



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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IARO 2006-2007
Russia

Social Mobility in Imperial Russia: Petitions and Changing Estate before 1917

Topic of research

This project explores the process of changing social estate during the broad imperial period. By examining the documents produced by individuals seeking to change their social estate, and the decisions produced by local and central administrative bodies, the project examines not only the process of social mobility and the social structures that underlay it, but also the development of legal standards and controls over Russian society.

Relevance and contribution to field

This project seeks above all to deepen historians' understanding of how Russia's system of social estates worked on the ground. Every individual belonged to some sort of social estate (*soslovie* or *sostoianie*) in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and that membership defined individual rights and responsibilities. Taxes, recruit duties, and economic and social opportunities were generally based on estate membership, and thus the estate into which an individual was born had significant influence on individual life patterns. However, estate membership did not define every opportunity available; instead, individuals at various times lived beyond the "normal" bounds of their estates. And some sought to align their everyday lives and their estate membership by seeking to change their estate membership. In order to do this, they had to

petition a series of bodies, and receive permission from them all, a process that could be very simple, or very complex.

The process of change estate membership is barely recognized in the historical literature on social structures in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Thus, this project will fill a significant gap by beginning the process of examining the patterns of social mobility in this period. It will also contribute to our knowledge of legal structures—and of the development of a more centralized legal system—especially during the eighteenth century. During that century, legislation on individual estates frequently changed, creating significant uncertainty among local officials as to how best to follow the laws. Tracing out those laws, and their varying interpretation, will give us a better understanding of how the autocratic legal system developed.

Approach and research methodology

The project is primarily archival. I worked primarily in the archives of local estate or other administrative bodies. Because I quickly realized that there were far more individual records than I could order, and also that many archival *opisi* themselves contained significant information, I conducted archival research in two ways. First, I set up databases to record as much basic information on each individual petitioner. These databases should serve as the basis for quantitative assessment of patterns of change. Second, I chose individual files to read in more detail, in order to collect more qualitative data on reasons for petitioning, and reasons that petitions were accepted or denied.

In Moscow, I worked in two archives. At TSIAM (the Central Historical Archive of Moscow), I looked at estate and low-level legal records for the city and province of Moscow. At RGADA (the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts), I looked at files of provincial magistrates from the eighteenth century that had been collected in Moscow during the nineteenth century. In St. Petersburg, I worked at TsGIASPb (the Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg), again examining records from local estate and legal administrative bodies. I also worked at three provincial archives, examining similar records: GASO (the State Archive of Saratov Oblast), GATO (the State Archive of Tver' Oblast), and GARO (the State Archive of Riazan' Oblast).

In addition, I also carried out some research in libraries (the Russian State Library, the State Public Historical Library, and the National Library of Russia). I sought out memoirs and personal accounts of individuals who had changed their social estate, in order to collect more qualitative descriptions of the process.

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

My first major research finding is a simple one: there were very large numbers of Russians changing estates, far more than I expected when beginning this project. Hundreds or thousands of individual Russians might petition to enter a new estate in a given year (for example, in 1815, at least five hundred individuals petitioned to enter the Moscow *meshchanstvo* alone; in 1850, at least 363 individuals petitioned to enter the Tver' *meshchanstvo*). Many of these petitioners were heads of families, and thus these hundreds of individual petitions represented far more Russians shifting their estate identities. Families could be small, nuclear families, or large extended ones, with one senior member heading a family of multiple children and grandchildren.

Because the numbers involved are so large, my preliminary conclusions should be understood as very preliminary, and in some cases more impressionistic than not. However, even without

the in depth analysis these thousands of individual data points demand, several conclusions can be drawn.

First and foremost, estate membership maintained its importance in individual lives throughout the imperial period. Its importance shifted, and was never absolute, but estate membership mattered. Individuals petitioned to change their social estate from early in the eighteenth century through at least late 1917; the process involved changed dramatically during that time, but the action itself retained its importance in allowing individuals to live they way they desired. According to the few memoir accounts those who made such a shift, changing estate was generally a very pragmatic matter. Therefore, estate membership remained important because it continued to structure the economic and social opportunities available to individuals. Those who made changes did so because of either a desire for new opportunities (new trading rights, or in some cases new educational opportunities), or in order to avoid old duties (most notably, the duty to serve in the military).

Out of this comes a second conclusion: the institution of the semi-regular census by Peter the Great, and its links to taxation and recruitment duties, was the single biggest influence on the system of estates—and the single biggest source of stability, or stagnation, in the Russian social system. Over time, the laws governing changing estate came to hold one principle clear. Individuals who changed estates owed dues to both their estate of origin and their new estate until the next census. Because dues (taxes, recruits) were owed communally on lists drawn up irregularly, individuals could not decide as individuals to change their affiliation—their old estate organizations still owed duties on their behalf. The laws established a system whereby old organizations were not penalized for their members' desires to leave.

In general, this system made the process quite expensive. Old organizations might demand several years' tax duties in advance, or a significant monetary pledge to buy out of recruit duties. In some cases, estate organizations demanded additional payments, sometimes called "donations," to charities or to other communal funds. On the other hand, estate organizations could either start collecting duties from their new members immediately (also sometimes demanding several years' duties up front, or placed in escrow, essentially). Although at times organizations gave new members freedom from duties for some years after joining (*l'goty*), more often new members were burdened by double taxes, at least, for several years. Therefore, it served as a huge disincentive to change estate, or at least to take the decision to change estate lightly.

The census system influenced specific patterns of change. For one, it affected the timing of the decision to change estate. Obviously, immediately after a census was not a good time to change estate; an individual who sought a change then would be subject to double taxes for the longest possible time. Instead, the numbers of petitions rose as it seemed more and more likely that a new census would take place.

In addition, the census system affected who was more likely to petition to change estate. In the years before Emancipation, freed serfs far, far outnumbered their state or court peasant fellows among those seeking entrance into a town estate. Private serfs had only to convince (or pay off) their owners in order to receive freedom to choose a new estate (or "choose a new way of life," as many documents of the time put it). This was not necessarily an easy task. In some memoirs, former serfs describe owners who took significant convincing. But, still, many were freed, and many owners agreed to continue to pay their former serfs' dues in their emancipation papers. This meant that freed serfs were often without the financial constraints that might affect others.

State peasants, on the other hand, had to convince their entire communities (or rather, the local village administration) that the community's interests were served by letting petitioners go. This could be difficult. Many of those seeking to leave the peasant estate were well off, and losing sure sources of tax revenue was by no means in a community's best interests. Memoir sources suggest that bribes (perhaps in the form of vodka) played a role in gaining emancipation documents, but archival sources suggest that, at base, few managed to overcome this hurdle.

The census system was also reflected in the gender composition of those who petitioned to change estates. Women made up a large percentage of petitioners to enter town estates, particularly the *meshchanstvo*. At times, more than half the petitioners to enter the *meshchanstvo* in a given year were women, though women were far rarer among those seeking to enter the merchantry. Women did not owe taxes or, especially, recruit duties, and thus were far freer than their male counterparts, in some ways. That said, however, women did sometimes enter new estates as the heads of extended families that included males, and therefore were still bound by tax and recruit duties.

Although estate membership clearly held its importance throughout the period, the decision to change legal estate often happened long after individuals had changed elements of their everyday social life. For example, many of the peasants who sought entry into town estates had already lived in those towns, engaged in trade or craft, for significant lengths of time. Town estate organizations sometimes demanded proof of trade from petitioners, as well as proof of residence and other information. Therefore, petitions to change estate often simply legalized or regularized patterns of behavior of long standing. This also suggests that there may well be significant additional mobility at work in Russian towns, but mobility not measured by these petitions.

On the other hand, petitions also sometimes came from those with little interest in changing their lives. In some cases, individuals joined town estates but did not change their residence. This happened most prominently in the case of several villages with significant industrial output. Freed serf industrialists from the then village of Ivanovo, for example, sought membership in the merchantry of Moscow (or other towns), but continued to live and work in Ivanovo. Other freed serfs appeared to have applied to town estates, but continued to live in villages. These petitions show the strictures and limitations of the estate system. Everyone had to belong to an estate for bookkeeping purposes—so that taxes and recruit duties were given, or simply “for the count,” in the case of women—but sometimes there was no clear match between real life and estate options. Because Ivanova was a village, it had no merchant estate of its own (yet); therefore, its freed serfs had to find some legal position that would allow their businesses to prosper. Most probably entered the rolls of nearby towns, but some looked farther away, in some cases due to disputes with nearby merchants. In other cases, serfs were freed, but had no real desire to live in towns. Yet as freed serfs, they had no legal position in their old communities, which necessitated joining other estates. After Emancipation, some of these former serfs rejoined their old villages, as a flurry of petitions from *meshchane* requesting to exit that estate, and join peasant communities, suggests.

A final area that this project illuminates is the relationship between laws and social structure. The classic description of Russia's estate system is Kliuchevskii's. Kliuchevskii posited that a system of four major estates had crystallized by the end of the eighteenth century, and remained in place for much of the nineteenth. An examination of petitions both agrees with this picture, and complicates it. There is a clear shift between petitions from the eighteenth century and those of the nineteenth. The latter are far more formalized and regularized across the

country. By the middle of the century (and in some cases earlier) printed forms laid out all the documentation and information necessary to make changes. This regularization did not remove all sources of arbitrariness; individual cases of local authorities demanding excess money, or “donations” came before regulatory bodies, for example. But, still, in general the system became as straightforward as possible, with fairly consistent practices throughout Russia.

By contrast, during the eighteenth century, not only were the petitions themselves less standardized, individual provincial authorities might treat them in very different ways. In part this lack of order was caused by the legal system then in place. Different estates, and the process of moving between them, were governed by a whole series of separate, and sometimes contradictory, laws. Some individual towns (notably St. Petersburg) had their own laws, a distinction that not all town magistrates respected. In essence, each petition was judged according to whichever laws local authorities could pull together; although individual regions tended to decide things consistently (relatively), there was sometimes significant difference between regions, as local authorities picked and chose from among the many possibly relevant laws.

Suggestions for future research

My research only begins to examine the process of social mobility in Imperial Russia, and there are several areas in which further research could illuminate. First, examining how this process worked in the non-Russian parts of the Russian empire would not only add to our understanding of Russia’s estate system, but of its imperial practices, as well. In many cases the state simply tried to map Russian estates onto new lands, but not always. Did they also, then, map on the same system for changing estates?

Additional future research could examine exactly how this system was transformed—or remained the same—through the Civil War and into the Soviet period. Sheila Fitzpatrick has described the early Soviet practice of defining social class in essentially estate terms—of “ascribing class.” But if our understanding of what the estate system was changes, so might our understanding of how the early Soviet state utilized elements of that system in constructing their own idea of class.

Recommendations for the US policy community

It is a bit difficult to jump from eighteenth and nineteenth century history to contemporary policy. However, my research points to some historical tendencies that are still relevant to present day Russia. Most importantly, I think, is the disjuncture that appeared between legal social structures and actual everyday economic opportunity. In principle, everyone was restricted by social estate; by the end of the eighteenth century the Russian state had set up a system that did indeed seek to control or watch over everyone. However, even then, many individuals lived lives at some remove from that position. Peasants found what opportunities they could to trade, whatever their official standing, for example.

In other words, while legal structures *were* important in regards to the duties that individuals owed, and although in principle they also restricted the opportunities available to individuals, many Russians lived lives that blurred official estate lines. They did what it took to survive and even prosper, whatever the hardships of official identities, or of making the changes necessary to grow.