

155 YEARS OF ABOLITION OF SERFDOM IN RUSSIA

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Emperor Alexander II had no influence in state affairs before his accession to the throne, though he was already thirty seven years old. Less was known about him: he was raised by a famous poet Zhukovski, later Alexander Nikolayevich was traveling all over the European part of Russia, visited Siberia and Caucasus. He was known as a peace-minded person. He declared to the ambassadors of foreign states, who gathered to congratulate him with his coronation, that he would follow the principles of his father and uncle, i.e. the principles of Holy Alliance. However Alexander II understood, that public opinion demanded him to abandon the policy of oppression: there were a great number of pamphlets all over the Russia, containing demands to raise Russia to the European level through liberal reforms. Magazine «Kolokol», which was published in London by a political emigrant A.I. Gertsen in thousands of copies, leaked through the Russian border, telling about the administration abuses and found support even among the country elite. Alexander II himself was sure, that Russia would be able to take her worthy place among the European countries just after deep reformation, and this reformation would be matter of his emperor's prestige and personal fame. During his coronation in Moscow a great number of people were amnestied: Decembrists, supporters of Petrashevsky, members of the rebellion in Poland, Lithuania and Byelorussia in 1830-1831, revoked the decrees which restricted number of students, mitigated the severity of censorship. New people took places in ministries. But these first steps were only a prelude to forthcoming military, finance, administrative, political and social changes which would be known as Great Reforms of 60-70s of XIX century.

The most necessary reform was the destroying of social evil, which disgraced Russia before Europe and threatened its social and economic development – serfdom. Alexander II declared about the necessity of serfdom abolition to the nobility elite, who gathered in Moscow in March 1856: «...you know that the existing order of souls' possession can't remain unchangeable. It is better to cancel serfdom from above than to wait, when it starts to abolish itself from below. I ask you, gentleman, to think how to do this» (Cit. ex Oman E. Russia (1848-1870) // Laviss, Rambo. History of XVIII century. – Moscow. 1938. Vol.6. PP. 67-68). The words of the emperor have been taken without any enthusiasm, because the nobility had no practical suggestions. The government restarted the attempts in late 1857, when the nobility of Lithuanian provinces asked for a permission to reconsider the inventories which established relations between the nobility and the peasantry. The emperor thanked them for their initiative and authorized to create a committee for implementation of reforms. In the preparation of the reform special role played liberal politicians: brothers Milyutins, A.V. Golovnin, J.I. Rostovtsev, V.N.

Panin. At the same time the Minister of Internal Affairs count S.S. Lansky informed all members of the nobility of the intentions of Lithuanian nobility, noting that he would be glad to meet such an initiative from their side either.

The supporters and the staff of the emperor were numerous noblemen – Alexander's brother Grand Duke Constantine, emperor's aunt The Grand Duchess Elena, Y. Solovyov and other members of liberal social circles, both Slavophiles and Westerners – Y. Samarin, K. Kavelin and others. Press also joined the discussion and began to argue the arguments of those who supported serfdom – «planters». But Russian nobility had also no habit of opposition. It feared government, peasants; did not feel the right to possess serfs, which was granted for military service and no longer running being waved by an unpopular emperor Peter III in 1762. The most radical supporters of the reform became so called revolutionary democrats A. Gertsen, N. Ogaryov, N. Chernyshevsky, N. Dobrolyubov and others.

Meanwhile in the state rose more and more peasant rebellions, especially in western provinces which became part of Russian Empire not long ago. Trying to prevent such rebellions Russian government made efforts to alcoholize peasants, handing out vodka free of charge. In 1859 first in Byelorussia and Lithuania and then in other provinces peasants refused to drink and began to destroy drinking stalls, beat merchants and local officials. For several weeks in twelve provinces were destroyed more than 200 drinking stalls.

Besides, the government practiced the eviction of peasants from Western provinces to new lands in Siberia. Peasants stubbornly resisted, refusing to carry serfdom. Increased the number of beatings and killings of landowners and estate managers. Only in 1858-1860 in Russia took place almost 300 antiserfdom rebellions of peasants.

Under the influence of the growing peasant movement «planters» gave up. The nobility of Petersburg province was the first who asked for permission to create a committee to improve peasants' life. Other provinces came slowly after it. Interesting, that Moscow province decided to do it one of the very last.

Drafting committee in Saint Petersburg was to combine all the wishes and to edit the final project. The head of this committee was general Rostovtsev, but the soul of the reform became Nikolai Milyutin.

After the declaration of the beginning of the reform emigrant revolutionary A. Gertsen welcomed the Tsar-Liberator with an enthusiastic article in his magazine.

The creators of the reform tried to strike a balance between Westernizing and Slavophil tendencies. Slavophilism, however, prevailed, being represented by N. and D. Milyutins and Y. Samarin. Russian society must not be remake on the European model, on the contrary the creators wished to strengthen the communal ownership of land, which would cause a lot of troubles in first decades of the next century.

Russian peasantry of the pre-reform period was not heterogeneous.

For some categories of peasants the liberation from serfdom was relatively simple. State-owned and specific peasants were regarded as serfs. Actually their serfdom consisted mainly in the fact that they paid to the state or the royal family servages, though they were much less than those which paid other peasants to their private owners. For liberation of these peasants was enough to destroy servages and to acknowledge the ownership of the land occupied by them, and the right of free movement and labor. This was done by decree of 2 July (20 June) 1858 (the Decree "On granting all peasants in specific departments for personal property rights granted to others free rural estates") (Oman E. Ibid. PP.67-68).

Other category of peasants which it was easy to release was landless serfs, who served their masters and their estate. They were released, with a few transitional arrangements, with the stroke of a pen.

There was difficult situation with the liberation of real serfs attached to the land. On the issue of their personal freedom they were all unanimous. Landowners have agreed to give up custody of the peasants, but to give or not to give them land and on what terms - this was the main difficulty of the reform.

If release peasants without land this would ruin those nobles, who owned a small amount of land and lived off the servages paid by the peasants, whom they let go to work in the city. Meanwhile peasants of agricultural provinces wouldn't get real liberation without land. The peasants saw themselves as real owners of the land, and the seizure of their holdings would have caused a popular uprising. Providing land to the peasants would have meant the destruction of the nobility. Most of the nobles' committees wanted the land ownership recognized for the nobles, and peasants would be granted use of the land for the servages. Drafting committee which engaged the development of the reform, decided that the peasant communities would be freed from the power of the former owners; each peasant would receive full ownership of the estate; that the cultivated land would be divided between the landowners and peasants; that the peasant community of every village would collectively own the land allotment; that for this

allotment the landowner would receive compensation with the assistance of the state (if this proves necessary).

This decision met with sharp nobility opposition. Drafting Committee was accused of violating the sacred right of the inviolability of private property, but Committee dealt with this situation as follows: the most active representatives of the opposition of the nobility were removed from St. Petersburg with the help of the police. So, for example, in the estates, to the plants of Perm province, with the prohibition of entry into the capital was removed M.A. Bezobrazov because he provided through V.A. Dolgoruky chief of police at the end of 1859 a note attacking the work of editorial committees (Oman E. Ibid. P.71).

Some danger was and by the emperor. Alexander II initiated the reform, but at the last moment he hesitated and yielded over trifles reform opponents. Reform was prepared for the anniversary of his reign. The Drafting Committee had increased the number of day and night sessions, hastily edited project "Tatar", as wrote angrily I. Aksakov and manifesto appeared by 19 February 1861, although it was published only in March 17 (5) 1861.