

Russia After Peter the Great

Consolidation under Catherine the Great

Several decades of weak rule followed after Peter's death in 1724. Significant change resumed during the reign of Catherine the Great who ruled from 1762-1796. She used the Pugachev peasant rebellion as an excuse to extend central government authority. Catherine was also a Westernizer and brought Enlightenment ideas to Russia, but centralization and strong royal authority was more important to her than western reform. She gave new power to the nobles over serfs in return for their service in the bureaucracy and military. Catherine continued patronage of Western art and architecture. Russian expansionist policies continued. Territories, including the Crimea on the Black Sea, were gained in Central Asia from the Ottomans. Catherine pushed colonization in Siberia and claimed Alaska. In Europe, Catherine joined Prussia and Austria to partition Poland and end its independence. By the time of her death, Russia had completed an important transformation. Russia's tsars over three centuries had created a strong central state ruling over the world's greatest land empire. New elements from the West had entered and altered Russia's economy and culture.

1. What were the main achievements of Catherine the Great?

Serfdom: The Life of East Europe's Masses

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the power of the nobility over the serfs increased steadily. Before the Mongol conquest, Russian peasants had been largely free farmers with legal rights. After the expulsion of the Tatars, however, increasing numbers of Russian peasants fell into debt and had to accept servile status to the noble land owners when they could not repay. They retained access to much of the land, but not primary ownership. The Russian government actively encouraged this from the 16th century onward. Serfdom gave the government a way to satisfy the nobility and to extend direct control over the peasants and common people. As new territories were added to the empire, the system of serfdom was extended accordingly, sometimes after a period of free farming.

1. What was the role of peasants before the Mongol conquests?
2. What happened to serfs after the Mongols?

By 1800, half of Russia's peasantry was en-serfed to the landlords, and much of the other half owed obligations to the state. Laws passed during the 17th and 18th centuries tied the serfs to the land and increased the legal rights of the landlords. An act in 1649 fixed the hereditary status of the serfs, so that people born into that station could not legally escape it. Russia was setting up a system of serfdom very close to slavery in that the serfs could be bought and sold, gambled away, and punished by their masters. The system was a very unusual case in which a people essentially enslaved many of its own members, in contrast to most slave systems, which focused on "outsiders." They used the system to support their political control and distinctive lifestyle, as in Russia.

Serfs on the estates of Eastern Europe were taxed and policed by their landlords. In Russia, whole villages were sold as manufacturing labor—a process that Peter the Great actively encouraged. Peasants were not literally slaves. They continued to use village governments to regulate many aspects of their lives, relying more heavily on community ties. Yet most peasants were illiterate and quite poor. They paid high taxes or obligations in kind, and they owed extensive labor service to the landlords or the government—a source of not only of agricultural production but of also mining and manufacturing. The labor obligation, tended to increase steadily. Both the economic and legal situation of the peasantry continued to deteriorate. Although

Catherine the Great sponsored a few model villages to display her enlightenment to western-minded friends, she turned the government of the serfs over to the landlords more completely than ever before.

1. How did Russia exercise power over the serfs?
2. How were the serfs treated?

Trade and Economic Dependence

In between serfs and landlords, there were a few layers of Russian society. Cities were small, and 95 percent of the population remained rural. Manufacturing took place in the countryside so there was no well-defined artisan class. Small merchant groups existed as well, although most of Russia's European trade was handled by Westerners. The nobility, concerned about this potential social competition, prevented the emergence of a substantial merchant class.

Russia's social and economic system worked well in many respects. It produced enough revenue to support an expanding state and empire. Russia was able to trade in furs and other commodities with areas in central Asia outside its boundaries, which meant that its export economy was not totally oriented toward the West. The system along with Russia's expansion, yielded significant population growth: Russia's population doubled during the 18th century to nearly 36 million. Despite periodic famines and epidemics, there was no question that the overall economy advanced.

Yet the system suffered from important limitations. Most agricultural methods were highly traditional, and there was little motivation among the peasantry for improvement because increased production usually was taken by the landlord. Landlords themselves debated agricultural improvements, but when it came time to increase production they concentrated on squeezing the serfs. Manufacturing lagged behind Western standards, despite the important extension developed under Peter the Great.

1. What were the layers of Russian society?
2. What were the positive aspects of the economic system? Why were there limitations?

Social Unrest

Russia's economic and social system led to protest. By the end of the 18th century, a small but growing number of Western-oriented aristocrats were criticizing the regime's backwardness, urging measures as far-reaching as the abolition of serfdom. More significant still were the recurring peasant rebellions. Russian peasants for the most part were politically loyal to the tsar, but they harbored bitter resentments against their landlords, whom they accused of taking lands that were rightfully theirs.

Periodic rebellions saw peasants destroy manorial records, seize lands, and sometimes kill landlords and their officials. Peasant rebellions had occurred from the 17th century onward, but the Pugachev rebellion in the 1770's was particularly strong. Pugachev, a Cossack chieftain who claimed to be the legitimate tsar, promised an end to serfdom, taxation, and military conscription along with the abolition of the landed aristocracy. His forces roamed over southern Russia until they were finally defeated. Pugachev was brought to Moscow in a cage and cut into quarters in a public square.

1. What was the Pugachev Rebellion?

From *Decree on Serfs (1767)*

Although Catherine liked to use the liberal rhetoric of the Enlightenment, she actually ruled Russia with a heavy hand. Her government enacted this decree about serfdom in Russia.

The Governing Senate. . . has deemed it necessary to make known that the landlords' serfs and peasants . . . owe their landlords proper submission and absolute obedience in all matters, according to the laws that have been enacted from time immemorial by the autocratic forefathers of Her Imperial Majesty and which have not been repealed, and which provide that all persons who dare to incite serfs and peasants to disobey their landlords shall be arrested and taken to the nearest government office, there to be punished forthwith as disturbers of the public tranquility, according to the laws and without leniency. And should it so happen that even after the publication of the present decree of Her Imperial Majesty any serfs and peasants should cease to give the proper obedience to their landlords . . . and should make bold to submit unlawful petitions complaining of their landlords, and especially to petition Her Imperial Majesty personally, then both those who make the complaints and those who write up the petitions shall be punished...and forthwith deported to Nerchinsk to penal servitude for life and shall be counted as part of the quota of recruits which their landlords must furnish to the army. And in order that people everywhere may know of the present decree, it shall be read in all the churches on Sundays and holy days for one month after it is received and thereafter once every year during the great church festivals, lest anyone pretend ignorance.

From *A Source Book for Russian History*, G. Vernadsky, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), Vol. 2, pp. 453-454.

1. How does this document explain the relationship between landlord and serf in Russia?
2. What would happen if someone went against the Queen of Russia?
3. From whose point of view is this document written?
4. What other source does the reader need to gain a more complete picture on Russian serfdom?