



Slavery and Serfdom in Muscovy and the Russian Empire

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INTRODUCTION

The history of servitude, bondage, and slavery in Russia—that is, in the Tsardom of Moscow or Muscovy (1547–1721) and in the Russian Empire (1721–1917)—includes different expressions, policies, structural dynamics, and institutional configurations. Some of these forms of strong asymmetrical dependency were autochthonous, and some were adapted as a result of political and economic contacts with neighboring states. In both cases, we find various different servile and working relations in the household, in agriculture, in crafts and trades.

Due to military conflicts and the incorporation of established practices from newly annexed territories in the imperial legal and economic space, Muscovy and the Russian Empire acquired non-Christian and non-Russian dependent people. Among them were Muslim, Buddhist, and Animist captives (*iasyri*), imported slaves and *iasak* people¹ in Siberia.²

In this chapter, we will focus on two widespread forms of strong asymmetrical social dependency: *kholopstvo* (indentured servitude) and *krepostnichestvo* (serfdom). Both groups are often considered slaves in academic discourse.

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Particular attention will be paid to the preconditions for becoming dependent or enserfed, to the respective legal status and its modification over time, to working and living conditions as well as occupations, and to ways of exiting the dependency or limiting its oppressiveness.

SLAVERY IN MEDIEVAL RUSSIA

Although foreign trade—including trade in slaves—had played a decisive part in the founding of the Kievan Rus',³ the importance of agriculture for princes and nobilities subsequently grew with the Christianization, the downturn of Byzantium, the surge in nomad power in the steppes between the Black Sea and the northern areas of the territory, and the intensification of control of the countryside. The noble elites increasingly lived off feudal rent rather than trade.

Most of what we know about this period⁴ stems from law codices written in the twelfth century and citing older texts—the “Russkaia Pravda.”⁵ In these codices, dependent people mostly are referred to as *roba*, *kholop*, or *cheliadin*. *Roba* is a word for a female worker derived from the Indo-European root *rb—‘*rabotat*’ (work).⁶ The term for a male worker is *kholop* (young man),⁷ indicating that labor by young people was common⁸; as with the term *deti boiarskie* (children of *boiars*) for the lower nobility, age was used to define social status. *Cheliadin* means a member of the household of a rich and/or noble person. The *cheliad* or household also had community functions: For example, it could hide a criminal member, but then had to pay the fine for him.

Articles 63–71 of the “Russkaia Pravda” describe three ways of becoming a “full” *kholop*: (1) bought before witnesses, (2) married to a *roba*, and (3) accepting a job as manager (*tiun*) of a prince or boyar. A full *kholop* was not allowed to testify in court (except as *tiun* “if necessary”), and if sentenced did not pay his fine to the prince but instead twice the amount to the plaintiff. Article 98 states that when an owner had children with a *roba*, the mother and children were to be set free when he died, albeit without claims to his inheritance. *Kholopy* were also forbidden to lend money, but permitted to trade if their owner agreed.

In the event of murder in the Kievan Rus', vengeance by family members was legal, but a so-called bloodwite (*vira*) could also be paid for killing a non-princely person.⁹ This fine was 16 times higher for the murder of a *tiun* (a steward or a manager of a prince) than for a peasant or a *kholop*; a *roba* was valued slightly higher than the latter. Article 89, which was added later, did away with the bloodwite for *kholopy* and *roby*, but a penal fee could still be paid to plaintiff and prince.

KHOLOPSTVO IN EARLY MODERN RUSSIA

From 1224 to 1226, the Kievan Rus' was conquered and became a western periphery of the Mongol Empire. The territory subsequently had to pay a regular tribute in silver or risk being left open to slaving raids. Until the eighteenth century, Eastern European Christians were captured in such slaving raids and sold in Muslim states from Bukhara to the Ottoman Empire. Similarly, in the wake of Russian victories, non-Orthodox captives became *iasyri*, servants to the Muslim nobility of the tsardom or, if baptized, *kholops*.¹⁰ Supported by the Church, the Moscow branch of the governing dynasty succeeded in uniting the country and stopped paying tribute in 1480. Envoys were employed in Kaffa to buy back enslaved Russians, for whose liberation everyone had to pay a special tax.

In medieval times, the economy north of the Oka River was dominated by slash-and-burn agriculture with migrating fields and villages. Beginning in the fifteenth century, permanent fields and the three-field system were introduced in the central region between the Volga and Oka rivers, providing more yields and economic prosperity and leading to more noble and clerical institutions as well as more control. New textual sources were also added: records maintained by the Church, the government, and the higher nobility.¹¹

Entry

Dependent people in the fifteenth century were called *liudi* (people), but the term could refer to members of the low nobility as well as to persons whose labor belonged entirely to an owner. The term *kholop* gained prominence again. *Kholopy* for life have been called slaves by Richard Hellie,¹² but since they formed the minority within the group and most *kholopy* were only obligated to labor for a certain time, we will translate the word as "indentured servant" following Alessandro Stanziani.¹³ When a *boiar* mentioned *kholopy* in his last will (1497), he noted their occupations as master of the stables, falconer, cook, German cook, bootmaker, tailor, carpenter, and so on. Occupations were also specified for some Tatars. Especially highlighted were *stradniki*, people who provided corvée (*barskchina*). Some *kholopy* handled the management of estates, but many labored as peasants in the socioeconomic sense, paying *obrok* (dues in cash and kind). From the end of the fifteenth century, the records for the city-state of Novgorod Velikii show an increase in the purchase and sale of peasants together with the properties they worked on in some hamlets, which also gave the respective lord influence within those villages. The common procedure was to hand over the keys (and thus the power) to the lord.

In his sample of *kholopy* for 1597 and 1603,¹⁴ Richard Hellie found that around two-thirds had sold themselves, more than one-tenth had become the property of their masters by way of a gift or inheritance, five percent were born into *kholopstvo*, and only few became indentured servants by captivity.

According to the “*Russkaia Pravda*,” a free person marrying an unfree one became a *kholop*. Exceptions did occur, but they did not fundamentally qualify the rule. Furthermore, the sale of family members—especially children—was possible. Children could be born into unrestricted *kholopstvo*, but children born before their parents became *kholopy* remained free.

Many of the 119 articles on *kholopstvo* in the “*Sobornoe Ulozhenie*” (law codex) of 1649¹⁵ regulate how free persons could sell themselves by indenture (*kabala*) for a limited time or for life. The codex begins by forbidding members of the lower nobility (the children of boiars) to become *kholopy*. Men could indenture themselves together with their women and children, and the reasons for voluntary *kabala* were mostly poor living conditions or even starvation.

Labor Extraction and Daily Life

During the seventeenth century, the first autobiography was written in Russia by a cleric, but biographical data on servants remains rare until the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Most of our available sources are lawbooks or estate management records.

Kholopy had to perform any labor ordered by their owner, and they were commonly made to work the land or fulfill administrative tasks. But their obligations could not contradict the rules of the Church, which regulated daily life.¹⁷ Since all Russian Orthodox Christians were obliged to attend mass on Sundays, observe lent, and confess regularly (legally enforced since 1716), nobody was easily able to avoid the Church’s control. Prior to the reign of Peter I, Orthodox parishes were quite small, comprising a few hundred men and women and thus allowing control by the local priests. Lords or masters were held responsible for their servants following the Church rules. If a *roba* had sex with her owner and they had a child, both of them were to be sent to the bishop for judgment. Like all Christian churches, Russian Orthodoxy prohibited and sanctioned sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

The “*Domostroi*,”¹⁸ a commonly used book of household rules, advised the head of a household to keep his servants dressed and well-fed, to ensure obedience by praising good work and applying punishment (which might include beating) only when necessary. Women were to be punished by the wife. The head of the household was also advised to lead his wife, children, and servants in joint prayer every evening and go to mass with them on Sundays. He was admonished against all sins and urged to invite priests often.

Where did they live? Russians in early modern times lived on landed properties called *dvor* (literally: yard) that were surrounded by fences and generally featured several buildings—the residence building *izba*, stables, separate buildings for cool and dry storage, and a bathhouse (*bania*). The people living in such a *dvor* had to accept the rulings of the landlord (*khoziain*). For a long time, the *dvor* was also the basic unit for taxing rural communities and town populations. In the noble estates and towns, there were also wooden houses

with multiple floors; two-story houses were common in Moscow in the seventeenth century. The servants mostly lived on the ground floor, which as a rule did not have windows. One of their jobs was to maintain the fire in the furnace, which heated the house by air respectively with its exhaust smoke. Servants also lived in the market stalls kept by artisans and merchants since it was not common to sell goods in one's own home.¹⁹

What did they eat?²⁰ According to the "Domostroi," servants were to be fed sufficiently. When boyars expelled some of the *khology* from their *dvor* in times of scarcity to save on supplies, they were punished. There was a food hierarchy, of course: table books and lists of expenditures inform us what the tsar and the patriarch had on their tables, but what did the servants eat? The assumption that they "tasted" when they were able to seems reasonable.

Politics Regarding Kholopstvo

All legally free people of Russia, the high and low nobility, serving people (*sluzhbilye liudi*) of all ranks, merchants and artisans (*posadskie liudi*), and even peasants and *khology* themselves could use the service of a *kholog* for a specified or unlimited period of time. Women might own *khology* as well—usually by inheritance as mentioned above, but also through purchase. The period of a limited *kholopstvo* was defined in years.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, most people sold themselves and their families using the formula "by my own will," but in later sources, this formula is absent. Up until the annexation of Novgorod Velikii by Moscow in 1478, many individuals were bought and sold without any official control or registration. Before the annexation, the employed phrasings point to more individual decisions, thereafter to more control by officials. At the end of the sixteenth century, the central government in Moscow ordered a new registration of all *khology* in the territory of Novgorod Velikii.

Peasants living in the countryside sold themselves by "giving the key" to their *dvor* to the new lord. After the end of the fifteenth century, the records show an increase in purchases and sales of peasants together with their yards. Several Novgorod noble families changed the legal status of peasants into that of *khology*. By obtaining land and workers in the peasant communities in this way, they increased their influence and wealth in terms of acreage, meadows, and wood.

Instigated by the Church, the government promoted the limitation of *kholopstvo* and advised not to take interests from loans, as the law codex of 1551 (*Stoglav*) stated: "so that the peasants stay and that the villages will not fall empty."²¹ Registration was a further instrument to prevent the extension of *kholopstvo* without control. Nevertheless, the number of dependent persons increased during the crisis of the *Smuta* (1598–1613). In the seventeenth century, *khology* represented the second most dependent group of people in Russia. Only the *iasyri*, the nonorthodox prisoners of war, were more dependent since they were not protected by the Church.

From the middle of the sixteenth century, there existed a special department (*Kholopiĭ Prikaz*) where *kholopy* had to be registered.²² Their social and legal status ranged from servants for a limited time to *kholopy* by birth. Only Orthodox people appear in the published cases handled in the *Prikaz* during the seventeenth century, although certain names and definitions (like *murza*, *batrak*, or *tatarka polona*) hint at non-Orthodox family backgrounds.²³ Russians who had been held captive in Poland or the south likewise entered *kholopstvo* upon their return since they were poor.²⁴

In 1649, the “Sobornoe Ulozhenie” of Muscovy was agreed upon by the assembly (*sobor*) of clerics, noblemen, merchants, and townspeople convened by Tsar Aleksei.²⁵ The legal status of *kholopy* is defined in Section 20 of this document. It was determined explicitly, that *kholop* and *roba* belonged to the same status. Indentured servants were considered subjects in terms of jurisdiction, admitted to the oath, and heard in the *Kholopiĭ Prikaz*. They were able to successfully contest being forced into *kholopstvo*.²⁶ A *kholop* had “honor” and was entitled to a compensation of one ruble if his honor was offended; a *kholop* woman to 2 rubles. The value of the work of an indentured male servant was fixed at 5 rubles per year, a female servant received half of that sum. Children of *kholopy* added to the repayment of the owed debt with their work as well—for children above the age of 10, the value was fixed at 2 rubles per year. Redemption of debt by way of labor was thus regulated. Children could also be submitted into time-limited *kholopstvo* by free parents. As was the case all over the world, children learned their trades by working with their parents.²⁷

Prices for *kholopy* in Novgorod around 1600 varied between one and five rubles from children to adults²⁸; in Moscow, between four rubles for someone who had learned a white-collar job and two for a beggar.²⁹ Comparing these prices with the sums they were entitled to in case their honor was offended or to the amount of two rubles a year stipulated for the labor of a youth, the low prices for *kholopy* seem to reflect the limitations of their services.

Exits from Kholopstvo

Time-limited *kholopstvo* ended with the date agreed in the *kabala* deposited in the *Kholopiĭ Prikaz* or with death; it also ended with the death of the owner. Permanent *kholopy* (according to Hellie, around 15 percent of all indentured servants) could be sold, inherited, or passed on. But it was also customary to allow a number of *kholopy* and *roby* to “go into freedom” in one’s last will.³⁰ A *roba* serving her owner sexually was generally set free upon the latter’s death, as already indicated in the “Russkaia Pravda.” In 1558–1559, a member of the lower nobility also granted freedom to “my Kazan and German prisoners, men and women and boys and girls” in his will.³¹

A nobleman who sold himself as a *kholop* was removed from the list of heirs to his family *votchina*.³² When the family tree owning it died out during the

plague and children of the *kholop* petitioned to receive the inheritance, the Tsar allowed them to buy it back in an act of grace in 1474.³³

Murder cases were adjudged in Moscow, but districts were occasionally permitted to judge murders of *kholopy* regionally. Killing a *kholop* was considered murder, but a significant difference was made: In the event that a *kholop* killed his master, he was to be sentenced to death “without mercy”—meaning he was to be tortured heavily.³⁴

What about resistance? The image held by Westerners is one of “resignation and patience.”³⁵ But the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are full of Russian uprisings—Cossacks and townspeople, soldiers and Old Believers—in the frontier regions. “Subaltern persons” in Russia were definitely prepared to take up arms against their masters and their seas of troubles when the waves became overwhelming and/or the situation seemed promising.³⁶

In many last wills, *kholopy* are mentioned as runaways. They are identified by name and were searched for by the heirs of the deceased. Sometimes they were hidden by other estate owners. They can be found in almost all Novgorod family trees: Absconding was apparently a common option for *kholopy* not only in northwestern Russia. Even when owners knew where a runaway *kholop* was staying, they did not always have the means to get him back.³⁷

The End of Kholopstvo

When the tsardom was changed into an empire, *kholopstvo* was gradually disestablished. The *Kholopiĭ Prikaz* was eliminated in 1704,³⁸ peasants and *kholopy* had to pay the same tax and provide recruits from 1713, and in 1723 the *kholop* status was abolished entirely. From this point on, all servants in towns and countryside were included in the peasant status. Between 1676 and 1762, the percentage of peasants in the Russian population increased from 80 to 91 percent, while the percentage of townspeople decreased.³⁹ This change is not always described adequately in historiography.⁴⁰ After 1723, all people living in the countryside (besides clerics and the nobility) were officially peasants, and many people in the towns—including all of the servants of the nobility—belonged to this social class as well.

SERFDOM IN MUSCOVY AND THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

The peasantry in the Tsardom of Moscow was not homogenous in its legal status—in other words, it was not limited to serfs. In the fifteenth century, Muscovy’s rural population was comprised of two groups: “black” peasants and “white” peasants. The “black” peasants (*chernososhnye krest’iane*) paid obligatory duties in cash and kind to the lord and lived on the common land. Those who retained their status later became “state peasants” (*gosudarstvennye krest’iane*). After the secularization of monasteries in 1762, the former monastery peasants were also added to this group of personally independent peasants. The burden of taxation on the “white” peasants (*belopashchy*)

was alleviated in the seventeenth century when they began to work on estates owned by the church or the nobility. This group also became bonded (*krepstnye*) to clerical institutions (*cerkovnye* and *monastyrskie*) respectively to estates of the nobility (*pomestnye*) or the Tsar's estates (*dvorcovye*).⁴¹ In 1721, Peter I issued a decree introducing a category of "possessional" (*possessionnyye*) peasants owned by merchants and entrepreneurs. Their principal occupation was to labor in manufacturing locations in the Ural and Siberia.⁴²

Russian law texts and administrative documents from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries never contain the term "serfs," only "peasants" (*krest'iane*) and "bonded people" (*krepstnye liudi*). In Russian and European historiography, the term *krepstnoe pravo* (bondage) is considered the Russian equivalent of "serfdom."⁴³ For this reason, *krepstnye liudi* has been translated as "serfs" in academic meta-language even though the serfdom system in Muscovy and the Russian Empire exhibited certain differences in terms of regularized labor and property relations toward land and peasants.⁴⁴ The strong personal bondage and dependency on landlords allow comparisons to be drawn between Russian serfs and American slaves.⁴⁵ In this regard, it must be highlighted that Russian serfs belonged to the same ethnic and religious group as their landlords, meaning they were Russians and Russian Orthodox Christians.

Studies on serfdom can be conducted from the perspective of different historical disciplines based on specific sources. These include official legal codes and regulations concerning property conditions and dependency relations, institutional reports and correspondence related to taxation and obligation, peasants' petitions and unrest, archival documents on the working and living conditions in local estates, and preserved memoirs of serfs.

Entry into Serfdom

Historiography has identified various reasons that may have led to the establishment of peasants' bonds to individual landowners. According to the "decree" interpretation based on legal documents, the mobility of peasants was limited by several state decrees, culminating in the legal codex ("Sobornoe ulozhenie") of 1649. This measure was primarily dictated by state needs, specifically the need to support the army. The "non-decree" interpretation emphasizes the importance of peasants' indebtedness due to adverse economic developments (mass starvation, population decline, and fluctuations in farm prices) as a crucial factor for enserfment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to a further theory, the rise of the service gentry to landlords and their need for resident agricultural laborers may have led to an increase in bondage of peasants to their landlords. The state may also have been interested in bonding peasants to land or landlords in order to facilitate the collection of taxes and ascertain the rendering of state obligations.⁴⁶

The Russian peasants became serfs through the restriction of their right to leave the estate on which they tilled fields and move to another. The first

limitation of peasant mobility can be found in the law codex (*sudebnik*) of 1497: According to Article 57, peasants were allowed to leave their home estate one week before and one week after St. George's Day (November 26). The second condition for their departure was a one-off payment (*pozbiloe*) to the estate owner for the right to leave. The *sudebnik* of 1550 confirmed this practice and increased the amount of the required fee. With the introduction of the so-called "forbidden years" from 1580 to 1581 in the western part of the Tsardom of Muscovy, the peasants finally lost their right to move entirely. From 1592 to 1593, the scope of this regulation was extended to the entire territory of Muscovy; it was briefly suspended during a period of mass starvation in the early seventeenth century. Estate owners were entitled to search for and retrieve fugitive peasants, even if they were already working for a different estate owner. The period granted for the recovery of peasants—the so-called "allotted years"—was first limited to five years, then extended to 15 years in 1607 to strengthen the position of the service gentry.⁴⁷

Section XI of the law codex of 1649 further restricted the mobility of peasants, bonding them to their respective estate owners according to the land register of 1626 and the census records of 1645–1647. Fugitive peasants could now be recovered (Articles XI-1, XI-2, XI-3, XI-9, XI-10, XI-11) without any time limitation. Most of the new regulations focused on the identification of peasants, on the conditions for their return, and on the punishment of estate owners sheltering them. Furthermore, they addressed the rights of estate owners to exercise judicial power over all residents of their estate including peasants (Article XII-1).⁴⁸ Bonded peasants were thus effectively excluded from state jurisdiction and became objects of law. While the 1649 codex thus did not explicitly establish serfdom in Muscovy, it crucially contributed to the enhancement of peasants' bondage.⁴⁹

The limitation and legal prohibition of peasant mobility led to bondage to the landed estates of nobles, and eventually to the nobles themselves. This strong personal dependency was evidenced by the concentration of local fiscal, judicial, legislative, and executive power in the hands of estate owners.⁵⁰ Bonded peasants received allotments of land for use, and in return were required to serve the estate owners as well as pay obligations in labor (*barshchina*) and dues (*obrok*) in cash and kind. The personal bondage to the landlord extended to the descendants of serfs and was transferred from one generation to the next. The purview of this system of peasant bondage was initially restricted to the area of the Tsardom of Moscow. Following the territorial expansions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, its application was extended to new regions with large rural populations.

Extraction of Labor

Originally, the term *krepostnoi* (serf or bondsman) was applied to peasants living and working on the land of estate owners in the central governments of Muscovy and Russia. Upon closer consideration, we can observe further

occupations by bonded people in Russia. Besides agricultural labor, serfs also worked in the households of their landlords as well as in the manufactories and factories, while some of them acted as well-known artists and even as successful entrepreneurs.⁵¹ In the latter case, they traded in their masters' name, developed their own businesses. These traders, craftsmen, and hired industrial workers were called "traveling serfs" (*otkhodniki*); they received a passport from their master and were only obliged to pay dues in cash and kind (*obrok*).⁵²

By contrast, bonded peasants had to pay dues as well as provide agricultural services to estate owners. Further areas of occupation were household labor and the maintenance of postal and road connections. The peasant community (*mir*) constituted the local unit of self-government with collective responsibility toward the lord, and later toward the state.⁵³ Its key tasks were land repartition, tax collection, and welfare provision, with further responsibilities including the maintaining of estate granaries and the management of pastures and forests for use by the serfs. The *mir* cooperated with the estate administration to implement the landlord's policies and defend its own interests. These peasant communities had more autonomy in their everyday life, though their agency was still limited by the respective landlord's ultimate authority.⁵⁴

While the relations between estate owners and bonded peasants in Muscovy were based on informal agreements, the state began to regulate certain aspects of the lives of serfs following the establishment of the Russian Empire in 1721. In 1724, poll taxation for serfs was introduced. This duty toward the state was added to the recruitment obligation: Every peasant community had to send recruits (one man per 25 community members) to the imperial Russian army for a service period of 25 years. The proclamation of April 5, 1797, regulated the duration of peasants' work for the landlord: Labor service on Sundays was forbidden, and the other six days could be equally divided between noble and peasant land. The latter stipulation was formulated more as a recommendation than an obligation, however. Only in 1832 would the "Digest of Laws in the Russian Empire" bindingly codify the limitation of serfs' labor services to three days a week. The decree on "Beholden Peasants" (1842) permitted nobles to regulate relations with their serfs via contracts. These voluntary official agreements governed the size of parcels of land as well as the scope of labor obligations and dues. With the "Auctions Decree" (1847), serfs received the right to purchase the part of the estate they lived on if it was being sold at public auction to pay the landlord's debts. This allowed them to both own the land and become a free person.⁵⁵ As we can see from this overview of official regulations, the imperial state sought to expand its influence on relations between landlords and bonded peasants by introducing added economic dependency for serfs in the form of taxation and state obligations, as well as by governing and controlling the rights and duties of both parties.

As personally dependent persons, the serfs judicially belonged to the local court of a landlord. In the official law codices, enserfed peasants are mostly mentioned as objects of law. Nevertheless, they had the opportunity to submit

petitions (*chelobitnaia*) not only to their landlord but also to the chief of their local administrative unit (*voevoda*), to the respective governor, and ultimately to the tsar. Most peasant petitions concerned taxation issues, devastation by soldiers, and misgovernment by landlords.⁵⁶ In 1775, Empress Catherine II introduced local peasants' courts and abrogated the right of peasants to contact the tsar directly. The cases heard at these courts frequently had to do with illegal bondage and unlawful obligations toward estate owners. Even though some local judges were corrupt and the investigations and proceedings were often slow, this measure represented a first step toward limiting the legal monopoly of landlords regarding their serfs.⁵⁷

Peasants could also engage in other, non-legal forms of resistance. Disobedience and refusal to work were common reactions to excessive and unjustified obligations and service requirements. In order to reduce their tax burden, some serf communities submitted false data concerning the size of lots and the number of male family members. A further means of avoiding suppression was abscondence to towns or to remote or frontier regions. These forms of resistance can be identified as non-violent. In some cases, however, peasants would also take arms and use them against their estate owners or state officials. Another form of violent resistance was the establishment of autonomous paramilitary units to protect the interests of local rural actors, including serfs. In most official sources, these groups are called "bandits" (*bandity*), implying a specific perspective and connotation. The list of violent reactions is completed by the local revolts and popular movements generally referred to as "peasant wars" by Soviet historians. Most local riots, including those led by the Cossacks Stepan Razin (1670–1671), Kondratii Bulavin (1708), and Emel'ian Pugachev (1773–1775), took place in the border regions. Escaped serfs joined such rebellious groups in the hope of finding freedom. Nevertheless, these popular movements never aimed to abolish serfdom, instead simply seeking partial economic relief and the improvement of serfs' legal status. In all cases of violent resistance, the landlords and state actors invariably responded with force—and were invariably successful.⁵⁸

Exit from Serfdom

The legal way of exiting serfdom was by manumission.⁵⁹ According to available legal documents, serfs could be freed by judicial decision (*otsuzhdennye*), due to completion of their military service in the case of retired soldiers, due to returning from exile and imprisonment, or due to conversion. Furthermore, serfs could be released into freedom by the choice of their landlords. The most widespread form was manumission upon the landlord's death as documented in a will. Obtainment of freedom by self-purchase also required the agreement of the estate owner. The manumission document (*vol'naia gramota*) confirmed the landlord's ownership—and thus their right to manumit—as well as the complete fulfillment of the serf's duties toward the state. After their manumission, former serfs had access to various official social ranks (*sosloviia*)

such as merchant, townsperson (*meshchane*), or artisan; they were able to choose a new occupation and become members of specific estate-based societies. This process facilitated the successful integration of former serfs into the imperial society without social exclusion by way of forming a separate social group, as in many other well-known slave societies.

A further common but illegal way out of bondage was abscondence. While official documents from the seventeenth century often mention the escape of entire peasant communities, the size of escapee groups decreased in the second half of the eighteenth century with the establishment of serfdom in the central governments of Russia and Ukraine. Now it was generally families or individuals who ran away. Although abscondence to the nearest city or *posad* community did not equate to escaping the legal status of serf, runaway peasants regularly managed to leave their estate owner and end their personal bondage by joining the craftsman community.⁶⁰ The more promising opportunity to escape serfdom consisted of fleeing to the imperial border regions and joining local Cossack units. The preferred regions varied according to the territorial expansion of Muscovy and the Russian Empire: Siberia in the seventeenth century, Ukraine in the first half of the eighteenth century, and the Caucasus and the Kazakh steppes in the second half of the eighteenth and in the nineteenth century. Becoming members of a Cossack unit facilitated the transition to other legal statuses (essentially, from serf to Cossack) and protected runaways from official search agents. However, the integration of annexed territories into the imperial legal and social system restricted the autonomy of local Cossack units and impeded the inclusion of runaway serfs—a development that helps to explain the shifting of preferred escape destinations.⁶¹

The gradual release of certain groups of bonded peasants was implemented by the state through various legal provisions. The official regulation of the relations between nobles and peasants began in the second half of the eighteenth century. According to the manifest of March 21, 1762, the Church's estates became secularized and the respectively bonded peasants became "state peasants" (*gosudarstvennye krest'iane*). The personal judicial dependency relation to the Church as the landlord was abolished for these peasants. Their new legal status of "state peasant" implied personal independence combined with the obligation of increased tax payments to the state—more precisely, the amount of 170 copecks compared to the 70 copecks for estate peasants. Moreover, they received the formerly Church-owned land for cultivation without any labor obligations or requirements to pay dues in cash and kind. In this case, the abolition of Church peasants was characterized by the abrogation of economic obligations to the landlord and the transfer of jurisdiction over the affected individuals from the ecclesiastic intermediators to the state.⁶²

The second state-introduced possibility for peasants to obtain freedom with the approval of their estate owner was adopted in the Decree on Free Agriculturalists (*vol'nye khlebopushcy*) of February 20, 1803. Indenturing estate

owners were now able to conclude contracts with their entire peasant community, granting the latter ownership of the land. Moreover, the affected peasants became personally free as a group of state peasants called “free agriculturalists.” In return, the serfs had to pay for their right to own the land. This manumission based on a voluntary decision by the respective estate owner had little impact in practice: By 1855, only 114,000 male serfs were registered as “free agriculturalists.”⁶³ The state-initiated measure provided the landlords with an additional opportunity to free individual serf villages or communities, but the serfs themselves did not have the right to initiate such a process. In summary, the agency of the peasantry depended on the power balance between the state and nobles. Gradual reforms in the direction of abolishing serfdom compromised the prosperity and wealth of nobles and thus had to be negotiated carefully.

The complete abolition of serfdom in the Russian Empire began in 1816–1819 in the three Baltic provinces (Estonia, Livonia, and Kurland), with the three provinces of right-bank Ukraine (Kiev, Volhynia, and Podolia) joining the process in 1847–1848.⁶⁴ Finally, in 1861, serfdom was abolished in all regions of the Russian Empire.⁶⁵ This legal act mainly granted the serfs personal freedom in a legal sense; the possibility or the right to acquire and possess land was not considered in the abolition process in the Baltic provinces. The imperial manifest of September 19, 1861, eventually provided the option for serfs to own land, but only with the agreement of the estate owners.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have presented two widespread Russian autochthonous forms of asymmetrical social dependency, namely the *kholopstvo* (often translated as slavery) and the *krepostnichestvo* (often translated as serfdom). We hardly can consider either form a stable system with a consistent repertoire of economic and social coercive mechanisms. Rather, the two mechanisms represent a set of multifarious servile and working practices that changed over time under the domestic and foreign political influence as well as due to demographic, fiscal, and legal developments.

Even if *kholopstvo* is often considered equivalent to slavery in academic literature, this form of strong personal dependency in early modern Russia in fact possessed many similarities to indentured servitude in the West. The rights and obligations of both owners and *khology* were regulated by the state through legal policy and controlling institutions. The degree of social engineering manifested in the activity of the Russian government was considerable, as shown by the abrogation of *kholopstvo* during the reign of Peter I.

Russian serfs (*krepostnye*) can be considered bondservants⁶⁶ or bondspeople, as they could pursue various occupations in the nineteenth century, working as merchants, craftspersons, manufactory workers, or artists. Originally, Russian serfs were bonded both to the land and to the estate owner. But the obligation to provide agricultural services could be compensated by

paying higher dues in cash or kind with the permission of the estate owner. In contrast to American slaves, Russian serfs were not foreigners recruited through the slave trade or captivity; they belonged to the same ethnic and religious group as their owners. With regard to enserfed peasants, the entire rural community (*mir*) was responsible for satisfying obligations, paying taxes, and providing local communal services. Their representatives were a mediating authority between the individual serfs and the respective estate owner—a further difference from the American master–slave relation.

Further research on the incorporation of other dependency relations in annexed territories into the legal space of Muscovy and the Russian Empire could provide valuable contributions to the historical exploration of local forms of servitude, bondage, and slavery.

NOTES

1. The tributary indigenous peoples of Siberia. The origin of *iasak* can be traced to a tax collected from native populations in the Golden Horde. Iasak tribute was gradually introduced in North Asia after the Muscovy's conquest of Siberia in the seventeenth century. Elena Smolarz, "Zwischen Integration und Segregation: Die Anwendung der imperialen Kategorie der Fremdstämmigen (inorodcy) auf die Steppennomaden im Russischen Reich im 18. Und 19. Jahrhundert," in *Taxing Difference. Empires as Spaces of Ordered Inequality*, ed. Sarah Albiez-Wieck (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2020), 117–22.
2. William G. Clarence-Smith, "Slavery in Early Modern Russia," in *Mediterranean Slavery Revisited (500–1800)*, ed. Stefan Hanss and Juliane Schiel (Zurich: Chronos, 2014), 123–38.
3. Hans-Heinrich Nolte, *Russische Geschichte*, 3rd edition (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2021).
4. For details on the following text, see Hans-Heinrich Nolte, "Terms for Dependent People in Rural Russia in Early Modern Records," in *Semantic Fields of Dependency*, ed. Stephan Conermann and Jeannine Bischoff (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022).
5. Oleg Ivanovic Chistiakov, ed., *Rossiiskoe zakonodatel'stvo X–XX vekov* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaja literatura, 1984–1994) [hereinafter RZ]; *Russkaja Pravda* in RZ 1, 64–132.
6. Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, 20th edition (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967) 28–30, 170; Andrea Komlosy, *Arbeit: Eine global-historische Perspektive* (Vienna: Promedia, 2014), 36–52.
7. Sergei Pushkarev, *Dictionary of Russian Historical Terms* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 37, 53–58, 110.
8. Michael Zeuske, *Handbuch der Geschichte der Sklaverei*, 2 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 292–344.
9. Money paid to the family/owner of a killed person instead of blood vengeance.
10. Hans-Heinrich Nolte, "Jasyry," in *Eurasian Slavery, Ransom and Abolition in World History 1200–1860*, ed. Christoph Witzernath (Ashgate: Farnham, 2015), 247–64.
11. Cherepnin, L. V. ed., *Akty feodal'nogo zemlevladieniia i choziaistva XIV–XVI vekov*, vols. 1–2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk, 1951–1956)

- [hereinafter AFZCh]; Grekov, D., ed., *Akty social'no-ekonomicheskoi istorii Severo-vostochnoi Rossii konca XIV—nachala XVI v.*, vols. I–III (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1952–1964) [hereinafter ASEI]; Schmücker-Brelower, Maritta, ed., *Das Hausarchiv der Fürsten Pozbarskij* (Cologne etc.: Böhlau, 1996); and a collection of sources translated into German: Hans-Heinrich Nolte, Bernhard Schalhorn, and Bernd Bonwetsch, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte Russlands* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014). The *Ulozhenie* (RZ III, 75–446) is cited by chapter and paragraph.
12. Richard Hellie, *Slavery in Russia* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).
 13. Alessandro Stanziani, “Serfs, Slaves or Wage Earners?” *Journal of Global History* 3, no. 2 (2008): 183–202.
 14. Hellie, *Slavery*, 82–83 and 356–58.
 15. The “fundamental law,” RZ III, 75–446, is cited by chapter and paragraph.
 16. Nolte, *Geschichte*, 86–87, 103, 125–26.
 17. Carsten Goehrke, *Russischer Alltag*, vols. 1–3 (Zurich: Chronos, 2003–2005); Angela Rustemeyer and Diana Siebert, *Alltagsgeschichte der unteren Schichten im Russischen Reich (1861–1914): Kommentierte Bibliographie zeitgenössischer Titel und Bericht über die Forschung* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997).
 18. Klaus Müller, ed., *Altrussisches Hausbuch “Domostroï”* (Leipzig – Weimar: Kiepenheuer, 1987). This Russian version of economy books was written in Novgorod in the sixteenth century and in use until the beginning of the nineteenth century. *Domostroï* is a direct translation of Greek οἰκονομία (rules on how to maintain a household).
 19. Arcikhovskii, A. V., ed., *Ocherki russkoi kultury XVII veka* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1979), 165–201.
 20. L. P. Vdovina, “Pishcha i utvar” [eating and tableware], in Arcikhovskii, *Ocherki*, 219–33.
 21. RZ II, 242/500, citation 354.
 22. *Gosudarstvennost'*, vol. 4, 384–85; Grigorii Kotoshikhin, [1664], in *O Rossii v carstovanie Aleksia Mikhaïlovicha*, ed. Aleksandr Barsukov (St. Petersburg: Akheograficheskaiia Kommissiia, 1906), 113.
 23. “Dokumenty: Tiazhby po kholop'im delam,” in *Kholopstvo i kholopy v Moskovskom gosudarstve XVII veka*, ed. Iakovlev, A. (Moscow – Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk, 1943), 323–27, 401–414, 496–512. For the preceding period, see Zimin, A. A., *Kholopy na Rusi s dreneishikh vremen do konca XV v.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1973).
 24. Paneiakh, V. M., *Kholopstvo v pervoi polovine XVII v.* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), 80–86, 124–25; Paneiakh, V. M., *Kholopstvo v XVI—nachale XVII veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974).
 25. RZ III, 75/446.
 26. Iakovlev, *Kholopstvo*, 513–62; Hellie, *Slavery*, 540–53.
 27. On children in Russia, see Mironov, B. N., *Social'naia istoriia Rossii (XVIII – nachalo XX v.)*, vols. 1–2 (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1999), 233.
 28. Iakovlev, *Kholopstvo*, 60–65.
 29. Hellie, *Slavery*, 366.
 30. ASEI 1, no. 612, cit., 524.
 31. AFZCh 2, no. 274, citation 281.
 32. *Votchina* was a land estate that could be inherited and belonged to a family or an individual person, while a *pomest'e* belonged to the Tsar or the Church

- and was “lent” for service. See Hans-Heinrich Nolte, “Eigentumsrechte im Moskauer Russland,” in *Rechts- und Verfassungsgeschichte in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Gedenkschrift Joachim Leuschner*, ed. Katharina Colberg and Herbert Obenaus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 226–244.
33. ASEI III, 357.
 34. Evgenii Anisimov, *Dyba i knut* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1999).
 35. Max Weber, *Present State*, vol. I, 191–92.
 36. G. G. Nolte, “Russkie ‘krestianskie voiny’ kak vosstaniia okrain,” *Voprosy Istorii* 11 (1994): 31–38.
 37. AFZCh II, 15–16; ASEI III, 357; Nolte, Schalhorn, and Bonwetsch, eds., *Quellen*, 2.24.
 38. *Gosudarstvennost’*, vol. 4, 384–85; Erik Amburger, *Geschichte der Behördenorganisation Russlands von Peter dem Grossen bis 1917* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 3 and 117; Hellie, *Slavery*, 695–710.
 39. Hellie, *Slavery*, 129–30.
 40. Mironov, *Social’naia istoriia Rossii*.
 41. Hans-Heinrich Nolte, *Kleine Geschichte Russlands* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2005), 53–55.
 42. Roger Bartlett, “Serfdom and State Power in Imperial Russia,” *European History Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2003).
 43. Alessandro Stanziani, *Bondage: Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Berghahn, 2014).
 44. Christoph Schmidt, *Leibeigenschaft im Ostseeraum: Versuch einer Typologie* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997).
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 46. Richard Hellie, *Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1–18.
 47. Jan Kusber, “Leibeigenschaft im Russland der Frühen Neuzeit: Aspekte der rechtlichen Lage und der sozialen Praxis,” in *Leibeigenschaft: Bäuerliche Unfreiheit in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Jan Klußmann (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), 142–44; Schmidt, *Leibeigenschaft im Ostseeraum*, 66–67.
 48. *Sobornoe ulozhenie 1649 goda. Tekst i kommentarii*, ed V.I. Buganov (Leningrad: Nauka, 1987).
 49. Hellie, *Enserfment*, 141–47.
 50. Kusber, “Leibeigenschaft,” 142.
 51. Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Russia’s Age of Serfdom, 1649–1861* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 169–89; Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): 30–40, 71–83, 238–42, 332–42.
 52. Bartlett, “Serfdom,” 31–32.
 53. V.I. Neupokoev, *Gosudarstvennye povinnostin krest’ian Evropeiskoi Rossii v konce XIX veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987).
 54. Tracy Dennison, *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 93–130; Steven L. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, a Village in Tambov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 133–59; V.B. Bezgin, *Sel’skoe pravosudie i pravovye obychai russkikh krest’ian vtoroi poloviny XIX – nachala XX veka* (Tambov: Izdatel’stvo IP Chesnokova, 2014).

55. David Moon, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia, 1762–1907* (London: Routledge, 2001), 29–36.
56. Kusber, “Leibeigenschaft,” 148.
57. Stanziani, *Bondage*, 112–13.
58. Nada Boskova, “‘Dort werden wir selber Bojaren sein.’ Bäuerlicher Widerstand im Russland des 17. Jahrhunderts,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 37, no. 3 (1989): 345–86; *Materialy dlia istorii krepostnogo prava v Rossii. Izvlecheniia iz sekretnykh otchetov Ministerstva vnutrennikh del za 1836–1856*, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia publichnaia istoricheskaia biblioteka Rossii, 2010).
59. Alison K. Smith, “Freed Serfs without Free People: Manumission in Imperial Russia,” *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 4 (October 2013): 1029–46.
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63. Moon, *Abolition*, 41.
64. Moon, *Abolition*, 43–45.
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