

RUSSIAN SOCIAL HISTORY

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SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Overview All prehistoric nomadic societies remained tribal in structure. There was no social organization above the tribe, and the tribal leader who held his position by consensus. After the formation of sedentary groups, social groups at the level of chiefdoms and social stratification appeared. Starting with the clan-tribal system, Russian society, like every other society, remained stratified for centuries. During the empire, each century added a new class to the stratum based on their privilege and status within society. It was only the Soviets who claimed to create a classless society; their task of building up a communist classless society required the complete obliteration of the exploiting classes which owned the means of production, but produced nothing, and only exploited the labor of the working classes. However, towards the end of the Soviet Union this utopic endeavor ended with the restoration of class privilege.

ANCIENT PERIOD

The Scythians lived in a clan-based society. A class of wealthy aristocrats who later became rulers of the southern Russian and Crimean territories emerged. These aristocrats were led by a sovereign whose authority was hereditary. Later, a military nobility, a class of servants, and a priestly stratum emerged, but the Scythians still lacked a state.

Sarmatian society also developed a clan-tribal system led by a sovereign, and like the Scythians, they had no organized state. Sarmatian burials indicated that there were princes, aristocrats, commoners and poor people.

A clan-tribal system was also observed among the Eastern Slavic tribes. Prior to the evolution of the first official ruling class, the early Slavic population was divided into three distinguishable strata. At the lowest strata there were the slaves who were allowed to own property and even leave it to their children. Above the slaves were the freemen, known as *smerdi* who were below the rudimentary aristocracy. Later, this term was used for the agricultural population living on communal land-holdings. Above the freemen there were the seniors, and above them – a tribal chieftain.

POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

The Kievan social structure was complex and stratified. Kievan social structure was fluid in that there were no barriers to social mobility, and movement from one class to another. Rather, status was determined by opportunity and skill.

In the Kievan state there were seven main classes or estates (*soslovie*) stipulated in Kievan law: princes, boyars (nobles), merchants, artisans, *smerdy* (rural peasants), semi free persons, and slaves.

Prince: At the top of the classes were the princely families. They had administrative power over most Russian towns and territories. The relations among the princes were always tense, and their struggles for political power led to civil war which resulted in the weakening of the Kievan state.

Druzhina (Retinue): After the evolution of the Russian commercial towns, the princes allied themselves with the Varangian warriors who later formed the entourage of the prince, known as *druzhina*. At first each prince had his own military units, of whom many in the beginning were probably Vikings. But soon they merged with already existing groups of Slavic warriors.

Muzhi: Beneath the princes and princesses stood upper-class freemen, called *muzhi* (free community members/soldiers) who made up the *druzhina*.

Merchants: The merchants had significant influence because of their contributions to the economy, and in some towns, they even exercised political power.

Smerdy: Most people in the towns and cities were free and fell into a broad group of artisans, tanners, potters, armorers, goldsmiths, carpenters and masons (*molodshie ljudi*). In the countryside, were the lower class people, free peasants were bore the title *Smerdy*. Some were dependent on princes or boyars, but apparently most were free.

Zakupy and Cheliad: *Zakupy* and *Cheliad* (or *kholop*) were also terms used to designate semi-free people, enslaved prisoners who had become subject to purchase and sale in the 9th and 10th centuries. These were at the bottom of the social ladder. Some may have been semi free individuals who fell into complete bondage, but a majority were apparently prisoners-of-war, and many were therefore not Slavic. In the early years of Kievan rule, slaves were an important commodity. Slaves had no rights and could even be killed by their owners.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

In the Muscovite state, the inhabitants were officially organized into nine estates: princes, boyars, servitors, *streltsy*, clergy, merchants, artisans, peasants, and slaves. Muscovite society was not a flexible society, and more closely resembled a society of castes.

Prince: At the top of the class structure of the Muscovite state, were the princes and their families. After Moscow established control over other principalities, some princes fell into the noble class.

Boyars: In 1649, the 59 members of the Boyar Duma (council) and their families were at the top of society based chiefly on hereditary rights. Below them were a few thousand boyar families from the upper service class who helped run the government and the tsar's court in Moscow. A third group of nobles belonged to the provincial nobility. Their primary duty was to serve in the tsar's cavalry forces.

Servitors: Muscovite princes took on servitors who were sometimes impoverished or landless boyars who received a grant of land for their service, called a *pomestie*. The *pomestie* was at first allotted to the servitor only for the duration of his service, but later became hereditary.

Streltsy: Beneath the nobles stood a lower service class, the *streltsy*. They included the Cossacks, and other non-noble military men. The elites and the middle service class from the provincial towns and countryside performed formed the backbone of the army in wartime.

Artisans (Meshchane): Artisans, peddlers and servants were poor urban dwellers, who developed into a near equivalent petit-bourgeois in the 19th century.

Clergy: Hereditary caste as well as other grievances resulted in church reforms that began in the 1860's. Alexander II transformed the hereditary estate of the church into a professional service class.

Merchants: This estate was hereditary if the business was successful and passed on. However, it was necessary to declare the capital the person owned.

Peasants: In the early 1500s the peasants' right to move to other land or to the service of a different lord had been restricted to a two-week period in the fall, after the harvest was in.

Slaves: During the reign of Ivan the Terrible, the number of slaves in the military increased after the Service decree issued in 1556. Slaves were the largest class after the peasants, comprising 10 percent of the population. In the middle of the 17th century, because of the consolidation of serfdom, the number of slaves in the military declined. With the establishment of serfdom in 1649, landlords became less dependent on slaves, and household serfs replaced slaves. Another reason for the decline of the slavery was the changing nature of military requirements, which had less need for slaves. Slavery also declined because the government wanted to maintain as many tax-payers as possible, and slaves did not pay any taxes.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

During the 19th century the government continued to classify people by social estate (*soslovie*). The rigid *soslovie* categories such as prince, nobility, clergy, merchants, urban dwellers and peasantry continued to be used in official censuses. But, this classification was becoming more cumbersome each year; industrial workers, for example, had no category of their own, and were included in the peasant category. The Code of the Law of the Russian Empire of 1832, vol. 9, "Laws about Estates" defined four major estates: nobility (*dvoryans*), clergy, urban dwellers and rural dwellers (peasants). But, these rigid estate headings were no longer adequate to describe a society in which professionals, workers, intellectuals, industrialists and politicians played a visible, and even dominant, role.

Nobility (Dvoryans): . The *dvoryanstvo* estate was mainly hereditary, but anyone could be promoted into this estate by achieving senior rank in the civil and military service.

Clergy: was subdivided into *white* (priests) and *black* (monks).

Urban dwellers (*meshchane*): Artisans, petty tradesmen and most urban workers were included in this class. They had some real estate in a town, were engaged in some trade, craft, or service, and paid taxes.

Rural dwellers (peasants): The category of rural dwellers had permanent residence in towns, and were correspondingly classified as "urban peasants". The rural dwellers category also included the *inorodtsy* estate, that included non-Russian and non-Orthodox native peoples of Siberia, Central Asia or the Caucasus. An *inorodets* who converted to Orthodox Christianity was excluded from this estate and included into one of the other ones, most often the peasantry.

Raznochintsy: People of miscellaneous ranks. The state was for those people who were unable to be categorized in any of the other existing estates.

Military: This estate included the lower military strata. These people were either discharged or on indefinite leave. In addition, the Cossacks troops from the south brought into this category.

Industrial workers: The urgent need for Russian industrialization demanded industrial workers. After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, free serfs began to move to urban areas forming a mobile labor force, able to relocate to areas where industrial workers were needed.

Kulaks: The *kulaks were rich peasants* who owned larger portions of land, livestock and machinery, and provided work for the landless peasants. This estate survived until the Bolshevik Revolution.

Inorodtsy: Ethnic minorities which were the part of the Empire residing in European Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia.

Several factors had rendered the old system of social classification largely obsolete by the late 19th century. Among these were the abolition of serfdom, the emergence of a capitalist economy, and property ownership

rather than membership in a particular estate becoming the determining factor in the legal and governmental system.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Classless Society: To build a communist society, the Soviets' first task was to eliminate all exploiting classes, such as landlords, merchants, kulaks etc., and create a classless, socialist society. With the elimination of the exploiting classes in the Soviet Union, there would be no barriers blocking the way for the development of a socialist country. Their goal was for the nation's income to be totally dedicated to providing for all of the workers' needs, both private and social. Class antagonism would be replaced by the shared interests and goals of all levels of the population. The elimination of conflict and distrust between all nations, national groups and nationalities within the Soviet Union would lead to mutual friendship, resulting in true, fraternal cooperation among all peoples in this single, federated state.

Working class (Proletariat): Imperial *Russia* was backward economically, and its *working class* small, around 4 percent of the population. The Bolsheviks' main task was to establish the hegemony of the proletariat, abolish the capitalist economic system, and establish socialist ownership of the means of production. The working class of the Soviet Union had become politicized, and were the backbone of the revolution.

Peasants: After the peasants were emancipated from all exploitation, the peasant began to survive on their own without any landlords, kulaks and usurers exploiting them. During the enforced collectivization process, the majority of peasants were compelled to join the collective farms.

Nomenklatura: *Nomenklatura* was the term used to classify the Stalinist and post-Stalin members of the Soviet bureaucracy. The *Nomenklatura* included all Communist Party members, government officials, and senior officers in the army. *Apparatchiki*, who were the full-time Party officials, were also considered *Nomenklatura*. The term *Partapparat* was also used to denote this privileged ruling class in the Soviet Union.

Intellectuals: The intellectuals in the Soviet Union had also undergone significant alteration. The majority came from the ranks of the workers and peasants. Intellectuals now only served socialism, not capitalism, and became equal members of this socialist society.

Military: The Bolsheviks established the Red Army in 1918. The military was politicized and the soldiers were provided special political indoctrination to serve the socialist system and to protect it. After the Civil War, the army became a professional military organization, and with the establishment of Soviet military schools, the Soviets sought to create a loyal officer corps. The name Red Army was abandoned in 1946 and became the Soviet Army under Stalin.

After the liquidation of the exploiting classes, despite the official propaganda declaring a classless society, three classes were implicitly recognized by the Soviets - the working class, the peasant class and the intellectuals. Any other class formation outside the classification of the Party was deliberately discouraged since it would threaten the Party's monopoly on social control. However, Soviet society looked far from classless and more complex toward the later years of the Soviet Union due to increasing inequalities in the distribution of income and sharp variations in socialist values. However, it is clear that they were successful in narrowing the gaps and divisions between social groups.

Discussion/Questions

1. Why were the people arranged in social strata? What made stratification important during the Russian Empire?
2. Why was the main task of the Soviets to create a classless society to fulfil the building a communist society?
3. After the emancipation of the serfs, they became free and were able to leave their farms. Some stayed in the rural areas and became farmers, but others migrated to the urban areas to become workers in the

factories. Discuss the working class of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. In what ways they were different from each other?

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GENDER RELATIONS

Overview From a matriarchal and democratic social structure to a life in segregation until the 18th century, women played a secondary role in Russian society. This confinement came to an end in the late 18th century, and during the period of modernization and westernization women were able to receive an education and schooling. But this was not enough to combat high illiteracy, since until the 19th century only noble women were allowed to get an education, buy land, exercise their legal rights, and join the intelligentsia. However, in the same period little was done to improve the situation of the peasants or of poor women. In the 19th century, intellectuals had come to believe that much more needed to be done for all the women of the empire. The solutions to women's issues in the next decades came with the Bolsheviks in the 20th century. An overwhelmingly patriarchal society transformed itself into a gender neutral society, in which men and women were comparatively equal; this new society would fight for the equal rights of the women, and extend women's right to participate in the social and political life of the country.

ANCIENT PERIOD

In the early period many tribes were matriarchal in structure, due to women's important roles within the tribe as mothers, gatherers, housekeepers and cooks. Archeologists have found 300 graves that belong to women dating from the Bronze Age to the second century AD, who were buried with axes, spears, swords, and arrows. Many of the graves contained female skeletons that bore combat injuries.

Scythians: There is compelling archeological evidence confirming that Scythians had warrior women who were buried with the same honors as men, with sacrificial horses, armor, weapons, tools and a great feast for the mourners.

Sarmatians: Sarmatian society retained some matriarchal characteristics (for example, women could be warriors until they married) in its early period, however this would change over time. There was also gender equality among the Sarmatians. Sarmatian woman sat on horseback to go hunting wearing the men clothes.

Later, with the domestication of animals and the development of agriculture, men's role in society became more important, resulting in a transition to a patriarchal social structure. With increasing tribal organization, the power of military leaders increased, and changes in tactics, armor, weapons and riding equipment (the metal stirrup) all led to women being excluded from a military role in Sarmatian society.

Proto- Slavs: Proto-Slavic society was matriarchal, and based social equality. Cooperation between large families, and a basic democratic structure prevented the concentration of power, political or economic, in the hands of any group or person.

POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

Kievan Rus:

In Kievan Rus, the early Russian Law gave men the highest and most powerful position in the social strata since they hunted, fought, and dominated religious and political life. But, women also engaged in agriculture, worked in the harvest, gathered forest products, weaving, and, when necessary, they even fought to defend their cities. Women controlled their children, their family property, dowry and wealth, and could purchase land and perform charity works.

During Kievan Russia, women enjoyed considerable freedom and independence, both legally and socially which was the remnant of the matriarchal tradition of the Proto-Slavs. In the mid-10th century there was a women ruler, and the first Kievan women ruler was Olga, who took power in 962 after her husband's murder, but prevalence of women rulers disappeared until the 14th century. Princess Olga also was the first woman who travelled to Constantinople and converted to Christianity.

After the conversion to Christianity in 988, the rights of women were not forgotten. While sometimes women's influence over individual male lives was perceived, women also received negative reactions, were blamed for natural disasters regarded as the "devil's vessel" and were even killed.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Muscovite Rus:

Segregation of Women in Terem: In contrast to Kievan Rus, the Muscovite state segregated men and women. The position of women in the Muscovite state was one of complete subjugation to men. Women were deprived of any freedom and they were forced to live in segregation.

The Muscovite royal women lived in a separate women's quarters known as the *Terem*. Upper-class women enjoyed some freedom in the sense that they could own property, manage their own estates and even arrange marriages. The Tsar's wives and daughters had an important public role in dispensing charity, receiving petitions and standing in when men were absent. Elite women were allowed out using curtained recesses in church and closed carriages for outside.

The main task of royal women was to give birth to an heir to the throne and to raise children. No women were allowed in the tsar's formal receptions. Women's portraits scarcely permissible at all outside of a religious context.

There was no seclusion for ordinary townswomen who contributed to household incomes. In the countryside, peasant women worked alongside their men; while the men sowed, women dealt with the reaping.

High illiteracy: Illiteracy was very high among both men and women. Even the majority of noble women in the empire remained illiterate, and education was not considered important. In the *Domostroy* (house manual) written in the 15th century, the rules on education had no reference to women. "The Wife was always and in all things to take Counsel with her Husband". There were a few private schools for girls, but they never learned how to read and write there, they only studied household management techniques.

Life out of Terem: It was Peter the Great who abolished the *Terem*, and encouraged the social mixing of the sexes and the wearing of Western clothing. During the first decades of the 18th century the petrine reforms made the education of women an increasingly important issue. In order to create a Western nation, Peter ordered the wives of his nobility to join in weekly assemblies or parties at noble homes, to participate in public ceremonies, and to dance, drink, and play cards at court parties.

Law of Succession: Another reform that Peter the Great introduced was a change in the law of succession, which allowed women to rule for most of the 18th century. In 1722 Peter issued a decree stating that each emperor should choose his own heir. After his death, empresses ruled Russia for the next seventy years.

Schools for Girls: Catherine the Great established girls' schools, including a teacher's college and a school for noble girls called the Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg, and more noble women received finishing-school education at these female institutions. She also authorized the creation of a school for maidens, the Novodevichy Institute which was situated in a Moscow convent.

As a proponent of the Enlightenment, Catherine II believed that noble women should be educated and take an active role in the development of Russian culture, and among Russian intellectuals. Everywhere in the Empire, noble girls were educated, primarily by tutors hired by their parents, took an interest in the arts, played musical instruments, attended plays, and drew sketches of the countryside. Like Peter the Great, Catherine also encouraged women to join in weekly salon assemblies in their homes to debate political questions or talk about the arts.

Property rights: The property rights of Russian noble women were protected in the 18th century by the law of 1753. This law allowed married women to control their own property, and the dowry property they had brought into the marriage. In the 18th century, women also participated in court sessions, could sell their own property, and sign their own names on sales contracts.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Russia remained an overwhelmingly patriarchal society in the early 19th century. Women's main duties remained the same. Women were expected to be traditional wives, and should devote themselves to their families and household jobs.

Russian Law of 1836: According to the Code of Russian Laws of 1836 "the woman must obey her husband, reside with him in love, respect, and in unlimited obedience...". Women were forced to marry against their wills, but were able to control any dowry property. These property rights were not given to peasant women.

Intellectuals and the issue of women: Reform-minded women intellectuals began to participate in political life which was one of the most important developments of the Nikolai I era, but the foundation for this participation was laid by Catherine II.

During Alexander II's reign, Russian intellectuals brought up the issue of "the woman question" and they emphasized that women should be given the same education as men, because they were "equal beings." During this period two novels, Ivan Turgenev's *On the Eve* (1860) and Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) were both answers to the woman question. Both novels depicted young women who left their parents and in order to devote themselves to doing something useful for society.

Feminism: The discussion around the woman question in the 1860s resulted in the appearance of the feminist movement in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other provincial cities that was led by Filosofova, Stasova and Trubnikova. They dedicated themselves to helping poor urban women and improving education for girls.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Women's participation in economic and social life: Women began to participate in the economic and social developments of the last decades of imperial Russia. Noblewomen and feminists organized charities and persuaded the government to provide women with higher education. However, these changes excluded peasant and working-class women although they made up 80 percent of the female population and played a crucial role in industrialization. Many male workers did not even want to work with women in the factories, thinking that women would bring down wages and cost men jobs. Women were never allowed to obtain

leadership in the factories. Even the female textile workers' union had male leadership. Starting in 1905, women were out on the street participating in strikes, demonstrations, and taking active role in the Soviets.

The Russian Revolution began in February 1917 with a demonstration staged by women congregating on the Nevsky Prospekt in Petrograd, and the slogans on their banners demanded change. Hundreds of women came out of their factories and men joined in their protests on that day in 1917 which came to be known as the Women's Day March.

On February 23, textile workers poured into the streets to protest shortages of bread and the war that had cost so many men's lives. There were around one million female workers living in Russia's cities who were paid half the wages of men and treated unequally. The revolution brought many women into politics, and they began to demand women's equality.

Zhenotdel: Women went to work in the new government and in the military. The Bolsheviks established the women's department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (Zhenotdel) to educate women and promoted the establishment of female internships. In 1930's women made up 13 percent of the total party membership. By 1939 about four-fifths of females were literate, and the number of women completing secondary and higher education continued to increase.

Industrialization: Between 1929 and 1935, 1.7 million women were working as industrial wage earners. Although Stalin's rapid industrialization opened up new career opportunities for women, in 1943 women made up 53 percent of industrial workers and in 1945, 92 percent of agricultural workers were women.

Women at the front: There were also around 70.000 women enlisted in the Red Army during the Civil War and World War I; some women fought in battles, but many of them served in non-combative positions, such as medical or clerical positions. In 1920, the Soviets provided for the political and legal equality of women, and removed marriage from church control and made it a civil matter. However, male soldiers did not want to be with women at the front. They believed that women were not strong enough to handle the stresses of war, that they brought bad luck and destroyed friendships.

Inequality returns after war: Towards the end of World War II, after the government's stress on the importance of women in domestic jobs, some women had to yield their jobs to returning men in the countryside, where men reclaimed their leadership positions on the collective farms. The percentage of women working as heavy machine operators dropped from 55 percent in 1943 to 5 percent in 1949.

However, women's participation in public institutions and activities continued. Women began to appear in fields that previously had been predominantly male. There were women officers, managers, physicians, farmers, engineers, economists, faculty members, journalists, writers, editors, and visual and performing artists by the late 1930s. But, as in the past, women had lower incomes than men and very few were promoted into the top ranks of their fields.

Obshchestvenitsa (women's volunteer movement): A voluntary movement called *Obshchestvenitsa* operated between 1934 and 1941, in which thousands of wives of military officers provided supplies to cafeterias, childcare centers, dormitories, and medical clinics in the factories and regiments to improve living conditions and bring culture. Some supervised cooks, put up curtains, taught hygiene, planted trees, organized day-care centers etc. Others organized into control brigades and inspected retail shops for cleanliness and good customer service.

After Stalin died, life improved for millions of Soviet women. The programs for providing better funding for social services and education continued. Many women began to appear in middle management position in government institutions and in other professions, and wages increased.

Zhensovet (women's soviets): During Khrushchev more women were appointed to government committees and regional soviets (*zhensovet*) to improve their communities. He authorized the establishment of a training program for female cosmonauts.

Second-wave feminism: Brezhnev believed that the outcomes of the double shift undesirable in that it not only limited women's productivity in their jobs but also caused them to have small families. Brezhnev believed that they needed to increase the productivity of labor and the growth of the population to keep up in the Cold War's arms race.

The second wave of feminism that revived in America in the 1960s advocated a more egalitarian style of life. In order Soviet accomplishments to show the world, Brezhnev encouraged journalists and scholars to publicize women's achievements. Women's presence in administrative and managerial positions increased. In the 1970s, there were thousands of doctors, judges, scientists, professors, architects etc. Female membership in the party was 26.5 percent in 1981.

Soviet Women's Committee: During Gorbachev, there was criticism of the double shift, and he also promised to improve social services, creating social science study groups to discuss women's problems. The *Soviet Women's Committee (Zhensovet)* represented Russia at *international* conferences and *meetings*. *Zhensovet* was brought under the leadership of the *Committee*.

Women in politics: During the last decades of the Soviet Union, only 16 percent of candidates elected to the Congress of People's Deputies were women. Gorbachev appointed one of the female party officials to the Politburo, and he also chose economic and sociologic female advisors. Women had been active in political life since the beginning of the Revolution of 1917, but women were most active in political life and women's organizations after the 1980s. However, they did not become a members of any political party. They were able to vote to support candidates, join strikes and demonstrations, give petitions etc. In 1991 they even showed resistance to the to the coup attempted in August 1991.

Discussion/Questions

1. Why was Muscovite women's life confined and their public life so limited? Why did the state exercise such strict control over them?
2. Why did the promotion of women in public life slow down during Stalin?
3. Women's rights were one of the most divisive issues, a source of conflict during WWII in the Soviet Union. Why did the Soviet government limit women's rights after the war?
4. Women appeared in all classes, both inside the family and in the workplace during the Soviet Union. But, why were Soviet leaders were against double shift? Did this policy contradict their stated support for gender equality?

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