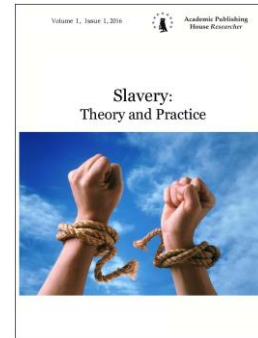


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Eastern European Slavery: An analysis of the Health and Productivity of Serf-Based Economy between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries

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Abstract

The Eastern European system of the slave trade during the medieval and pre-modern periods had complex remote routes where slaves were captured through raids from various areas including Asia and other parts of Europe. Special economic interest for a specific race for specific purposes and prices were on the rise. The system of players in the slave trade in Eastern Europe comprised of the people, usually men who captured or kidnapped slaves, slave traders who served as middlemen, and clientele who slaved were auctioned too. These clientele were often the upper-class of society who used slaves for personal, socioeconomic, and military reasons. Though the slave trade as a concept existed in Eastern Europe as a multifaceted phenomenon, there is a paucity of published English scientific works on the history of slavery between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The purpose of the study was to review the health, productivity, rights, and wages of slaves who were turned into serfs in Russia until 1723 under Peter the Great. Though popularly argued that Russian serfdom was introduced in this era, it has been noted by some scholars that it was never plainly institutionalised among households who owned slaves. I noted from the review of scholarly materials that though serfdom had serious economic implications, it was a mere change of name for household slaves in Russia. Slavery continued as owners regarded the law banning slavery and the sale of serf without land as an ordinary convention. This paper has implications for research on slavery.

Keywords: economy, Eastern Europe, slavery, slaves, serfs, Russia, sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

1. Introduction

The concept of "serfdom" is a form of captivity that was practiced in parts of the world whereby servants were only traded with the land he or she tills (Wirtschafter, 1998). It had been described by scholarly works as one of the prevailing forms of slavery between the Russian upper-class and peasants in the 17th century following the abolition of slavery by Emperor Peter I in 1723 (Bohac, 1985).

In legal theory, Russian nobility and state were the sole entities who were allowed to engage in the selling and buying of serfs with lands (Nafziger, 2012; Melton, 1987; Wirtschafter, 1998). However, serfs were sold by other rich serfs and commercial entities openly on the market as slaves

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in Russian provinces (see Figure 1) and places outside the Russian Empire like Persia and the Ottoman Empire (Stanziani, 2008).

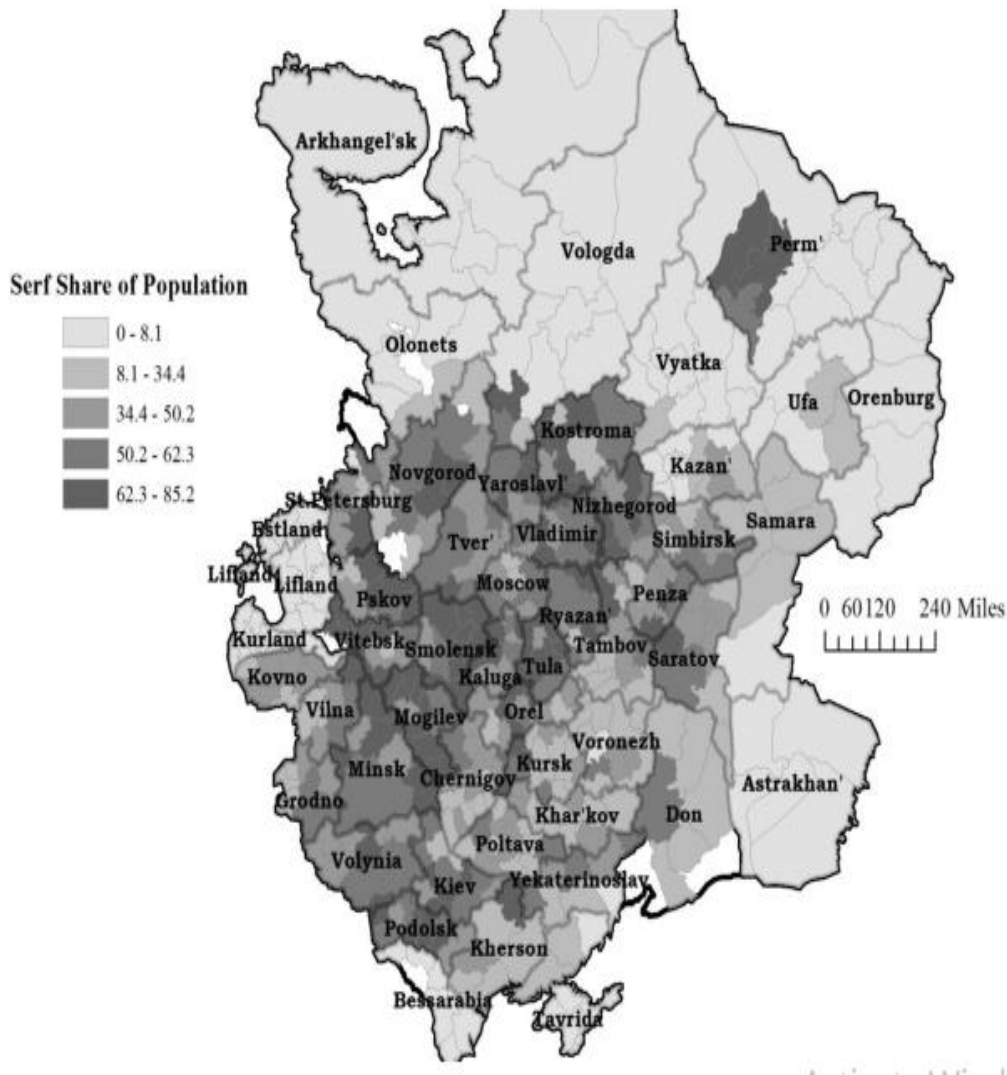


Fig. 1. Geographic Distribution of Serfdom by 1860
Source: Nafziger (2013).

With some socioeconomic interventions to reform the system of serfdom in Eastern Europe, Emperor Alexander I (r. 1801–1825) transform the laws regarding the practice. Consequently, serfs who were found in Estonia (1816) and those living in Courland (1817) were liberated and permitted all classes aside from the nobles of the society to own land. This land ownership excluded peasant serfs as they were still perceived as slaves in practice (McCaffray, 2005). As argued by Stanziani (2008), the concept of serfdom was problematic in practice in the state as it “*was never clearly introduced institutionally in Russia*” (p. 183).

This paper focuses on the subject of serfdom in the scope of Eastern European slavery, serfdom system, legal basis, productivity, and wages of slaves who were turned into serfs in Russia between the sixteen and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, the paper analyses the problems associated with serfdom where laws regarding the theory of serfdom as an institution conflicted with its practice as the landowners violated the fundamental principles of human and labour rights of the peasants.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. The materials used in this study were obtained from scholarly publications and monographs of researchers such as Wirtschafter, Stanziani, McCaffray, Bohac, and others.

Furthermore, official websites of several historical societies in Europe and the world were also explored for information regarding slavery between the sixteen and nineteenth centuries.

2.2. The study was conducted mainly using the systematic review approach for historical analysis. According to Molchanova (2019), this method comprises “a variety of general research methods such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, specialization, etc.” (p. 20). This approach is also being used by several recent scholars in the field of slavery (Finkel et al., 2017; Such et al., 2020).

3. Discussion

3.1. Serfdom in the Russian State

The European Feudalism of which Russia was part consisted of a hierarchy where the King is at the topmost level. The King is followed by the nobles, the knights, and lastly the peasants (Metz, 2018). Russian peasants were initially free until the Russian State declared them the properties of the nobility who owned estates in the 1649 Code of Law (Sobornoye Ulozhenie).

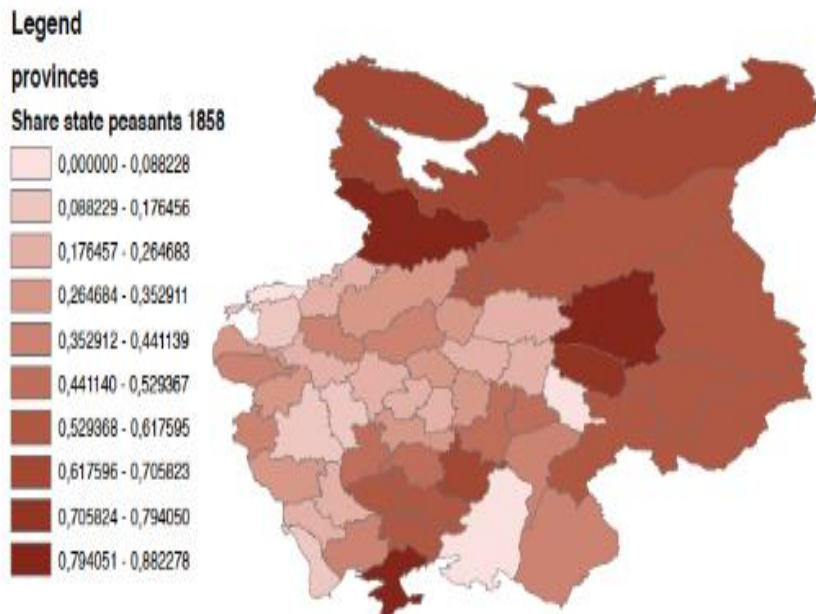


Fig. 2. Populations of state-owned serfs in the Russian State

Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

Consequently, the relocation of peasants out of their estates without the permission of their landowners was seen as a criminal offense according to the serfdom regulation. All relocated peasants before the law was passed were called back to their respective estates and were seen as assets of their landholders. Serfdom in the Russian state was a key institution that was predominant between 1649 and 1861 (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017).

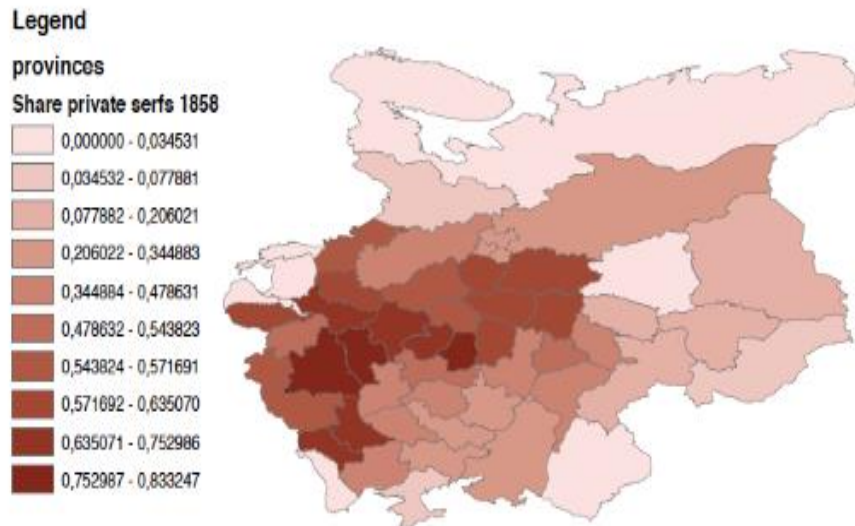


Fig. 3. Populations of privately-owned serfs in the Russian State
Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

Prior to the liberation of peasants, there existed in the Russian State, three different categories; free agricultural labourers, state peasants, and private serfs (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017) described the state peasants as free individuals without lands who reside and work state lands while private serfs were seen as assets of the nobles who owned the lands that these serfs occupied and worked on (see Figure 2 and 3 for the population of state and private serfs respectively).

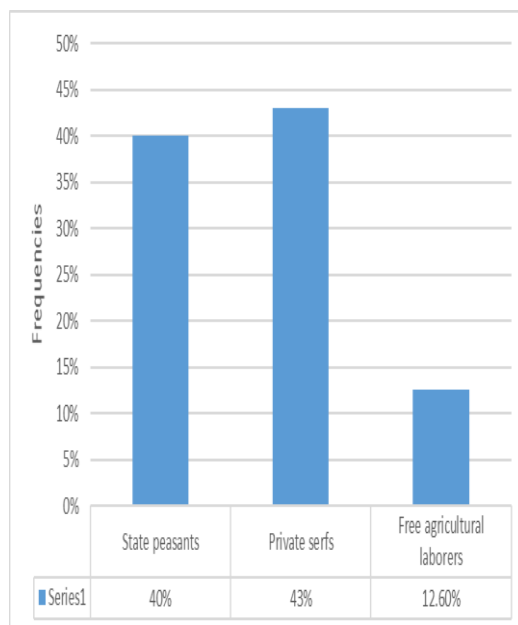


Fig. 4. Trends in proportion of peasants before the liberation in rural Russian State
Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

Intrinsically, the state laws allowed serfdom in the Russian State offered the owner the legal right to use their labour and transfer when the need arises. Nonetheless, the laws on serfdom forbade the sale of serfs without lands as that will appear as slavery (Massie, 2012; Millward, 1982).

On the other hand, free agricultural labourers were “Cossacks with community land ownership, peasants in the three Baltic provinces without lands, indigenous people living Bessarabiya and Astrakhan provinces who were non-Russians, and colonials who worked on fields belong to the state” in 1858 (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017, 5). Figure 4 shows the graph of proportions that each category occupied in the Russian State in 1858.

3.2. Serfdom in the Russian State

Serfs were owned by both the state and other private individuals. The prevalence of private serfs formed 43 % of the rural Russian population in 1858 according to Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017). Following the 1949 Code of Law, the criminalisation of the flight of serfs from their Russian landowners gave the nobles seemingly unrestricted power of possession over their serfs to the extent that some landowners could sell their serfs without lands in a form of transfer while taking custody of their families and properties (Massie, 2012; Millward, 1982).

Though the landowner could not kill the serf, their rights as mere workers had deteriorated from receiving menial payments for the responsibilities to ordinary slaves during the middle of the eighteenth century (Massie, 2012). According to Pipes (1974), though the number of serfs kept increasing in each province between 1777 and 1859, agricultural production continued to decline across the state because of the overexploitation of these peasants and their use of traditional methods of farming. Some serfs were made to work in Russian factories or even drafted into the Russian military (Metz, 2018). Nevertheless, their rights in the army or factories were least respected (Massie, 2012; Metz, 2018). Even though there is a general assertion that serfs had poor rights, state-owned peasants were seen to have better conditions than private-owned serfs (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017).

Furthermore, serfs had two different forms of work agreements depending on what their landlords perceive as lucrative. The *corvee* (*barschina*) form of contract forced the serf to work for specific periods as dictated by nobles in the estates or chosen field of the noble. The second form of contract is the quit rent (*obrok*) where peasants worked on their lands to pay their landlords specified amounts in-cash or in-kind (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017; Metz, 2018).

Because landowners had an undue advantage to revise these contracts whenever they wish to favour them, serfs who worked on farms of their landowners for specified periods (*corvee*) for payments were comparably less productive with poorer health status (especially malnourished). Peasant serfs who were at the liberty to work on their landlords’ farm and offer produced or cash out of their peasant-cultivated lands (*obrok*) as payments to their masters were seen to have better nutritional and socioeconomic outcomes than the *corvee* (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017).

Likewise, the negative health, human rights abuses, and poor socioeconomic status of serfs, especially among the privately-owned who were supposed to be paid by their landlords were latent push factors for the emancipation of serfs in Russia (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017; Massie, 2012; Metz, 2018).

3.2. Emancipation of Serfs in Russia

The emancipation of the serfs in Russia mainly hanged on the failure of Tsar Alexander II to win the Crimean War after signing the 1856 Treaty of Paris (Simkin, 2020). Following Russian’s loss of victory in the Crimean War, Alexander II and his advisers disputed the fact that Russia's economy built on serfdom is not sustainable looking at the industrialised might of France and Britain (Metz, 2018; Simkin, 2020). Furthermore, he noted that Russia archaic by using a serf-based military force compared to the sophisticated armies of the West (Metz, 2018).

In effect, he voted to end Russia’s serfdom-based economy while a group of Moscow nobles objected to his position. In a popular quote, Tsar Alexander II stated that “*it is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for the time when it will begin to abolish itself from below*” (Metz, 2018). Additionally, Alexander delivered his recommended seventeen legislative acts in a form of an Emancipation Manifesto to abolish the Russian serfdom system, which had deteriorated into a form of slavery.

In 1861, he implemented liberal reforms by offering opportunities for all peasants to be able to purchase lands from their landowners with support from the state through forty-nine annual installments called “redemption payments” (Metz, 2018; Simkin, 2020). The twenty-three million freed serfs were permitted to marry without the authorisation of their owners. Similarly, freed serfs

through his reforms obtained citizenship and land ownership rights (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017; Metz, 2018).

4. Results

Generally, the debate among historical scientists over the effects of serfdom on Russia's socio-economic and political growth seems unsettled (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). Moreover, most of the existing historical studies often centre their discussions exclusively on inconsistent subjective information.

Some scholars like Moon (1996) described the positive aspects of serfdom with attributes of flexibility and economic growth. To these scholars, the nobles were better at managing society and production than the serfs even after their emancipation. The nobles were seen at handling public challenges like famine better than the freed serfs. Furthermore, serfdom aided social order as the nobles or landowners were able to ensure that serfs follow societal regulations. Indeed, serf-owners benefited immensely from the institution of serfdom before the liberation of the Russian serfs in 1861 (Domarand, Machina, 1984).

Though the problems surrounding the Russian serf-economic system occurred during the period of keeping the serfs, it was worsened probably by the challenges that were seen within the emancipation. According to Metz (2018), most privately-owned serfs obtained no land apart from freedom from their landlords. More so, those who were able to acquire some plots of land got lesser sizes than they required to provide for their families and to pay for the redemption costs. Eventually, there was famine across many parts of Russia as freed serfs were forced to sell all the food they produced to pay back their redemption payments (Metz, 2018; Simkin, 2020).

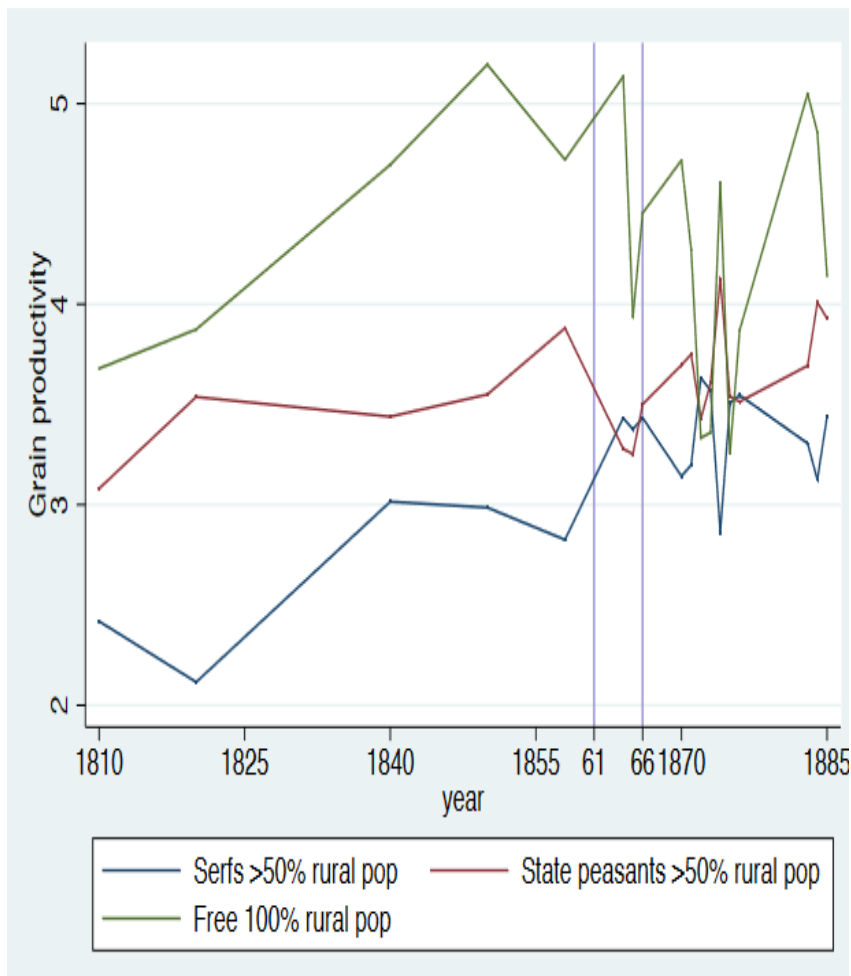


Fig. 5. Grain productivity among “free”, “state”, and “serf” provinces
Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

Nevertheless, some scholars (Cherepanov, 2018; Finkel et al., 2017; Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017) strongly opposed the idea that serfdom was productive. Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017) reported from their analysis that serfdom had a negative impact due to the highly exploitative interest of the nobles whenever they dealt with the peasants. These landowners cared about their interests and operated their trade by flouting some of the regulatory laws on serfdom.

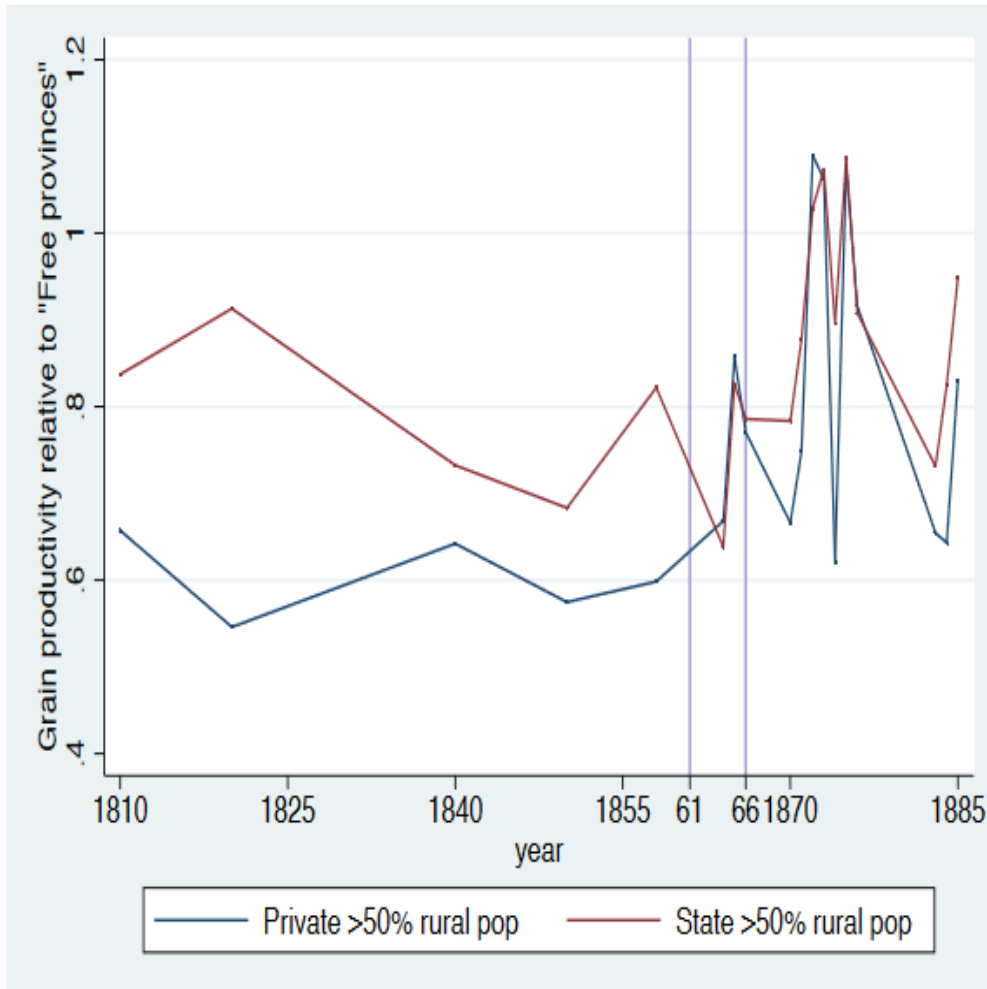


Fig. 6. Grain productivity among “free” provinces
Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

Again, Peters (2018) argued for the fact that serfdom served the political defence interest of the Russian State as they forced peasants to serve in the military as serfs to cut down costs between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries.

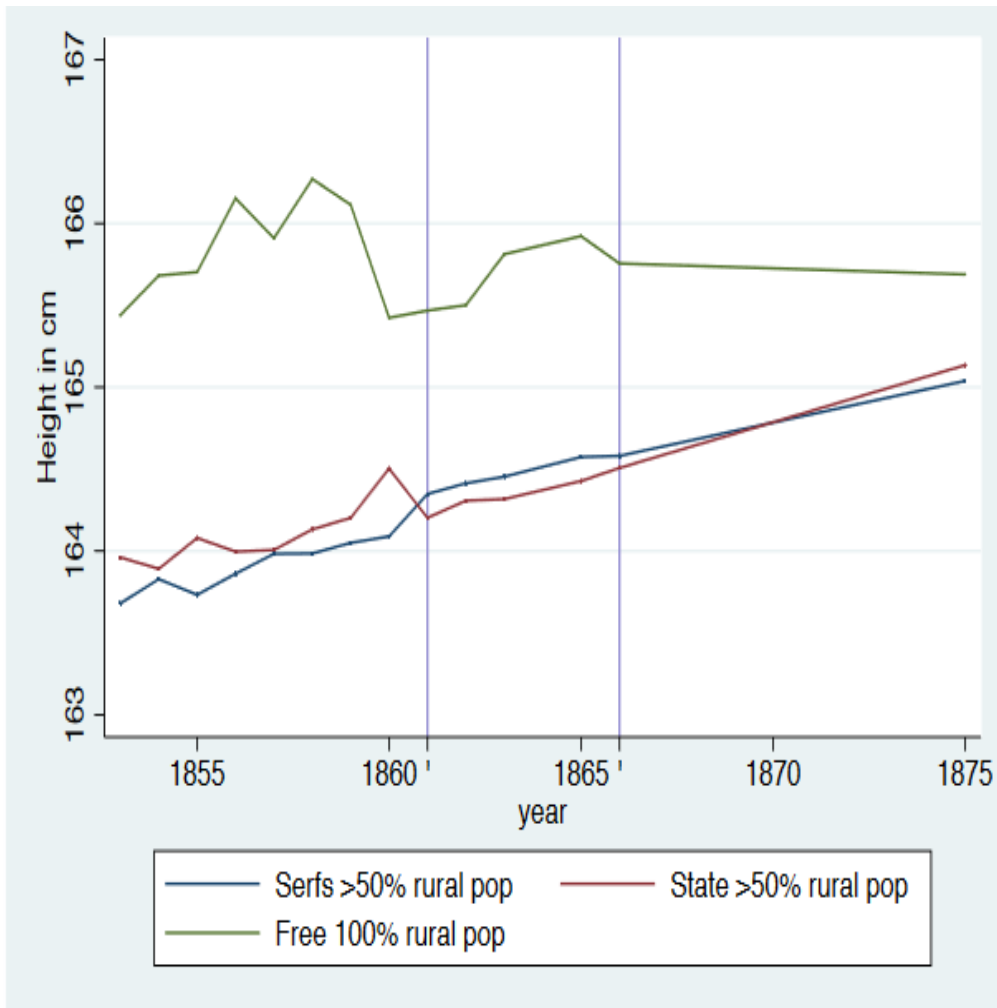


Fig. 7. Height of populations in “free”, “state”, and “serf” provinces
Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

For instance, Buggle and Nafziger (2017) in their locations with a greater percentage of serfdom after the emancipation still experienced the negative effects of serfdom when they analysed their data which was between 1800–2002. According to them, the decline in industrial development and urbanisation of these respective serf dominated areas was very significant among these negative effects.



Fig. 8. Height of populations in “free”, “state”, and “serf” provinces
Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

Likewise, the serf system could be seen as having a declining effect on the growth of agricultural productivity and unprofitable economically when the grain production of serfs are compared with the freed population (Figure 6). It is evident that a vast difference in the productivity of grain can be seen among the different categories of peasants.

Following the emancipation period, food production among both private and state-owned serfs gradually began to change. Clearly, after the emancipation of Russian serfs, Figure 6 shows an explicit nearness of grain production of both private and state freed serfs. Initially, the state-owned serfs were able to produce more than their private-owned counterparts (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017).

More so, these disparities in production might be because some of the privately-owned slaves were transferred to other landowners without land; a practice that was condemned by the law was acceptable by the nobles in practice (Parmele, 2018). To this end, the rights of these Russian serfs as humans were trampled upon by the self-seeking interests of the landowners.

Another important negative effect of serfdom on the Russian peasants is the decline in health status. Due to the ill-treatment and abuse against human rights, serfs in the Russian State exhibited malnourished body sizes and stunted growths (see Figure 7 for the differences in heights of populations in “free”, “state”, and “serf” provinces).

In comparison, state and privately-owned serfs were seen to have shorter heights and malnourished body sizes in Figure 8 as compared to the freed peasant population (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017; Metz, 2018). These health outcomes showed the deterioration of the socioeconomic statuses of these serfs and how Russian serfdom poorly affected the respect for human rights during the period. Arguably, one can confidently tell from Figure 8 that the freed serfs were seen to gradually catch up in the growth rate and height after the emancipation

(Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). This empirical evidence augments the fact that serfdom was not the best practice like all forms of slavery.

5. Conclusion

The study analysed scholarly materials and other available internet sources regarding the system of serfdom and how it affected the Russian State. The study shows that though the serf system served the selfish interest of the nobles in the Russian sovereignty after the declaration of the Code of Law in 1649, the negative impacts of serfdom are more than its benefits. Additionally, the upper-class within the Russian Feudal System flouted the laws surrounding the sale of peasants and changed contracts to suit their interests alone. This study has an implication for historical learning and research.

6. Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the scholars whose historical works were cited in this study.

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