

Book Project: “Serf Emancipation, Land Reform, and the Political Economy of Development in Tsarist Russia”

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Note: This short note summarizes the VERY preliminary argument and structure of my just-beginning book project. This was written without notes, without citations, and somewhat off the top of my head, so please treat it accordingly. In my talk, I will touch upon some but not all of the topics mentioned below.

The emancipation of the Russian serfs in 1861 is generally seen as *the* epochal event for late-Tsarist economic development. This idea has long been present in Russian historiography, in the work of Soviet writers (including Lenin), and was most famously emphasized by Alexander Gerschenkron. For the most part, this literature argues that, while ending serfdom dramatically changed the institutional structure of rural Russia, the changes wrought by emancipation and the accompanying “Great Reforms” (*Velikie reformy*) did relatively little in practice *and* quite possibly fostered a new set of rigidities that kept the peasantry and the economy poor into the 20th century. In the Gerschenkronian framework, the outcome was limited endogenous structural change that eventually forced the Imperial state to step in with policies to encourage industrialization: the Witte system (railroad subsidies, foreign capital, and protectionism) in the 1890s and the Solypin land reforms (that ended the constraints of the peasant commune) in the 1900s. Given that this was seen as too little too late (Lenin: “1861 beget 1905”), many writers have drawn a line between the failures of serf emancipation and the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

This book proposes a new interpretation of the impact of the emancipation reforms that draws upon what Gerschenkron and others have proposed, but then extends it in light of new evidence and insights from recent scholarship on the institutional political economy of development. In a nutshell, this book argues that emancipation and related reforms set in place a revised (but then evolving) structure of land endowments and factor relations that had specific negative *and* positive effects on subsequent economic development. This was true in terms of agricultural productivity, labor mobility, and financial development.

Perhaps even more critically, the post-1861 distribution of land and institutions of rural property rights interacted with a newly created system of local governance to generate considerable temporal and geographic variation in the provision of public goods and services. This system included institutions of peasant self-government, local representatives of central ministries, and, most importantly, a new quasi-representative form of governance at the district and provincial levels – the *zemstvo*. The *zemstvo* were granted substantial local fiscal authority and the room to undertake a variety of public services. The *zemstvo* assemblies were constructed to include representation from all rural groups based, critically, on the status their property ownership. Fundamental to the story, the structure of representation by social class varied across *zemstva*, and this was linked to the distribution of property generated by the emancipation land reforms.

Thus, differences in how emancipation occurred fostered heterogeneity in local political institutions, which led to variation in the amount and types of taxes collected and

public goods provided. This was reinforced by differences across European Russia in the composition and activities of other local government institutions, especially the peasant commune and township bodies. And at the end of the chain, the resulting variation in local schooling, roads, agronomic services, and healthcare impacted the broader patterns of economic development across European Russia.

However, fundamental limitations on these institutions of local governments and on economic conditions more generally, both of which can be linked back to emancipation reforms, circumscribed the scale of these development initiatives. By the 1890s and 1900s, the central government was forced to react to at least perceptions of distress in countryside by intervening more directly in the economy, both at the macro and the micro levels. However, the Tsarist state did this in ways that did not eliminate the underlying *local institutional* constraints fostered in the Great Reforms. For example, although particular strictures of the commune were eliminated by the Stolypin reforms, in practice this likely did little to spark rural economic growth. Furthermore, although the creation of the Duma built upon the electoral foundations of the *zemstvo*, it did not correct the underlying distribution of political power, and it did little, practically, to engage in local development initiatives until the last years of the regime. And so, while mostly speculative at this stage in the research, it appears that this tension between central government failures and local constraints quite possibly led to a greater likelihood for revolutionary outcomes.

Thus, the book does not seek to so much undermine the Gerschenkron framework as to reinterpret the history of the period in light of new data, new applications of economic and political theory, and a new emphasis on comparative perspectives. Contemporary writers and later Soviet and Western scholars were quantitatively inclined, but the data they drew upon to evaluate developments in the period were quite limited in terms of geography, time, and level of aggregation. At the same time, the analysis of the data that previous writers did employ was perhaps overly simplistic. Thus, a key contribution of this book is to bring extensive new empirical evidence to bear, and to do so in a robust way that employs modern statistical methods. The central component of this effort is based upon a newly collected district (*uezd*)-level panel dataset that covers serfdom, land ownership, local public goods and services, governance, tax collections, and a variety of economic outcomes from the 1850s into the 1910s. This rich source is then coupled with a new GIS map of the districts of European Russia, which allows for the inclusion of a large set of geographic variables into the analysis. To inform the empirical work, the book will rely on insights from new institutional economics and recent work in comparative and theoretical political economy (particularly in developing economies). Especially relevant are the literatures on property rights, on fiscal and policy decentralization, on state capacity, and on the connection between political structures and policy outcomes. These issues are all relevant for other European and non-European societies in this period, and so the book will place the features of rural Russian development into a broadly comparative perspective.

This book will serve as a one-volume modern economic history of rural Imperial Russia between 1861 and the Bolshevik Revolution. In this way, I will only briefly touch upon non-agricultural activities in the countryside, the transfer of resources and labor to cities, and the broader processes of industrial development. But through out the book – particularly in the concluding section – I envision a broader perspective that places

emancipation and the institutional trajectory of agrarian Russian in the context of the larger issues in Russian social, economic, and political development. That should enable a consideration of just how 1861 did or did not lead to 1905 (and 1917).

Possible Structure of the Book

1. Introduction: the economic development of rural Russia
2. Serfdom and its variation
3. Emancipation and redemption: setting factor endowments and peasant institutions in place
 - a. Specifics of the reforms that directly impacted rural Russia to 1900s
 - b. Documenting the evolution of property holdings through 1917
 - c. What were the new institutional structures created in the wake of emancipation?
4. The evolution of factor markets as a result of emancipation: labor, land, and capital (finance) up to 1890
 - a. Think of this as the direct economic impact of serf emancipation
5. The *Zemstvo*
 - a. The structure, especially as linked to property ownership as set by reforms
 - b. Taxes and public goods
 - c. Measuring its impact: 1864-1911 [i.e. the indirect economic impact of serf emancipation as filtered through
 - d. Comparative perspective: to other institutions of local government AND to developments in the rest of Europe and elsewhere
6. From decentralized to centralized development policies: growing central government intervention, 1890 to 1914
 - a. RRs, Industry / protectionism, Financial sector, Human capital
 - b. Overall fiscal capacity, especially relative to local institutions
 - c. Changes after 1890:
 - i. Famine → perceived failures
 - ii. Abolishment of the post-1861 rural regime: commune, collective responsibility, Stolypin
 - iii. Duma / Stolypin
 - iv. Education reforms
7. Did 1861 lead to 1917?