

LABOR AND DEPENDENCE ON RUSSIAN ESTATES

Introduction

In Russia, landlords could ask peasants for quitrent or for labor services (*corvées*). Traditionally, Western, Russian, and Soviet historiography have all argued that quitrent encourages trade and economic growth but that labor service restricts both.¹ This argument has been widely echoed by historians of serfdom in Western² and Eastern Europe.³ Of course, many others disagree, maintaining that trade and economic growth can also take place under a system of *corvée* labor or even slavery in the strict sense.⁴

Any satisfactory answer to this question requires an assessment of labor productivity and the overall demesne efficiency: Some claim that *corvées* call for high supervision costs while simultaneously reducing labor productivity and peasants' interest in increasing productivity and market production. Others disagree, claiming that labor supervision is not necessarily stricter under *corvées* than under quitrent. Hoch, in particular, has shown that serf owners were able to exploit serf labor with minimum supervisory costs by harnessing the patriarchal authority structure of the peasant household.⁵

The question underlying this debate is important: were historical forms of forced labor compatible with the market, innovation, and capitalism? We may note that an increased dissemination of quitrent was recorded during the first half of the eighteenth century, followed by the greater success of labor services during the second half of this century, and that finally, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the quitrent regained its prominence, although to a lesser degree than previously. Within this overall framework, significant regional differences can be seen: forced labor was more widespread in the Black Earth region (the central, most

fertile regions of European Russia), whereas the quitrent system was more widely practiced near industrial areas.⁶ Based on this observation, several historians have concluded that forced labor restricted trade and economic development.⁷

Yet this approach requires serious revision. Empirical analysis shows that the revival of labor services went along with an increasing integration of the demesne in proto-industrial activity, as well as in local and national markets for agriculture and manufactures. Overall trends since the eighteenth century provide evidence of an important link between rural estates and markets. Of course, regional variations were important, as we will see, and even beyond this, institutional constraints, social hierarchies, and market dynamics varied from one area to another and even from one estate to another. Most microeconomic studies focus on large estates⁸—even if some Soviet scholars like Koval’chenko exploited several estate archives. In part, such a focus creates a bias, as large estates were more inclined to adopt modern techniques and they tended to have higher yields and rates of commercialization than smaller units. Yet this bias does not invalidate our argument; rather, it confirms it. Despite the better performances of big estates, overall data reveal quite good outcomes for the Russian economy as compared with most Western economies,⁹ and this despite the well-known tendencies of statistics to underestimate products, yields, and revenues.

Proto-industry, Trade, and Growth in the Eighteenth Century

Proto-industrialization has long been considered an obstacle to modernization and industrialization—an approach that is firmly rooted in the hypothesis that large manufactures and the “British” way are the only paths to industrialization. More recently, this view has been strongly modified, stating instead that the Continental European, Asian, and Latin American paths, mostly anchored to small units, were the rule.¹⁰ Recent analyses have also shown that in contradiction to the first theories, guilds declined even without proto-industrialization (this was the case in most parts of England, Flanders, and the Netherlands).¹¹ Conversely, in many other parts of Europe (Bohemia, northern Italy), the seigniorial institutions, community,¹² and guilds remained strong despite the diffusion of proto-industry.¹³ But to what extent does Russian history confirm or invalidate these issues?

In eighteenth-century Russia, agricultural prices continued to climb, rising by a factor of two and a half, which no doubt made service labor more profitable than quitrent.¹⁴ At the same time, such profit was only

possible if the estates were efficiently supervised. Supervisors were supposed to adopt good working methods; carry out an inventory of goods, land, and harvests; and keep the landowner informed about the running of the estate. Hence landowners also increased their interest in supervisors.

In this context, there is no evidence of an increasing autarchy of the demesne coupled with increasing wheat exports from “backward” Russia to the benefit of “advanced” Europe, as Wallerstein and Kula have argued. Exports undoubtedly rose, and, as Mironov has shown, Russian markets became progressively more integrated into the international and European markets. Nevertheless, the growth of exports did not take place at the expense of local and national markets; indeed, by 1760 the demand for grain in the heartland created a rise in grain prices.¹⁵ Russian local markets therefore became more integrated into a national market during the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ The nobility’s role in the expansion of rural trade is reflected in the fact that much of the rural expansion took place on the gentry’s estates. In 1760, nobles’ estates were the sites of 413 out of 1,143 rural fairs (36 percent), and by 1800, they were the locations for 1,615 out of 3,180 (51 percent). This data clearly shows that not only landlords, but their peasants also, firmly entered the rural agrarian markets. Peasant activity in rural markets even surpassed that of merchants and small urban traders.¹⁷ Therefore, contrary to traditional arguments, trade in estate production increased with *barshchina* (corvées), which was compatible with exportation and long distances, as well as with the rise of local and national markets.¹⁸

Widespread local markets, therefore, became all the more important, not only for agriculture produce, but for proto-industrial products, as well. Since the mid-eighteenth century, peasants had been buying important shares of proto-industrial products while benefiting from increasing incomes. For example, the larger accessible labor market of peasants already familiar with linen-weaving gave Moscow and Ivanovo firms a greater competitive viability than the firms in Saint Petersburg.¹⁹ To control this market, noble landowners began retaking control of the sale of products from their estates and entering into urban trade circuits, with a certain degree of firmness.²⁰ Proto-industry became ruralized.²¹ Between 1742 and 1801, the urban population dropped from 12 percent to 8 percent of the total population,²² and therefore industrial rural areas were sometimes differentiated and sometimes overlapped.

Thus while 5 percent of all private factories belonged to nobles in the 1720s, the percentage rose to 20 percent by 1773. In 1725, 78 percent of industrial activity was located in cities; that dropped to 60 percent in 1775–78 and to 58 percent, in 1803.²³ On the whole, the second half of the eighteenth century saw a drastic increase in landlords entering

the proto-industrial sector; the ruralization of proto-industry was not a symptom of demesne autarchy, but quite the contrary—it testified to the demesne’s increasing commercialization. Both peasants and landlords entered the market in cereals, in addition to going in for proto-industrial activities and trade and transportation activities. Numerous “serf-entrepreneurs” registered businesses or even proto-industrial and industrial activities—sometimes on behalf of the landowner and sometimes quite independently²⁴—and they often employed workers in their proto-industrial activity. They came from the same villages or from neighboring districts.²⁵ During and after the mid-eighteenth century, peasants bought an important share of proto-industrial products while benefiting from increasing incomes.

All these developments increased the need for labor and exacerbated competition for goods and proto-industrial labor markets. Competition therefore rose not only between nobles and merchants, but also among nobles; even more than in the first half of the eighteenth century, landlords competed with one another to keep the best master-peasants, who trained other artisans. Litigations on runaways and estate records confirm this picture. As a consequence, many estate owners sought to keep their peasant-workers on the estate instead of sending them to town.²⁶ As in the case of the sale of products, it would be reductive to see the landowners’ orientation toward factories merely as a desire for estate autarchy and market closing and hence as a regression of the Russian economy. In reality, what the landowners wanted was to take over the proto-industrial and manufacturing sector, once dominated by peasants and merchants. This accounts for their request, which Catherine granted, to prohibit any form of serfdom in factories owned by non-nobles.²⁷ Estate archives show that landlords had every interest in developing a sort of “protectionist” politics beneficial to the estate’s peasants and craftsmen.²⁸ For example, Count Sheremetev did not hesitate to publish an *instruktsiia* giving priority to local peasant-traders over urban merchants in the commercialization of the Pavlovo estate’s products.²⁹ Peasant-masters also demanded from Count Sheremetev the exclusive right to sell their products in Nizhegorod.³⁰ Sheremetev’s estate-law court regulated conflicts between peasants and merchants, and the decisions were often favorable to the former.³¹ In other words, peasants and landlords made arrangements to shape markets and competition rules to their own advantage and to exclude urban merchants and producers.

Labor relations were therefore extremely complex. In the Nizhnyi-Novgorod province (250 miles east of Moscow), on the Demidov estate in particular, there was a mix of both compelled and hired labor. The latter was used for some processing of products and for the supervisory

personnel in the mills and brickworks, and compelled labor was used to mill rye and wheat and for cottage industry, including spinning yarn and making linen cloth.³² The relations of dependence between peasants, merchants, and manufacturers should be understood in this context. One of the key factors was the control of raw materials. As long as every stage in the production process took place within the peasant household, the producer remained more or less an independent craftsman. The fact that flax cultivation was so widespread outside the Black Soil provinces helped make linen production especially resistant to change. But in sectors like cotton and silk weaving, where the cottage weavers depended on outside sources for their materials, wage relations grew more rapidly.³³ For the supply of raw materials for metalworking, the development of production in the Urals region modified the networks and the hierarchies. This was true in particular after the 1760s, when the Demidov estate in the Urals region exported raw materials for metallurgy to the proto-industrial districts of Tula, Nizhnyi-Novgorod, and Moscow.³⁴

Peasants could buy materials themselves, but sometimes landlords provided raw materials and made advances to their peasant-master. In such cases, too, after the end of the eighteenth century, landlords developed a clear strategy to enter and control networks that had been previously dominated by traders and merchants. It is interesting that nobles adopted the same strategies as merchants to control the output system (i.e., advancing money and/or raw materials).³⁵ Again, this confirms that legal limitations on mobility alone did not suffice; otherwise estate owners would have not developed this system of advances to keep peasant-workers bound to them.

To sum up, the rebirth of *barshchina* (corvées) during the second half of the eighteenth century was accompanied neither by an increased exploitation of peasants solely with a view to export trade nor by a crisis in manufacturing business and markets in general, as predicted by Witold Kula's model. The demesne economy and the Russian economy as a whole were more efficient, flexible, and market oriented than he stated. Agriculture and proto-industrial markets developed intensively, and so did national income and per-capita income. Agriculture and proto-industry expanded, and the competition between noble landowners and merchants was institutional before it became economic. The former wanted to enter into trade and industry at the expense of the latter—and succeeded, thanks to the support of institutional measures such as the exclusion of serfs from factories managed by merchants. Thus labor services raised commercial produce, and proto-industrial activity became strongly integrated into the demesne activity.

At the same time, these multiple activities increased competition for labor time between estate owners and peasants, nobles and merchants, and even within the peasant family. Institutions (state law, demesne law, and peasant commune law) provided a set of rules to solve this problem. These arrangements were not without conflicts, but, as a whole, rural institutions worked well enough to ensure coordination. The decreasing impact of bad harvests on the standard of living and the increasing integration of the peasantry and the landlords into market networks testify to this increasing coordination among the involved actors. Evidence suggests that the output of both agricultural produce and proto-industrial products increased throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; in turn, this sustained the demand for manufactured goods, which was mostly satisfied by local proto-industrial activity that utilized labor-intensive technology.³⁶

The growth in productivity and the standard of living, as well as and the commercialization of agriculture in Russia, can hardly be explained by the potentialities (i.e., the possibility of extorting more and more surplus by force) of a system of serfdom, which did not exist as such, at least not in its pure form, but rather can be explained by the flexibility of a world made up of inducements and constraints, central law, and local customs. Thus the coexistence of service labor and quitrent enabled the peasant economy and that of the noble landowners to cope with the fluctuations of the economy by limiting their impact on the level of activity, standard of living, and investments.

From Peasant-masters to Peasant-workers? (1800–1861)

The first half of the nineteenth century has usually been described as the time of the deepening “crisis of serfdom” in terms of income growth, demographic trend, and social unrest. The rate of growth is said to have slackened during this period, the net increase of population is estimated to have decreased as well, while social unrest in the countryside and industrial areas is understood to have resulted from the growing tensions in Russian society at the time. During the past two decades, these views have been seriously challenged. Economic historians have revised the rate of growth in agriculture and industry upward, as well as overall economic activity,³⁷ and historical demography has corrected the increase of population—i.e., the rate of mortality sank and children’s exposure to disease also fell.³⁸ The evolution in legal and institutional settings, in particular the transfer of private peasants into other categories that we have examined in previous chapters, is also part of this broader dynamic

and offers a far less static picture—one that changed again during the first half of the nineteenth century, when price fluctuations were more pronounced than during the second half of the eighteenth century, and this led again, as during the first half of the previous century, to mixing *corvées* and *quitrent*.³⁹

At the same time, noble estates were concentrated; the number of small estates declined, while large properties became the rule to such an extent that in 1857, noble estates with less than 21 peasants accounted for barely 3.2 percent of all estates; those with between 21 and 100 peasants made up 15.9 percent; and the great majority of estates had between 100 and 500 peasants (37.2 percent), 500 and 1,000 peasants (14.9 percent), or even more than 1,000 peasants (28.7 percent).⁴⁰ This trend was linked to the increasing indebtedness of the estate owners and the limited capital markets available to them; the growing institutional pressure of a tsarist state favoring peasants' emancipation and merchants' development also contributed to the concentration of estates.

Quitrent declined on state estates and on some private estates as well, while rising in the heartland (although this rise was generally moderate). Regional specialization also increased, with central and other industrial and proto-industrial areas tending to specialize while agricultural areas lost nonagrarian activities. In particular, while factories shut down and proto-industrial activity was reduced in steppe and central Black Earth areas,⁴¹ the surface area of cultivated land expanded in the territory as a whole and inside the main estates.⁴² This process was accompanied by the reorganization of *barschina* on a new basis. *Urochnaia sistema* (service labor by task) came into wide use in different forms; one activity was assigned per day, or each work group was assigned to a particular part of the nobleman's estate and completed a full work cycle.⁴³ This solution enabled the expansion of the seigniorial reserve, as well as the intensification of peasant labor.⁴⁴ It was adopted in strictly agricultural areas as in areas close to industries. This process corresponded to an increase in agricultural production and, most important, to a growth in marketed production and market integration. During the first half of the nineteenth century, grain prices in Russia showed a clear tendency toward homogenization and correlation on the national level.⁴⁵

In the central industrial regions, the main difference from the previous century was that noble landowners no longer restricted peasant movements between the city and country. This was for reasons of choice and constraint—in part, more volatile prices led some landlords to diversify their economic strategies; and in part, industrial and tsarist elites pushed for increasing liberalization of the labor market. During

the 1830s, '40s, and '50s, at the urging of the Moscow Section of the Manufacturing Council (*Moskovskoe otdelenie Manufaktur'nogo Soveta*, a corporate association of central-region industrialists), the imperial government approved a series of decrees that standardized the procedures for issuing and extending passports and tickets for peasant-migrants. On 24 May 1835, the government issued a new law that denied the right of landowners and local authorities to recall employed peasants from factories until the expiration date of their passports or of their permission for temporary leave. Initially the law was limited to the Moscow and Saint Petersburg districts, but by the early 1840s it had been extended to most industrial provinces.

The main issue was that the use of *obrok* and the movements of peasants in the city and in neighboring estates had intensified.⁴⁶ During the 1840s, in the northwestern and western agricultural and industrial regions of European Russia, passports and tickets granted to peasants concerned between 25 and 32 percent of the male population.⁴⁷ By 1850, in the Vladimir province, 92.44 percent of the state peasants were involved at least part-time in a nonagricultural occupation; in Moscow province, the proportion was 89 percent; in Kostroma province, 86.5 percent; in Novgorod province, 80.5 percent; in Pskov province, 80 percent; in Iaroslavl province, 75.8 percent; and in Nizhnyi-Novgorod, 65.7 percent.⁴⁸

This trend contributed to a remodeling of social relations. Unlike in the previous period and despite legal interdictions, noble landlords now often rented out peasants and craftsmen to non-noble merchants and industrialists.⁴⁹ In rural and proto-industrial areas that were close to industrial districts, social differentiation was more important between peasants, but as a whole they benefited from higher incomes per capita than in agricultural regions. Their diversified economies provided protection against both crop failure and market downturns. In these areas, the way back to proto-industry from countryside to town was not synonymous with a decline of the putting-out system (i.e., subcontracting while supplying raw materials). In 1828, 6,300 weavers worked in factories in the greater Ivanovo region (which included large swaths of both Vladimir and Kostroma provinces), while 18,224 (74 percent) worked outside of factories. In 1849, the number of factory weavers had doubled to 14,854; the number of nonfactory weavers had tripled, however, to 56,980 (79 percent).⁵⁰ With a flexible network of knowledgeable peasant weavers, cotton-printing firms had little incentive to expend capital on centralized weaving establishments; in general, only high-end grades of cloth were factory-produced. In Vladimir province, in the early 1850s, 18,000 factory looms merely supplemented the 80,000 peasant looms

filling factory orders.⁵¹ Most Russian weaving was performed in peasant homes throughout the central industrial region, either as an independent *kustar*⁷ (craftsmen) activity, on commission from printing factories, or on commission from independent middlemen who distributed yarn and then sold the finished cloth to printing factories.

Peasant-masters increasingly employed wage earners, often for short periods of time during which workers were under the strong legal and social control of the masters. Conflicts between peasant-masters and their workers increased; in such cases petitions were sent to local landlords, who were supposed to intervene in defense of the peasant-workers, which they often did.⁵² Conflicts concerned issues such as wages and the possibility of moving. If in certain cases the landlords and commune elders were favorably disposed toward temporary migration, in other cases they opposed it. For example, from a budget study of a large estate in Orlov, in the Black Earth region, we learn that in the last decade before emancipation, despite the obvious preference for benefits to be derived from quitrent labor, the administrators of the estate forced quitrent peasants to also perform service labor in peak seasons. During the harvest they were required to work on the demesne fields and transport grain to the market, among other tasks.⁵³ The regulation of competition concerned the distribution of peasant time as well. In Pavlovo, the Sheremetevs tried to achieve a double goal: to develop proto-industry without abandoning agriculture. In this regard, once again, there was a convergence of interest between certain peasants and their communes and the Sheremetevs. In 1802, P. B. Sheremetev received a petition from some local peasants, asking him to intercede for on their behalf with their masters so that they might go and take in the harvest.⁵⁴ Sheremetev thus issued an *ukaz* regulating the renting of land (limiting it to peasants in proto-industry) and limiting proto-industrial activity as well.⁵⁵

Taxes also contributed to sharp conflicts. The commune's leaders and the landlords worried about the size and yield of the urban activities. Migration meant increased economic burdens on the remaining households.⁵⁶ Tensions within the village were often resolved by appealing to the landlord. This was especially true in rural areas far enough away from proto-industrial and industrial areas. As Steven Hoch has persuasively demonstrated, peasant migration had to be negotiated within the family, between the family and the village assembly, and between the village and the landlord. Households and landlords sought the same goal: to assure a high and constant labor capacity during the peak season, which meant recalling emigrants and, on this basis, sharing them between the peasants and the landlord's arable land. This system was based upon short-term

intensive labor and strong seasonal differences in the intensity applied to agricultural labor.

Conversely, peasants were sometimes forced by their village commune to work in the factory to pay off their debts; at other times, they entered freely into the agreement for the same purpose. As the putting-out system grew through the early 1800s, many independent domestic weavers found themselves increasingly tied to particular factories or particular putting-out middlemen, because they had accepted loans or advances to buy yarn or more advanced looms. A law of 1835 stipulated that the employment of all workers be based on a personal contract between employer and employee that specified the responsibilities of both sides. Since most workers were peasants whose period of residence in the city was determined by their passports, the period of the contract's validity was usually limited by the term of the passport. Workers were not supposed to leave their places of work until expiration of their contracts. This regulation, however, was difficult to enforce. Many entrepreneurs and managers complained that workers left their enterprises for the countryside or better employment opportunities before their contracts had expired.⁵⁷ Yet all this was a symptom of economic and social dynamics, not of stagnation. Peasant families, landlords, merchants, entrepreneurs, and official institutions competed on the labor market to keep not only skilled workers and artisans, but also simple servants and laborers. The increasing demand for foodstuffs, services, and manufactured items was at the root of all this. Limitations placed on labor mobility were therefore not the symptom of a preindustrial society and backward economy, but just the opposite—they were evidence of its dynamism. As a whole, the Russian agrarian market developed further during the first half of the nineteenth century, and the convergence of prices testifies to the formation of a real national market. At the same time, regional specialization progressed: central and eastern agricultural areas increased productivity and marketable production, while proto-industrial areas created a denser network of urban towns and intensified product specialization. Both the putting-out system and urban manufacture were widespread, sometimes coexisting in the same area but more often developing separately in different areas and for different products. However, there is no evidence that in the long term one single solution prevailed over the other, or that one was more efficient than the other. Russian growth took place on the basis of the coexistence of these different organizations and on the basis of a long-term trend in which proto-industry and manufacture units moved from the town to the countryside and vice versa. Not only were the merchants urban, but landlords and even peasants, too.

Toward a Reassessment of Second Serfdom in Eastern Europe

These outcomes confirm similar recent issues in the study of Eastern European agriculture under serfdom.⁵⁸ For example, in Brandenburg-Prussia, by the turn of the nineteenth century, commutation payment increasingly eclipsed labor services. As in Russia, the government encouraged changes in the legal status of peasants,⁵⁹ however, before that date, increasing labor service in the seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries was not synonymous with a retreat from the market, as previously stated in the historiography, but, quite the opposite, commercialization of both peasant and demesne production (agriculture and proto-industrial products) quickly increased.⁶⁰ In contradiction to traditional historical literature on these matters (which conveyed the impression that East-Elbian agriculture was a simple affair of cereal monoculture based on coerced labor), new detailed analyses based upon estates' archives reveal a complex picture of a large and expansive workforce and high commodity sales. This was true not only of Brandenburg, but also of other regions of east-central Europe, including Poland. Peasant labor services here provided only 40 to 50 percent of the demesne labor force required during the summer months and thus had to be supplemented by hired labor.⁶¹ In all these areas, both peasants and seigniors employed hired labor.⁶² There were also migrant day laborers who worked only during the harvest. In eastern Prussia, many of the day laborers lived in small towns, subsisting on wages earned during the peak season. Tracy Dennison and Sheilagh Ogilvie have recently stressed the strong similarities between Russia and Bohemia regarding serfdom and social relations. Peasant and seigniorial institutions interacted in both systems and strongly contributed to the social and economic dynamics.⁶³

Taken together, the experiences of Russia, Prussia, Lithuania, and some parts of Poland lead to the conclusion that on the whole, "second serfdom" was not so much a form of slavery but, above all, a set of legal constraints on labor mobility. These rules were dictated much less by a scarcity of population than by increasing demand for agriculture produce and proto-industrial products, encouraging a Smithian growth. Labor and other institutions (seigniorial estate and justice, communes, and guilds) were flexible enough to simultaneously guarantee a stable set of rules and the procedures to adapt them to the changing economic and social environment. Labor services were not opposed to market development; quite the contrary, the two enhanced each other. Proto-industry developed, and the specialization of some areas went along with the

seasonality of proto-industrial activity for many peasants. Estate relations sometimes opposed proto-industry but in some other cases were favorable to it, which did not necessarily enhance or retard the proletarianization of peasants and craftsmen (as asserted in Franklin Mendel's model in which proto-industrialization slowed the growth of towns, confirmed by Jan De Vries).⁶⁴ Instead, agrarian development, proto-industry, demographic insights, and institutional and legal hierarchies varied from one estate to another, within the same country, in accordance with the specific relations among the landlord, the peasant community, and the involved markets. Still, despite this extreme variety, it is difficult to maintain that bondage and legal constraints on labor mobility were opposed to market and proto-industrial development and that developing markets in the West was the origin of increasing bondage in the East. Indeed, existing studies provide the following picture: Most microeconomic studies concern large estates with better-preserved archives. Certainly, on these estates the conditions of serfs were better; productivity was higher; and integration in the market was more developed than in smaller units. Also, all these indicators were more marked in industrial and proto-industrial areas than in agricultural regions. Yet when one takes all the statistics available since the first half of the nineteenth century, even if the average values seem lower than on the big estates, the overall picture is not as dark as earlier commentators argued. First, because we know now that overall statistics underestimate peasant and landlord production: based upon interviews with producers or with indirect evidence, figures suffered from the producers' incentive to hide part of their production and income for fiscal reasons.⁶⁵ Statisticians were also concerned with the "poverty of the peasantry" and exaggerated losses and crises.⁶⁶ Now, even if we do not correct the data, the final picture shows increasing productivity, well-being, and commercialization, from the eighteenth century on. Between 1718 and 1788, the Russian aggregate national income increased five-fold, raising per capita income 85 percent. After 1788, the annexation of rich southern provinces still increased this growth⁶⁷.

These new estimations require us to revise the conventional views; the most pessimistic recent analyses show that even if Russia's main economic indicators were persistently below those of main Western European countries, the gap between them was not that important and did not widen until collectivization. Before that date, the gap was constant or even sometimes narrowed, in terms of yields and commercialization in periods such as the second half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ Other, more optimistic, recent interpretations even conclude that by 1788, the average Russian was as rich as his English equivalent and only 15 percent poorer than the average Frenchman, who at that time enjoyed the

peak of his fortunes in the eighteenth century. During the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, moreover, the Russian maintained his position, surpassing the Frenchman and rising with the Briton to the very top of the international league table.⁶⁹ This means that unlike the conventional images of historiography, Russian economic growth was far from negligible.

This trend finds a confirmation in the rate of growth of the population. Recent analyses had sought to take into account the overall underestimation of birthrates in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century censuses, as well as the annexation of new territories and the resettlement (legal and illegal) of the peasantry. Once these biases had been corrected, then the natural rate of population growth is considerable: on peasant estates, it was at about 0.70 percent, between 1678 and 1719; 0.62 percent, between 1719 and 1744; 0.97 percent, between 1744 and 1762; and 0.96 percent during the next twenty years. It fell to 0.60, between 1782 and 1795, rose again to 0.86, between 1795 and 1811, but collapsed during the Napoleonic Wars to -0.42 percent. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the natural rate of growth of Russia's peasant population increased again to 0.94, in 1815–33; to 0.59, between 1833 and 1850; and to 0.54 percent, between 1850 and 1857.⁷⁰ Certainly, the high birthrate corresponded to an equally high rate of death, in particular among children. This trend has usually been considered evidence of the backwardness of Russia and its poverty. However, in recent years, this view has been seriously challenged: high child mortality actually had less to do with famine than with diseases linked to lack of hygiene (in regards to water in particular), epidemics, and wars.⁷¹

How can these new estimations on income, productivity, and demographic rates be explained?

Answers have put the accent either on legal constraints (forced labor) or, just the opposite, on flexibility. In the first variant, growth has been linked to the profitability of serfdom; this is a revisionist approach that attributes the peasants a status close to that of slaves. According to this view, bondage and slavery are much more profitable than some liberal authors asserted and are perfectly compatible with economic growth, markets, and capitalism. However, the previous chapters provide evidence of the second interpretation: economic growth was linked to flexible and increasingly relaxing legal constraints. In Russia, there were no official rules mentioning *corvées* before they were limited in the 1770s. Existing rules imposing limitations to peasants' movements were produced and implemented at the intersection of state, seigniorial, and village institutions. Unlike Brenner, I do not see these rules as the expression solely of the strength of the nobility over the peasantry, for they required the

interaction between the rules of the nation, estates, and villages. The real functioning of serfdom was founded upon these multiple institutions, actors, and rules. There were no classes in the Marxist sense, but rather porous estates. Russian peasants were not “serfs de la glebe” but strongly dependent people with extremely limited legal rights. These rights, however, increased over time. Serfs were not chattel slaves like American slaves. They always signed a contract with the landlord, and their progressive emancipation occurred before the general abolition of serfdom in 1861. This is why labor services and strong legal constraints on labor mobility were not opposed to market development. Landlords and the demesne economy were not devoted to unproductive tasks and supporting monopolistic and parasitic attitudes, but instead sought to exploit imperfect competition to increase their profits. The peasant economy under serfdom corresponded neither to the Chayanovian model of a peasant looking to satisfy his family’s needs and entering the market only when obliged, nor to Kula’s model of peasants pushed to produce by the landlord, who took the entire product and sold it on the market. Peasants were already integrated into market activity, and proto-industry was not necessarily residual (that is, an activity engaged in only after time and opportunities in agriculture had been fully exploited). Peasants’ and nobles’ integration into the market does not confirm the link between labor service and poor market development. Anti-economic cultural values are used to oppose imaginary peasantries to proletarians, landlords to capitalists. In reality, Russian landlords were interested in profits, and peasants were integrated into markets to various degrees. That they did not transform in accordance with a Western model does not mean that they were backward, but only that historical transformations of markets and societies may take different forms.

These issues do not close the dossier but raise new questions. If second serfdom was a much more flexible world than is usually held, if social groups evolved and the economy showed a high rate of growth, then where is the boundary between second serfdom and free labor and capitalism? This set of questions constitutes an effort to escape explanations of non-European realities in terms of missing factors (missing in relationship to a mythical, stylized West). Free labor, private property, industrialization, and urbanization are some of the most recurrent features of this mythical West. We consider Russian history a confirmation of the existence and viability of different paths of development and as a heuristic aid to questioning the imaginary West and an occasionally imaginary Asia. Rather than looking for missing factors to explain Russian backwardness, we want to reevaluate the rules and the practices of labor in some Western countries on the basis of the Russian case. More generally, once we have

called into question the existence of second serfdom and, therefore, questioned an ideal type of economic and social system and an equally ideal type of capitalism, we need to progress further in this direction and ask whether free labor is an appropriate category with which to understand market economies.

Notes

1. Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness*; Crisp, *Studies in the Russian*.
2. Bonnassie, *From Slavery to Feudalism*; Duby, *Les trois ordres*; Scott, *The Peasantries of Europe*.
3. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure, 30–74; Aston and Philpin, *The Brenner Debate*.
4. Blanchard, *Russia's Age of Silver*; Dennison, *Institutional Framework*.
5. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control*.
6. Semevskii, *Krest'ianskii vopros*; idem, *Krest'iane*; Koval'chenko, *Russkoe krepostnoe*.
7. Koval'chenko, *Russkoe krepostnoe*.
8. Dennison, *The Institutional Framework*; Peter Czap, "The Perennial Multiple-family Household," 5–26.
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