

RUSSIAN 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 and 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 establish 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?

Readings

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