an external will acting upon him. Unable to distinguish between the two he often repaid his would-be benefactors in a most cruel fashion.

Totally lacking in legally recognized personal rights, the peasant regarded all authority as by its very nature alien and hostile. He complied when confronted with superior strength, especially if it was applied decisively. But in his mind he never acknowledged the right of someone outside his village community to tell him what to do.

Rural violence was actually much less prevalent in imperial Russia than it is generally thought. Compared to most twentieth-century societies, the Russian countryside of the imperial age was an oasis of law and order. It is, of course, an easy thing to compute statistics of rural 'disturbances' and on this basis to argue a steady rise in violence. The trouble, however, lies with definitions. In imperial Russia any formal complaint against his peasants lodged by a landlord was classified by the authorities as a 'disturbance' (*volnenie*) whether it actually occurred or not, and without regard to the nature of the offence: refusal to obey an order, idleness, drunkenness, theft, arson, manslaughter and premeditated murder were indiscriminately lumped together. A catalogue of such occurrences resembles a police blotter and has about as much value in the computation of criminal statistics. As a matter of fact, the majority of the so-called peasant 'disturbances' involved not acts of violence but of ordinary insubordination (*nepovinoenie*).¹³ They performed the same function as do strikes in modern industrial societies and are equally unreliable as a gauge of social instability or political discontent.

Approximately once a century, Russian peasants went on a rampage, killing landlords and officials, burning estates and seizing properties. The first great jacquerie occurred in the 1670s under the leadership of Stepan (or Stenka) Razin, the second a century later (1773-5) under Emelian Pugachev. Both had their beginning on the periphery of the state, in land inhabited by Cossacks, and they spread like wildfire owing to the very weak administration in the provinces. There were no major peasant uprisings in nineteenth-century Russia, but two occurred in close succession in the twentieth, one in 1905, the second in 1917. A common quality of these major rebellions, as well as of the more localized ones, was the absence of political aims. Russian peasants never revolted against tsarist authority: indeed, both Razin and Pugachev claimed to



52 The evolution of the seal of Novgorod the Great in the hands of Muscovite designers: the original fifteenth-century seal of the independent city-state (upper left) showing the steps of the *veche* tribune and the symbol of sovereignty, is gradually transformed until in the seventeenth century the steps have become the tsarist throne, and the symbol of

have been the true tsars come to reclaim their throne from usurpers. Their hatred was directed against the agents of autocracy, those two classes which, under the dyarchic arrangement then in effect, exploited the country for their private benefit. From his intimate knowledge of the peasant, Leo Tolstoy foresaw that the muzhik would not support moves to subvert the autocratic system. 'The Russian revolution', he noted in his diary in 1865, 'will be directed not against the tsar and despotism, but against the ownership of land.'

Desperately violent as he could be on occasions, in daily life the serf tended rather to employ non-violent means to have his way. He elevated the art of lying to great heights. When he did not want to do something, he played stupid; when found out, he feigned contrition. 'The peasants show the landlord almost in all circumstances of life the darkest side of their nature', complained Iurii Samarin, a Slavophile expert on rural conditions. 'In the presence of his master, the intelligent peasant assumes the pose of a clown, the truthful one lies right to his face, untroubled by conscience, the honest one robs him, and all three call him "father".'¹⁴ This behaviour towards his betters contrasted vividly with the peasant's honesty and decency when dealing with equals. Dissimulation was not so much part of peasant character as a weapon against those from whom he had no other defence.

The authority of other men, onerous as it was, was not the only force constraining the peasant and frustrating his will. There was also the tyranny of nature on which he was so dependent – that which the novelist Gleb Uspenskii called the 'the power of the earth'. The earth held the peasant in its grip, sometimes giving, sometimes withholding, for ever mysterious and capricious. He fled it as eagerly as he fled the landlord and the official, turning to peddling, handicrafts, casual labour in the cities or any other work that would free him from the drudgery of field work. There is no evidence that the Russian peasant loved the soil; this sentiment is to be found mainly in the imagination of gentry romantics who visited their estates in the summertime.

If one considers the vice in which the peasant was held by the arbitrary will of his master and the only slightly less arbitrary will of nature – forces which he understood little and over which he had no control – it is not surprising that his fondest wish was to be totally, irresponsibly free. His word for this ideal condition was *volia*, a word meaning 'having one's way'. To have *volia* meant to enjoy licence: to revel, to carouse, to set things on fire. It was a thoroughly destructive concept, an act of revenge on the forces that for ever frustrated him. The literary critic Vissarion Belinskii, a commoner by origin who knew the muzhik better than his genteel friends, put the matter bluntly when he disputed their dream of a democratic Russia:

Our people understand freedom as *volia*, and *volia* for it means to make mischief. The liberated Russian nation would not head for the parliament but it would run for the tavern to drink liquor, smash glasses, and hang the *dvoriane* who shave their beards and wear a frock-coat instead of a *zipun*.¹⁵

Indeed, the handiest means of escape was drink. The Russian Primary Chronicle, in its account of Russia's conversion to Christianity, explains the Kievan princes' rejection of Islam by its prohibition of alcohol. *Rusi est' vesele piti, ne mozhet bez nego byti* – 'Russians are merrier drinking – without it, they cannot live' – Prince Vladimir of Kiev is said to have told the Muslim delegates who had come to win him over. The story is, of course, apocryphal, but it canonizes, as it were, drinking as a national pastime. Until the sixteenth century Russians drank mead and fruit wines. Then they learned from the Tatars the art of distillation. By the middle of the seventeenth century drunkenness was so serious a problem that Patriarch Nikon and his party of church reformers sought to enforce total prohibition. Russians did not take vodka regularly, in small doses, but alternated between abstinence and wild abandon. Once a Russian peasant headed for the tavern – a government licensed shop called *kabak*, which dispensed no food – he liked to consume several glasses of vodka in rapid succession in order to sink as quickly as possible into an alcoholic stupor known as *zapoï*. A saying had it that a proper binge required three days: one to drink, a second to be drunk, and a third to sober up. Easter was the high point. At that time Russian villages, emerging from the long winter and about to begin the arduous cycle of field work, lay prostrate in a fog of alcoholic vapours. Attempts to combat drinking always ran into snags, because the government derived an important share of its income from the sale of spirits and therefore had a vested interest in their consumption. At the end of the nineteenth century, this source was the largest single item of revenue in the imperial budget.

The peasant of old regime Russia had what the older generation of anthropologists like Levy-Bruhl used to call a 'primitive mind', an outstanding quality of which is an inability to think abstractly. The peasant thought concretely and in personal terms. For example, he had great difficulty understanding 'distance', unless it was translated into so many units of *versta*, the Russian counterpart of a kilometre, the length of which he could visualize. Similarly with time, which he could perceive only in terms of specific activity. 'State', 'society', 'nation', 'economy', 'agriculture', all these concepts had to be filled with people they knew or activities they performed in order to be grasped.

This quality accounts for the charm of the muzhik when on his best behaviour. He approached other people free of national, religious or any other prejudice. Of his spontaneous kindness toward strangers there are

innumerable testimonies. Peasants showered with gifts exiles *en route* to Siberia, not from any sympathy for their cause, but because they regarded them as *neshchastnye* – unfortunates. In the Second World War, Nazi soldiers who had come to conquer and kill met with similar acts of charity once they had been made prisoners. In this un-abstract, instinctive human decency lay the reason why radical agitators met with such resistance when they tried to incite peasants to ‘class war’. Even during the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 rural violence directed itself against specific objectives: to wreak vengeance on a particular landlord, to seize a coveted plot of land, to cut down a forest. It did not aim against the ‘system’ as a whole, because the peasant had no inkling of its existence.

But this particular aspect of the peasant mind also had its detrimental side. Among the abstractions the peasant could not comprehend was law, which he tended to confound with custom or common sense. He did not understand due process. Russian customary law, enforced by village communities, recognized the accused person’s confession as the most satisfactory proof of guilt. In the rural (*volost’*) courts established in the 1860s to deal with civil offences and run by the peasants themselves, in the majority of cases confession was the only evidence submitted.¹⁶ Similarly, the peasant had great difficulty comprehending ‘property’, confusing it with usage or possession. To him, an absentee landlord had no rightful claim on the land or its product. The peasant would readily appropriate an object which he felt the legal owner had no need of (e.g. firewood from the landlord’s forest), yet, at the same time reveal a very keen sense of ownership where land, livestock or agricultural implements of other peasants was concerned because these were required to make a living. The legal profession created by the Court Reform of 1864 was regarded by peasants as only another breed of corrupt officials: for did not lawyers take money to get people out of trouble with judges? Impatience with forms and procedures and inability to understand abstract principles, whether of law or government, made the peasant ill-suited for any political system except an authoritarian or anarchistic one.

The Russian peasant shared with other primitive men a weakly developed sense of personal identity. Private likes and dislikes, private ambition, private conscience, tended to be submerged in family and community – at any rate, until he obtained an opportunity to make money on a large scale at which point acquisitive instincts came to the surface in their crassest form. *Mir* – the village commune – meant also ‘the world’. The community restrained the unsocial impulses of the muzhik: the collective was superior to its individual members. Khomiakov once said that ‘a Russian, taken individually will not get into heaven, but there is no way of keeping out an entire village’.¹⁷ But

then the ties binding the inhabitants of a village and socializing them were intensely personal. The outside world was perceived through very clouded glasses as something distant, alien and largely irrelevant. It consisted of two parts: one, the vast, holy community of the Orthodox, and the other, the realm of foreigners, who were divided into Orientals (*Busurmane*) and Occidentals (*Nemtsy*). If foreign residents can be trusted many Russian peasants as recently as the nineteenth century did not know and would not believe that there were in the world other nations and other monarchs than their own.

The peasant was very conscious of the difference between equals and superiors. Everyone not in authority, he addressed as *brat* (brother); those in authority he called *otets* (father) or, more familiarly, *butiushka*. His manner toward equals was surprisingly ceremonious. Travellers to Russia were struck by the elaborate manner in which peasants greeted one another, bowing politely and tipping their hats. One of them says that in *politesse* they yielded nothing to Parisians promenading on the Boulevard des Italiens. To superiors, they either kowtowed (a habit acquired under the Mongols) or made a deep bow (Plate 15). Foreigners also commented on the peasant’s gay disposition, readiness to mimic or break into song and his peaceful disposition: even drunk he rarely came to blows.

But when one turns from these descriptions to peasant proverbs one is shocked to find neither wisdom nor charity. They reveal crude cynicism and complete absence of social sense. The ethic of these proverbs is brutally simple: look out for yourself and don’t bother about the others: ‘Another’s tears are water.’ The socialist-revolutionaries who in the 1870s ‘went to the people’ to awaken in them a sense of indignation at injustice learned to their dismay that the peasant saw nothing wrong with exploitation as such; he merely wanted to be the exploiter instead of the object of exploitation. A leading agricultural expert, who had spent many years working among peasants, sadly concluded that at heart the Russian peasant was a kulak, that is, a rural speculator and usurer:

The ideals of the *kulak* reign among the peasantry; every peasant is proud to be the pike who gobbles up the carp. Every peasant, if circumstances permit, will, in the most exemplary fashion, exploit every other. Whether his object is a peasant or a noble, he will squeeze the blood out of him to exploit his need.¹⁸

And this is what Maxim Gorky had to say on the subject:

In my youth [during the 1880s–90s], I eagerly looked in the villages of Russia for [the good-natured, thoughtful Russian peasant, the tireless seeker after truth and justice which Russian literature of the nineteenth century had so convincingly and beautifully described to the world]. I looked for him and

failed to find him. I found in the villages a stern realist and a man of cunning who – when it suits him – knows very well how to appear a simpleton ... He knows that the ‘peasant is no fool, but the world is dumb’, and that ‘the world is strong like water, and stupid like a pig.’ He says ‘Fear not devils, fear people’, ‘Beat your own people and others will fear you.’ He holds a rather low opinion of truth: ‘Truth won’t feed you’, ‘What matter if it’s a lie as long as you’ve got enough to eat’, ‘An honest man, like a fool, is also harmful’.¹⁹

Allowing for the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century, when Gorky was on his quest, the peasant was demoralized by economic difficulties, the fact remains that even before Emancipation had compounded his problems he displayed many of the characteristics with which Gorky credits him. Grigorovich’s novels of peasant life brought out in the 1840s and Dal’s collection of peasant proverbs, published in 1862, present an unattractive picture by any standard.

One possible resolution of the contradiction between these two images is to assume that the peasant had a very different attitude towards those with whom he had personal dealings and those with whom his relations were, so to say, ‘functional’. The ‘others’ whose tears did not matter, who were stupid, who could be lied to and beaten, were outside his family, village or personal contact. But since they were precisely those who made up ‘society’ and ‘state’, the breach of the walls isolating the small peasant *mir* from the large *mir* – the world – an event which occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, left the peasant utterly bewildered and at a loss what to do. He was ill-prepared to enter into decent *impersonal* relations, and, when compelled to do so, revealed promptly his worst, most rapacious characteristics.

In his religious life, the peasant displayed a great deal of external devotion. He crossed himself continually, attended regularly the long church services, observed the fasts. He did all this from a conviction that scrupulous observance of church rituals – fasts, sacraments, and the constant making of the cross – would save his soul. But he seems to have had very little if any understanding of the spiritual meaning of religion or of religion as a way of life. He did not know the Bible or even the Lord’s Prayer. He had nothing but contempt for the village priest or *pop*. His attachment to Christianity was on the whole superficial, resting primarily on the need for formulas and rituals with which to gain access to the nether world. It is difficult to quarrel with Belinskii’s judgement as made in his famous Open Letter to Gogol:

According to you the Russian people is the most religious in the world. That is a lie! The basis of religiousness is pietism, reverence, fear of God, whereas the Russian man utters the name of the Lord while scratching himself somewhere. He says of the icon: If it isn’t good for praying it’s good for covering the pots.

Take a closer look and you will see that it is by nature a profoundly atheistic people. It still retains a good deal of superstition, but not a trace of religiousness. Superstition passes with the advances of civilisation, but religiousness often keeps company with them too; we have a living example of this in France, where even today there are many sincere Catholics among enlightened and educated men, and where many people who have rejected Christianity still cling stubbornly to some sort of god. The Russian people is different; mystic exaltation is not in its nature; it has too much common sense, a too lucid and positive mind, and therein, perhaps, lies the vastness of its historic destinies in the future. Religiousness has not even taken root among the clergy in it, since a few isolated and exceptional personalities distinguished for such cold ascetic contemplation prove nothing. But the majority of our clergy has always been distinguished for their fat bellies, scholastic pedantry, and savage ignorance. It is a shame to accuse it of religious intolerance and fanaticism; instead it could be praised for exemplary indifference in matters of faith. Religiosity among us appeared only in the schismatic sects who formed such a contrast in spirit to the mass of the people and who were numerically so insignificant in comparison with it.²⁰

How superficial a hold Orthodoxy exercised over the masses is evidenced by the relative ease with which the communist regime succeeded in uprooting Christianity in the heartland of Russia and replacing it with an ersatz cult of its own. The job proved much more difficult to accomplish among Catholics, Muslims and Orthodox Dissenters.

The true religion of the Russian peasantry was fatalism. The peasant rarely credited any event, especially a misfortune, to his own volition. It was ‘God’s will’, even where responsibility could clearly be laid at his own doorstep, e.g. when carelessness caused a fire or the death of an animal. Russian proverbs are full of fatalistic sentiments. When, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the muzhik began to be acquainted with the Bible, he first learned the passages stressing humility and passive acceptance of one’s fate.

Finally, as concerns politics. The Russian peasant was undoubtedly a ‘monarchist’ in the sense that he could conceive of no source of worldly authority other than that emanating from the tsar. He regarded the tsar as God’s vicar on earth, a bolshak of all Russia, created by the Lord to give him orders and to take care of him. He gave the tsar credit for all that was good and blamed whatever went wrong either on God’s will or on the landlords and officials. He believed the tsar knew him personally and that if he were to knock on the door of the Winter Palace he would be warmly received and his complaints not only heard but understood in their smallest detail. It is because of this patriarchal outlook that the muzhik felt a familiarity towards his sovereign which would have been completely out of place in western Europe. De Segur on his travels in Russia with Catherine the Great observed with surprise the unaffected

manner which simple country people adopted when speaking to their empress.

A powerful factor in the peasant's monarchist sentiments was the firm belief that the tsar wished them to have all the land, that his desire was frustrated by the landlords, but that some day he would overcome this resistance. Serf emancipation of 1861 transformed this belief into firm conviction. The socialist-revolutionary propagandists of the 1870s were driven to desperation by the peasants' unshakeable faith that the 'tsar will give' (*tsar' даст*).²¹

Hence the chaos which enveloped Russia after the sudden abdication of Nicholas II; hence, too, Lenin's haste to have the tsar and his family murdered once communist authority seemed endangered and Nicholas could have served as a rallying-point for the opposition; hence the constant efforts of the communist regime to fill the vacuum which the demise of the imperial dynasty had created in the minds of the masses by mammoth state-sponsored cults of party leaders.

The imperial government attached great importance to the monarchist sentiments of the peasantry, and many of its policies, such as hesitation to industrialize or to build railroads and indifference to mass education, were inspired by the wish to keep the muzhik exactly as he was, simple and loyal. Belief in the monarchist loyalties of the peasant was one of the cornerstones of imperial policy in the nineteenth century. Correct up to a point, the government misconstrued the peasant's attitude. The peasant's loyalty was a personal loyalty to the idealized image of a distant ruler whom he saw as his terrestrial father and protector. It was not loyalty to the institution of the monarchy as such, and certainly not to its agents, whether dvoriane or chinovniki. The peasant had no reason whatever to feel attachment to the state, which took from him with both hands and gave nothing in return. To the peasant, authority was at best a fact of life which one had to bear like disease, old age, or death, but which could never be 'good' and whose clutches one had every right to escape whenever given a chance. Loyalty to the tsar entailed no acceptance of civic responsibility of any kind, and indeed concealed a profound revulsion against political institutions and processes. The personalization of all human relations, so characteristic of the Russian peasant, produced a superficial monarchism which appeared conservative but was in fact thoroughly anarchist.

Beginning with the latter part of the eighteenth century it was becoming apparent to an increasing number of Russians that serfdom was not compatible with Russia's claim to being either a civilized country or a great power. Both Alexander I and Nicholas I had serious reservations about this institution, and so did their leading counsellors. Public

opinion, nationalist-conservative and liberal-radical alike, turned hostile to serfdom. Indeed, serfdom had no genuine arguments in its favour: the best case that could be made for it held that after centuries of bondage the muzhik was as yet unprepared for the responsibilities of freedom and therefore that it would be best if it were given to him later rather than sooner. If, these growing abolitionist sentiments notwithstanding, serfdom was not done away with until 1861 the principal reason must be sought in the monarchy's fear of antagonizing the 100,000 serf-owning dvoriane on whom it relied to staff the chief offices, command the armed forces and maintain order in the countryside. Within the narrow limits open to it, however, the government did what it would to reduce the number of serfs and to improve their condition. Alexander forswore to hand out any more state or crown peasants to private persons. He also introduced procedures by which Russian landlords could carry out private emancipations, and authorized the liberation (without land) of the serfs belonging to the German barons in Livonia. The cumulative effect of these measures was gradually to reduce the proportion of serfs in the empire's population from 45-50 per cent at the close of the eighteenth century, to 37.7 per cent in 1858. Serfdom was clearly on the wane.

The decision to proceed with emancipation, come what may, was taken very soon after the accession of Alexander II. It was carried out in the teeth of strong resistance of the landowning class and in disregard of formidable administrative obstacles. Scholars had once believed that the step was taken largely on economic grounds, namely as a result of a crisis in the serf economy. This belief, however, does not appear well grounded. There is no evidence that economic considerations were uppermost in the government's mind when it took the decision to proceed with emancipation. But even had they been, it is questionable whether improvements in rural productivity required the liberation of serfs and the replacement of bonded with hired labour. The decades immediately preceding emancipation were a period of the most efficient utilization of serf labour because landlords, freed from compulsory state service, devoted more attention to rationalizing their rural economies to serve the expanding Russian and foreign markets. In his pioneering historical studies, Peter Struve has shown that serfdom attained the very peak of economic efficiency on the eve of its abolition.²²

It is much more plausible that the decisive factors behind the government's decision were political. Until Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean war it had been widely believed, even by persons unfriendly to the absolute monarchy, that at the very least it assured the empire of internal stability and external power. Internal stability remained as yet unchallenged, although the probability of another Pugachev uprising occurring if serfdom survived did not escape the new emperor. But the

myth of autocratic Russia's military might was irreparably shattered once the empire proved itself unable to defend its territory from the armies of the 'corrupt' liberal states. In the crisis of self-confidence which followed the defeat, all institutions came under critical scrutiny, serfdom most of all: 'At the head of current domestic problems which we must tackle stands – as a portent for the future and as an obstacle which precludes at the present time a substantial improvement of anything whatever – the question of serfdom'. Samarin wrote during the Crimean War, 'From whatever end our internal reconstruction should begin we will inevitably confront this issue'.²³ Human bondage now appeared as a ballast around Russia's neck, a weight which dragged it down into an abyss: on this there was wide agreement, which only those unable to see beyond their immediate personal interests did not share.

Russian serfdom as it developed historically consisted of two disparate elements: the authority of the landlord over the serf, and the serf's attachment to the land. The Emancipation Edict, issued after prolonged deliberations of 19 February 1861, immediately abrogated the landlord's authority. The one-time serf now became a legal person allowed to own property, to sue in court and to participate in elections to local self-government boards. Traces of his previous inferior status, however, remained. In many crimes of a civil nature he came under the jurisdiction of special rural courts operating according to customary law which could impose corporal punishment. He continued to pay the soul tax from which the other estates were exempt; and he was required to petition his commune every time he wished to absent himself for a longer period of time.*

The government approached the second ingredient of serfdom, attachment to the land, very gingerly. In this respect the peasant became fully free only half a century later. The reasons for keeping the peasant bound to the land were partly political, partly fiscal. The authorities knew how ready the Russian peasant was to abandon the soil and roam the country in search of easier and more remunerative work. It feared that an uncontrolled mass movement of the peasantry would provoke social unrest and make it impossible to collect taxes. In the final settlement, therefore, the government attached the peasant to the community which, in addition to its traditional powers (e.g. the right to repartition land strips) acquired some of the authority previously enjoyed by the landlord. The commune was retained where it had already existed and introduced where it had been unknown.

The authorities resolved early that upon his emancipation the ex-serf would receive an adequate land allotment to support himself and his

* This disability survives in the USSR, where kolkhoz members are not issued regular internal passports and cannot move away without authorization.

family. After hard bargaining with representatives of landed interests, minimum and maximum norms were set for the various regions of the country: landlords whose peasants tilled on their own behalf land in excess of the maximum norms could request to have it reduced; where the allotment fell below the minimum norm, they had to increase it. In the end, Russia's landlords retained approximately two-thirds of the land, including most of the pasture and woodland; the rest was distributed among the one-time proprietary peasants. Because in the eyes of the law both parts were property of the landlord, the peasants had to pay for their share. The government advanced to the landlords on the peasants' behalf 80 per cent of the price of the land, as determined by assessors, which the peasants had to repay over a period of forty-nine years in the form of 'Redemption Payments'. The remaining 20 per cent of the purchase price the peasant paid the landlord directly: in money if he had it, in services if he did not. To assure that the 'Redemption Payments' were accurately delivered the government entrusted the property title to the peasant allotment to the commune rather than to the individual household.*

The Act of 19 February 1861 placed the peasant in an ambivalent situation. He was freed from the detested authority of the landlord; thus the single worst feature of serfdom was done away with. But at the same time, he remained in many respects separated from the rest of the population and continued to be attached to the land.

At the time of its promulgation, the Emancipation settlement appeared a success. Only a small group of radical critics found fault with it on the grounds that all the soil should have been turned over to the peasants and that they should not have been required to pay for their allotments. The Emperor of Russia achieved with one stroke of his pen the abolition of bondage which took the President of the United States four years of civil war. In retrospect, the achievement appears less impressive. In fact, after 1861 the economic situation of the Russian peasant deteriorated, and in 1900 he was, by and large, worse off than he had been in 1800. For the rural population, especially in the black earth belt, the second half of the nineteenth century turned out to be a period of progressive decline and demoralization. The crisis had several causes, some traceable to human error, some to factors beyond human control.

To begin with, the imposition of Redemption Payments on one-time serfs on top of their regular taxes placed on them unrealistic burdens. The peasants had extreme difficulty meeting their new fiscal obligations, especially in the areas where corvée had been the traditional method of paying rent and there were few opportunities for making money. To

* The Emancipation Edict left it up to the ex-serf to decide whether or not he wished to buy his share of land. Purchase became obligatory only in 1883.

lease or buy more land, they borrowed money, first at exorbitant rates from village usurers, and later, at more advantageous ones, from the Peasant Bank. This indebtedness, on top of their current obligations, caused them to fall into arrears. In 1881 the government reduced by a quarter the moneys due under the Emancipation settlement, but this measure did not suffice. In 1907 bowing to the inevitable, it abolished the Redemption Payments altogether and cancelled arrears. But the harm had been done. The radical critics of the settlement who had argued the land should have been given the peasants free of charge appear in retrospect to have been right not only on moral but also on practical grounds.

The retention of the commune also seems to have been a mistake although it is more difficult to see how that one could have been avoided, because the peasants cleaved to it. The commune inhibited the emergence in Russia of a vigorous farming class, in so far as the hard-working and enterprising commune members had to bear fiscal responsibility for the indolent, inept and alcoholic ones. The whole arrangement fostered routine at the expense of innovation. Peasants had little interest in investing in the land which they stood to lose in the next round of repartition; they had every reason to squeeze out of it all they could, mindless of the future. The Emancipation Edict contained provisions which permitted a peasant household to consolidate its strips and separate itself from the commune; but these arrangements were hedged with so many formalities that few took advantage of them. In any event, in 1893 the government revoked them. By retaining and strengthening the commune the government undoubtedly achieved a certain measure of social stability and fiscal control, but it did so at the expense of economic progress.

The unwillingness of the authorities to entrust the peasant with full civil rights also represented an error of judgement. Understandably, it seemed more prudent to introduce the peasant to the obligations of full citizenship piecemeal. But the actual effect of the post-emancipation system which subjected peasants to so many separate laws and institutions was to perpetuate their peculiar status in society, and to postpone yet further the development in them of that civic sense which they so sadly lacked. The flaw was aggravated further by the creation in 1889 of rural officials called Land Commandants (*zemskie nachal'niki*). Chosen by the bureaucracy from among conservative landlords of the district, they were assigned a wide range of arbitrary powers over the peasantry, not unlike those the landlords had once enjoyed over their serfs.

Finally, the land settlement contained iniquities which over the long run produced very pernicious economic consequences. The Emancipation settlement left in the hands of landlords the bulk of the meadow land and forest which under serfdom the peasants had freely shared with them. Whereas a well-balanced rural economy in Russia required that

every two acres of arable be matched by one acre of meadow, in Russia around 1900 the ratio was 3:1 and in places 4:1. Lumber and firewood were a constant bone of contention between peasants and landlords.

Common to all the human flaws in the Emancipation settlement was an excess of caution. The settlement was, if anything, too carefully thought out and therefore too rigid; it allowed too little scope for self-correction. A more liberal, more flexible arrangement might have caused more trouble at first but in the long run it would have been better able to absorb the kind of pressures outside human control which in the end undermined it altogether; little revolutions might have prevented the big one.

Of these natural pressures the most devastating was the sudden spurt in population; a phenomenon which affected not only the one-time serfs, but all who made their living off the land. In 1858, Russia had 68 million inhabitants; in 1897, 125 million. Its compounded annual rate of population growth in the second half of the nineteenth century was 1.8 per cent; the corresponding figure in south-western Europe was 0.4-0.5 per cent and in north-western Europe, 0.7-1.1 per cent. The overwhelming majority of the new people, of course, was born in the rural districts of European Russia, where between 1858 and 1897 the population increased by some 50 per cent without a corresponding increase in resources, as yields remained pitifully low. At the turn of the century, the average net income from a *desiatina* (2.7 acres) of land (arable and meadow) in Russia was 3.77 rubles, or not quite \$2.00 in the then US currency. In the province of Moscow in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, where the average net per *desiatina* was about 5.29 rubles and the average peasant holding 7.5 *desiatinas* (about 20 acres), the net income was just below 40 rubles a year, or £4 (\$20.00). If one counts the peasant's labour as wages, and adds to it his outside earnings, the most generous estimate of a farming family's net income in the Moscow region in the 1890s would come to 130-190 rubles (£13-20 in British currency of the time) which fell far short of its needs.²⁴ The imperial government which alone had the capital to invest in the amelioration of Russian agriculture preferred to place it in railways and heavy industry, although it drew the bulk of its revenues from the countryside.

The combined pressure of excessive fiscal burdens, social and economic disabilities and an uncontrollable population growth created a situation which made it increasingly difficult for the Russian peasant to support himself from agriculture. In 1900, it was estimated, he covered only between a quarter and a half of his needs from farming; the remainder he had to make up in some other way. The solution readiest at hand was to hire himself out to landlords or rich peasants as a labourer,

or else to lease land and till it either on a sharecrop basis or in return for various services; in the latter event, he reverted to the status of a semi-serf. In 1905, peasants residing in European Russia held outright (mostly communally) 160 million *desiatinas*, and leased another 20–25 million, leaving only 40–45 million of cultivable land in private hands. (The state and crown owned, in addition, 153 million *desiatinas*, but nearly all of this land was either forest or soil unsuitable for cultivation; the arable was largely on lease to peasants.) Still, they did not have enough. The Russian peasant knew no other way of augmenting his food supply than by putting more land under the plough, and there simply was not enough unclaimed land to accommodate a population growing at so fast a rate. The peasants' belief in an imminent national 'black repartition' aggravated their plight, because they often refused to buy land offered them for purchase on advantageous terms. Some of them preferred to till the land until it was utterly exhausted than to pay for that which would be theirs before long for nothing.

The northern peasant suffered from an additional handicap. He had traditionally earned a large portion of his supplementary income from household industries. This source of income began to dry up with the development of modern mechanical industries. The crude cloth, shoes, utensils or hardware produced in cottages during the long winter months could not compete either in quality or price with machine-made products. Thus at the time when the peasant stood in greatest need of supplementary income he was deprived of it by industrial competition.

Finally, the rural crisis was exacerbated by a spontaneous social development, the dissolution of the joint family. As soon as the personal authority of the landlord and official over them had been lifted peasants split up their common properties and broke up into individual households. This was decidedly a regressive step from the point of view of rural productivity. The peasants apparently knew this to be the case, yet they not only did not want to live under the same roof with their parents and kin but preferred not to work jointly with them. The authority of the *bolshak* waned and with it weakened an important stabilizing force in the village.

As can be readily seen, there was no easy solution to the Russian agrarian crisis as it unfolded towards the end of the nineteenth century. The problem was not, as is often thought, mere shortage of land; nor was the solution to take land away from landlords and state and turn it over to the peasants. The entire rural economy was enmeshed in inter-related difficulties. The economic crisis enhanced the peasant's anarchist proclivities. The *muzhik*, whom foreigners at the end of the eighteenth century described as naturally gay and good natured, travellers around 1900 depict as sullen and hostile.

This ugly mood, exacerbating the peasants' instinctive hostility to the outside world, created at the beginning of the twentieth century a situation ripe for violence. It needed only some outward sign of weakening of state authority for the village to explode. This signal was given in the winter of 1904–5 by the liberal intelligentsia which through the Union of Liberation launched an open campaign of meetings and assemblies to demand a constitution. The government whose forces were tied down on the Far Eastern front against the Japanese had to temporize, and by so doing created the impression it was not averse to some kind of constitutional arrangement. In the confusion which ensued, the bureaucracy alternated concessions with brutal shows of strength. In January 1905, after troops had fired on the peaceful procession of workers marching to the Winter Palace, the cities were thrown into turmoil. The village, held in the grip of winter, had to await the coming of the thaw. As soon as the snow had melted and the ice on the rivers had broken, the peasantry went on the rampage, looting and burning estates and appropriating what they had so long coveted, namely the landlord's land. Once the situation was brought under control (1906–7) the government undertook a belated agrarian reform. Redemption Payments were abolished. Disappointed in the commune's failure to act as a stabilizing force, the government issued an edict on 9 November 1906 which allowed peasants to consolidate their holdings and leave the commune without its permission to set up individual farmsteads; the commune's authority over peasant movement through passport control was abolished. The government now appropriated large sums to finance the resettlement eastward of peasants from the overpopulated black earth provinces. Money was also set aside to help them purchase land from landlords. The consequences of these measures were indeed gratifying. In 1916, self-employed peasants (i.e. those who did not use hired labour) owned in European Russia outright about two-thirds of the cultivated land in private possession; with the leased land included, they had at their disposal nearly 90 per cent of such land. They also owned nine-tenths of the livestock.²⁵

The events of 1905 gave the peasants a sense of power such as they had never possessed before. When in February 1917 Nicholas II suddenly abdicated, there was no force left to restrain them. In the spring of 1917 the *muzhiks* once again went on the rampage, this time to complete what the first revolution had left undone. The object now was no longer arable land; this time they concentrated on cutting down state and private forests, harvesting crops sown by others, appropriating produce stored for sale, and, of course, once again looting and burning country manors. Peasant violence in 1917 was directed primarily against the large, productive estates. It was on the crest of this rural revolution (of

which the dissolution of the peasant army was an aspect) that Lenin and his party rode to power.

In the end, the Russian monarchy was destroyed by the peasant whom it had viewed as its staunchest supporter. Conditions aborted the development of a conservative rural estate in Russia. Latent peasant anarchism first delayed reform, then influenced it in an overly cautious direction, and finally, becoming overt, generated chaos which brought the inadequately reformed state down. At no point in history was the peasant in Russia that anchor of stability which he had been in Germany or France.