HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN EARLY MODERN PERIOD

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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 pretentions 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 tis 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-centu8ry 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: The Modern Framework: Ideas and Economies

Overview Economic, ideological and political changes in various parts of the world began to shift social structure away from many of the fundamental features that had defined agricultural societies, from the early modern period on to the 20th century. Shifts occurred at different specific times, depending on region, and there were many holdovers from the more traditional patterns. Furthermore, substantial inequality persisted almost everywhere, even when the component social groups had changed – only occasionally did major war or revolution cut into the position of a wealthy upper class. However, modern or industrial social structure differed in many ways from its agricultural predecessor, and social mobility on the whole increased as well.

Early modern trade Most of the world was still defined by some version of agricultural social structure by the later 18th century, but there had been some important shifts. The expansion of commerce and manufacturing in places like China and Western Europe, plus the increasing production of foods and raw materials for export in other centers, adjusted the standard social order. The importance of the business sector grew, without yet displacing the landed aristocracy or (in China) the Confucian bureaucracy. Urban

social groups, though still a minority, began to expand. More and more rural producers began to participate in market sales, which would alter the characteristics of the peasantry. In several places, including Western Europe, the expansion of domestic manufacturing added another new element to rural life. Again in Western Europe, several social groups began participating in new forms of consumerism, for example buying more fashionable clothing – leading to conservative complaints that it was becoming more difficult to identify a person's social place by what they wore. On the other hand, export production also increased pressure on coerced labor. Slave systems expanded in the Americas, based on the new Atlantic trade from Africa. In parts of Latin America but also in Russia and Poland, serf labor became more intense on large agricultural estates. This was a period of considerable but varied shifts in social and economic structure.

The Americas European conquests and settlements in the Americans overturned indigenous social structures in many ways, largely eliminating for example the Aztec and Inca aristocracies. New racial hierarchies were introduced, not only through imported African slaves and a concomitant development of racism. In Latin America, society increasingly divided between Europeans and natives of European origin (creoles); a majority population of mestizos, or people of mixed blood; and indigenous and slave groups. At the same time, no formal aristocracy developed – an explicit policy on the part of Spain and Portugal. A landowner class emerged in Latin America, among Dutch settlers in New York, and in the southern colonies of British North America; but it was not officially titled or privileged in law over other colonists of European origin. In British North America, furthermore, White rural populations featured independent farmers and their workers instead of a more traditional peasantry.

New ideologies The 18th-century Enlightenment in Western Europe (and to some extent the Americas) produced new and increasingly intense social ideas. Privileged aristocrats were criticized, contrasted with the hard-working, productive majority. Equality under the law became an increasingly popular rallying cry. In fact, in Western Europe, many aristocrats tried to close ranks in the 18th century, seeking to protect position against upstart middle-class elements, and this spurred growing demands for more open access to government posts. New ideas also created the beginnings of the abolitionist movement, aimed at eradicating the slave trade and slavery – another manifestation of a growing belief in a common humanity as opposed to divisions in status and law. Ideas of this sort blossomed quickly in the French revolution of 1789, which immediately eliminated the old Three-Estate system in parliament in favor of a single chamber and removed aristocratic titles and legal privileges. Government careers were now, in principle, "open to talent" rather than noble birth. New ideas and pressure also led to the British decision, in 1807, to end the Atlantic slave trade and to the abolition of slavery in a number of northern states in the new United States and also in several newly-independent Latin American countries such as Mexico.

Industrialization The industrial revolution began in Britain in the later 18th century, and fairly quickly spread to other parts of Western Europe and to the United States. Factory cities and some other urban centers began to grow very rapidly. The older social order did not immediately disappear: the industrial impact on social structure was a matter of decades, not years. But there was no question about the direction of change. By 1850 in Britain, for example, half the population was living in cities, for the first time in human history, and a similar transformation reached the United States and Germany around the end of the century.

The old social classes: aristocracies All of the old social groups declined, at least as a percentage of the population and in most cases in prestige and power as well. Aristocracies had a hard time with the combination of a rising big business class and legal equality. Furthermore, governments increasingly adopted civil service reforms that recruited on the basis of an examination system, weakening aristocratic privilege from another direction. Individual aristocrats might fare well, even becoming industrialists in their own right. As Japan began to industrialize in the later 19th century, a new upper class emerged that combined some former samurai (feudalism had been abolished) and new business types. But the aristocratic class as a whole suffered, and would be further undercut by 20th-century revolutions in Russia and China.

Other traditional groups A strong peasantry might persist, adjusting to greater involvement with the market and even new educational requirements, but its relative position inevitably declined and ultimately other "peasant" characteristics yielded as well. Most industrial societies still gave the rural sector

disproportionate political voice, and some nostalgic prestige, but there was no question that considerable decline occurred, creating clear resentments. Artisans suffered as well: skills remained important but old guild institutions were abolished everywhere, and distinctions from the rest of the working class blurred. Finally, during the later 19th and early 20th century virtually all societies (pressed by the West) decided to abolish formal slavery and serfdom, seen as incompatible with the kind of mobility required for industrialization. Considerable slavery continued to exist on the margins, including sex slavery, but its importance as well as its legality was clearly reduced.

New elements The principal components of industrial social structure – all primarily urban – were now a growing middle class and the even larger urban working classes. "Middle class" could include some older merchant and professional groups and shopkeepers, but it was increasingly dominated by factory owners and new professions such as engineering. Older professions, like medicine and law, had to retool through more demanding education and licensing. From the later 19th century onward, a white collar or lower-middle-class group became increasingly important, filling the ranks of sales clerks, bank tellers, secretaries and so on – often including a substantial female component. Many white collar workers eagerly sought to maintain distinctions from the urban working class. By the later 20th century, in the most advanced industrial societies, urban working classes stabilized or declined, now limited by increasing automation. Levels of education became increasingly important in shaping position in the social hierarchy. "Industrial" social structure was a shifting phenomenon, but it clearly differed massively from its agricultural predecessor.

Conclusion The fundamental social changes of the past two-three centuries provide some guidelines for examining the social evolution of specific regions during this period of major adjustment. Specifics, however, varied greatly, as did timing. Communist revolutions for example produced different versions of modern social structure from those of the capitalist West – though the differences should not be exaggerated. Older social categories did not roll over and die. Rural sectors even today, as in India and parts of Africa, maintain many older patterns. Basic legal changes were often less transformational than intended: the abolition of slavery was conditioned by continued racial prejudice; the 1947 ending of the caste system in India hardly destroyed the significance of caste. Many older groups fought social change with considerable success: the East German aristocracy, for example, successfully maintained itself until the collapse of Nazism. Small shopkeepers sometimes used political clout to hang on despite new competition. A preliminary roadmap of the basic contours of industrial society cannot replace more specific treatments of modern social change.

Study questions

1. What were the main new challenges to aristocracy?
2. What were the bases of the principal industrial social classes?
3. Were new ideas or new economic forms most important in undermining traditional social structures?

Further reading

Peter N. Stearns, *The Industrial Revolution in World History* (4th ed., Routledge, 2021)

Seymour Drescher, *A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Juergen Kocka, *White Collar Workers in America: and social-political history in international perspective* (Sage, 1980)