

SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN RUSSIA

Contents

Chapter 1 : Russian Society before Communism

Chapter 2: Communist Revolutions and Social Structure: Soviet Russia

Chapter 1 : Russian Society before Communism

Background Before the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, what is sometimes called Russia, or Kievan Rus', was centered mainly in what is now Ukraine and Belarus, though there were also Slavic populations to the east. This was a fairly loosely organized society, with a significant merchant class in cities like Kyiv and Novgorod. Aristocrats, or boyars, held considerable regional power, but there was also a fairly independent peasantry. This situation began to change under the Mongol invasion. Many peasants sought the protection of landlords against possible Mongol depredations, though in fact the Mongols ruled with a fairly light hand, mainly insisting on tribute payments. The situation gave additional economic as well as political power to the landlords, launching a system of serfdom that would play a huge role in Russian society up to Emancipation in 1861, and indeed beyond. From this point onward Russian social structure bore many similarities to some other parts of east-central Europe such as Poland and Hungary.

Aristocracy While earlier Russian nobles depended heavily on their military role, by the 17th century the class relied increasingly on ownership of substantial landed estates, and in turn most large landowners were nobles. The Tsar granted many estates in return for government service, including military service. Peter the Great confirmed the status and titles of the nobility, while abolishing the older boyar reference. By 1914 the nobility constituted about 1.1% of the total population (just short of 2 million people). (In other east European countries such as Poland the class was larger.) The ranks of the nobles themselves divided between great magnates, unusually wealthy and sometimes quite cosmopolitan, and more conservative, smaller estate owners who sometimes resented the pretensions of their richer colleagues. The class as a whole had something of a love-hate relationship with the tsarist state. Periodic rebellions against tsarist power surfaced in the early modern centuries and beyond; even the abortive 1825 Decembrist revolt was heavily aristocratic. At the same time the nobility provided most of the upper levels of the bureaucracy and military, all the way to the revolution of 1917. Mutual dependence of tsar and aristocracy was a fundamental feature of Russian society. Partly because of this, the aristocracy was somewhat fluid. Many people – including the father of Vladimir Lenin – were advanced into the aristocracy on the basis of state service. Finally, from Peter the Great onward, many aristocrats, particularly the wealthy, participated actively in cultural Westernization, often speaking French, enjoying extensive “grand tours” to the West in their youth, sometimes intermarrying with their counterparts elsewhere. This enhanced the distance between this class and the bulk of the Russian population – even though a few Westernized aristocrats urged social reforms

Serfdom The vast majority of this largely rural population were held as serfs, either on landlord estates or on state property. They were subject to the usual burdens of serfdom: they had their own land to work, but had to pay rent in money or more commonly in kind, and also had to provide labor service on the landlord's holdings (often other fees were charged, for example for use of the lord's grain mill). Many serfs participated in an active village life, which was the framework for a variety of popular religious festivals and also for dispute resolution (sometimes eased by alcohol). On the other hand, further by the state, landlord power and exactions steadily increased. Under Peter the Great, some landlords were allowed to sell whole villages, and their serfs, for example for use in metallurgy or mining. Landlord judicial powers expanded, including by the 18th century the right to impose capital punishment. Some historians have argued that this was the harshest social system ever imposed on one's own people (as opposed to foreign slaves). Russia relied heavily on serfdom both for its economy, with serf estates producing the increasing supply of grain for export, and for political administration in a vast empire where local government officials were few and far between. Harsh conditions, and sometimes land shortages, provoked recurrent peasant risings, including the great Pugachev revolt of 1773-4, which was brutally

repressed by the government, Various risings continued through the 19th century (even after serfdom was formally abolished).

Other social classes Into the 19th century, urban residents constituted little more than 5% of the total population. A good bit of Russia's foreign trade was conducted by British, French and German companies, some of which had permanent enclaves in key Russian cities. Russian merchants existed, and traded with Central Asia as well as locally, but their numbers and status were limited given the focus on the aristocracy – a key feature, and arguably a limitation, of Peter the Great's reforms. In contrast to the West or the Middle East, no large artisanal groups arose in the cities, though there were some craftsmen, and a guild structure did not develop. Slavery also persisted in Russian society (quite apart that Russian territories were often raided for slaves, for use particularly in the Middle East). By the early modern period most slaves served as domestics for the wealthy, but in 1723 Peter the Great converted domestics into serfs, abolishing formal slavery.

Reforms and industrialization The great emancipation of the serfs, in 1860s, responded to the growing belief that Russia was falling behind the West and needed a more flexible labor force; concern about rural unrest and some liberal reformist motives also entered in. The reform however sought to preserve the aristocracy by requiring redemption payments from the former serfs, which created persistent unrest including rural revolts both in 1905 and 1917. Some wealthier independent peasants, or kulaks, did emerge, often resented by other peasants. A local middle class of merchants and professionals also gained ground, and won some local political power in administrations set up to compensate for the end of landlord rule. By the later 19th century expanded industrialization prompted further social change. Cities grew, and an urban working class developed rapidly. Artisan ranks also expanded, as in printing, which also played a role in new labor organizations. A number of Russians, including some religious dissidents, entered the ranks of industrialists, though about half of all Russian factory industry was foreign-owned. The result by 1917 was a complex and combustible mixture of older and newer social structural features.

Study questions

1. Why was serfdom so important and durable in Russian history?
2. What were the limitations on social change that resulted from the 19th-century reform period?
3. How was the history of the Russian middle classes different from that in the West?

Further reading

Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia from the ninth to the nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1951)

Richard Hellie, "Slavery and Serfdom in Russia", in Abbott Gleason, ed., *A Companion to Russian History* (Wylie Blackwell, 2007)

Douglas Smith, *Former People: the last days of the Russian aristocracy* (Macmillan, 2012)

Chapter 2: Communist Revolutions and Social Structure: Soviet Russia

Overview Communist revolutions in major societies like Russia and China intended to revolutionize social structure, and they had a huge impact. Demolition of older patterns was the most immediate outcome, particularly in doing away with the longstanding upper classes. Correspondingly, massive new opportunities for mobility opened up, enhanced by the rapid expansion of educational systems, particularly in filling the expanding ranks of the Communist Party and government personnel. Treatment of the peasant class, another traditional segment, proved more complicated, though there was major change. Extensive industrialization generated social groupings not entirely dissimilar from those that had developed earlier in the West, as communism yielded some unexpected stratification.

Aristocracy The Russian Revolution immediately abolished the aristocracy, replacing aristocratic titles with the egalitarian term, comrade, and seizing remaining agricultural estates. Many aristocrats were killed, including some engaged in counterrevolutionary activities, and many fled to Western Europe or the United States. A longstanding staple of Russian social structure was removed.

Bases for the new order The professed goal of the communist leadership was a classless society. Economic and political issues during the 1920s complicated plans, as the government had to allow some private enterprise. Differentiations within the peasantry increased, with a minority gaining particular commercial success and sometimes expanding landholding; and a class of small businessmen persisted in the cities. But these were short term features. Overall, thanks to increasing government control of the economy, social structure ceased to depend on differentials in property ownership, and depended instead on differences in prestige (often linked to levels of educational achievement) and political power (often linked to membership in the Communist Party). (The Party had about half a million members in 1924, expanded to several million in the 1930s but was never more than a minority of the population as a whole.) Income was generally a consequence of social position, rather than determining it. All of this was in obvious contrast to the bases of social structure in the West. Officially, the Party claimed that there were only two social classes in the Soviet Union, workers and peasants, and that they were equal, differentiated only by location and specific function. In fact, a more complex structure developed arguably involving four major components: an elite at the top; white collar workers; blue collar workers; and finally peasants and other agricultural workers.

The elite This group, almost entirely composed of Party members including the leadership element, initially reflected a great deal of upward mobility, with many former peasants and workers rising into positions of power. Some mobility opportunities continued throughout the Soviet period: the final communist leader, for example, Mikhail Gorbachev, came from a poor peasant village and rose initially through his performance as a student. The functions of the new elite centered on top government, Party and intellectual activities (the cultural and scientific intelligentsia). Members of the elite received a growing number of privileges, including access to special stores that carried an unusual variety of foods and other consumer items (including imports not available to most citizens) plus access to particularly luxurious summer homes, or dachas. Position depended on function; it was not the result of inheritance. And demotion was always possible, particularly under Stalin. Over time, however, and particularly after Stalin's death in 1953, a certain degree of self-perpetuation described the elite, as children had a better chance to receive and succeed at university education than was true of the population at large.

White collar This category (including some Party members but not confined to this group) included doctors, teachers, engineers as well as the broader run of white collar workers. They were often paid less well than factory workers, but carried higher prestige. Many women participated in the relevant job categories.

Urban blue collar This class, already established before the Revolution, expanded rapidly with industrialization, its ranks swelled by the growth of cities and arrivals from the countryside. (The growth of cities was steady, even during World War II, and by 1989 the overall population was 73% urban – an important shift though below Western levels.) The class had great prestige in the Soviet scheme of things, was glorified in official art and propaganda, and often enjoyed comparatively high wages and benefits. The government for example carefully established vacation resorts for blue collar workers, along the Black Sea and in other desirable sites. At the same time, as was true for working classes in every industrial revolution, factory and mine workers faced intense production pressure and had to adapt to a variety of demanding working conditions.

Peasantry and rural laborers This group, diminishing in numbers though still very large, was at the bottom of the social order (despite some attention from the government). Stalin, aiming at the collectivization of agriculture, took particular aim at the independent peasantry, and millions of recalcitrant peasants were killed. Most remaining peasants lost access to property and simply became part of a rural working class – and agricultural production frequently faltered as a result. Industrialization generally enhanced the rural-urban differential, and Soviet policies simply enhanced the divide.

Trends over time By the 1960s it was becoming clear that the professional and white collar group, like the elite, was increasingly solidifying its position – rather like its counterpart in Western society – and becoming something of a modern middle class. Professionals and factory managers carefully limited their birth rates and devoted great attention to fostering their offspring's success in school with an eye to assuring access to universities. The same phenomenon was noted in other East European communist societies, leading to accusations that the revolution was being betrayed.

Post-communist society The end of communist rule by 1991 most obviously removed Communist Party membership as a vehicle for social power or mobility. At the same time, the transition created new opportunities and, possibly, new clarity for the urban middle classes, now able to enjoy greater access to an array of consumer goods. Many observers in the 1990s noted the characteristics of what they called “New Russians”, who seemed to have many of the same aspirations and values as their middle-class counterparts in Western societies (including the continued interest in education). At the same time, however, a new elite group was formed among business oligarchs, closely tied to the government, who managed to acquire ownership of a variety of former state enterprises and real estate holdings, and who frequently rose to great wealth and showy life styles. While no rigid hierarchy developed, social differentiation expanded and was increasingly based on wealth.

Study questions

1. What were the biggest changes in social structure under Communism?
2. What were the main differences between Soviet social structure, as the society industrialized, and its counterpart in the West?
3. Was there a middle class in the Soviet system, and if so what were its principal features?

Further reading

Pavel Machonin, “The Social Structure of Soviet-Type Societies: its collapse and legacy,” *Czech Sociological Review* 1 (1993)

Kendall Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin: origins of the Soviet technical intelligentsia* (Princeton University Press, 1978)

Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: ordinary life in extraordinary times* (Oxford University Press, 2000)