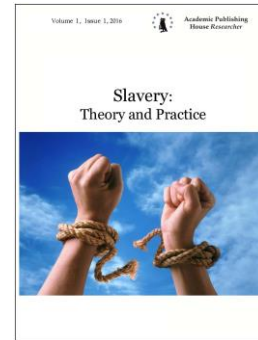


Copyright © 2020 by Academic Publishing House Researcher s.r.o.



Published in the Slovak Republic
 Slavery: Theory and Practice
 Has been issued since 2016.
 E-ISSN: 2500-3755
 2020, 5(1): 87-95

DOI: 10.13187/slave.2020.1.87
www.ejournal43.com



Serfdom in Eastern Europe between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: The Role of the Psychology of Slavery

Josephine Cudjoe ^{a, *}

^a KAD International, Ghana

Abstract

The psychology of slavery that existed in the regions of Eastern Europe has been described by historians to have a significant trend and impact on the nature of slavery, slaves, masters, and the general local population. Though there was a purported system of labour system called serfdom within Eastern Europe, the core psychological system that maintained its operation was purely slavery and an inhumane form of forced labour according to many historical scientists. The purpose of this paper is to critically review, develop, and describe the latent psychological system that drove serfdom until its fall in Russia. The study adopted multifaceted approaches to review existing empirical studies and internet sources. Notable among the findings is that the psychology of slavery drove the core system of serfdom in the Russian State. Furthermore, serfdom literally made peasants objects of slavery where they lost their freedom and rights to the rich landowners until 1723 under Peter the Great. Additionally, the laws regarding serfdom were not regarded in practise, though they existed on paper. Thus, the regulation of serfdom, especially the modalities surrounding the sale or transfer of serfs were left in the hands of the nobles and the state. Notwithstanding these illegalities, a wrong perceptual image was painted to the peasants to believe that serfdom was not equivalent to slavery. It can be concluded that serfdom had a dichotomous psychological frame to maintain it; the psychology of state and nobility and that of the peasants. The findings of this paper are useful for both research and historical pedagogy in Eastern Europe and beyond.

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

1. Introduction

The term "serf" in Eastern Europe is used to describe a group of people, mostly peasants, who served the nobles or the state following the abolition of slavery in the 17th century (Blum, 1957; Bohac, 1985; McCaffray, 2005). Serfdom according to historical scientists was another route used by the upper-class to enslave peasants after the closing down of slavery by Emperor Peter I in 1723 (Blum, 1957; Bohac, 1985). Though the traditional form of human enslavement during the period seems to have ceased, similar psychology of slavery ensued during the practice of serfdom (Metz, 2018).

Like serfdoms in other parts of Europe, the captivity of a Russian peasant was linked to a situation of a debt-bondage where he literally lives as a slave on the land of the noble (Blum, 1957). The complex social-psychological frame that supported serfdom in Eastern Europe differed a bit from the traditional slavery as it began by attaching serfs to the land they cultivated (Wirtschafter, 1998).

* Corresponding author
 E-mail addresses: cudjoej1@gmail.com (J. Cudjoe)

In the law passed to regulate serfdom in the Russian State, the state and the Russian upper-class were the only groups of entities who could trade in serfs (Wirtschafter, 1998). Furthermore, the state and the Russian upper-class were legally permitted to only sell or buy serfs with lands and had ownership rights over the serfs once purchased. Though the initial concept of serfdom appears to create a better approach to slavery, it offered the serfs with no human rights (Blum, 1957; Bohac, 1985; Metz, 2018). See Figure 1 for the geographical sharing of Serfdom by 1860.

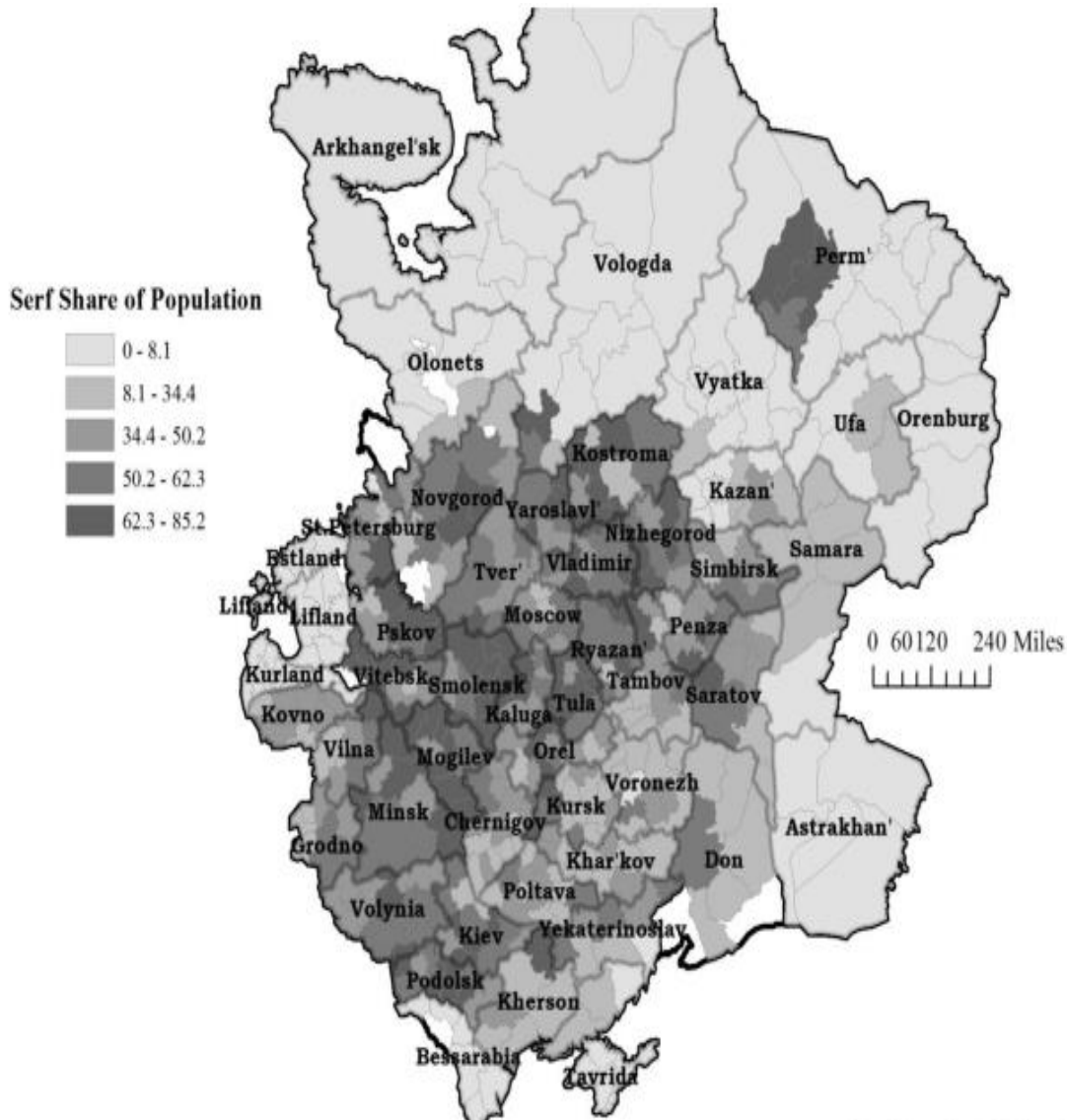


Fig. 1. Geographic Distribution of Serfdom by 1860
Source: Nafziger (2013).

Practically, serfs lived as slaves without the rights to leave their lords or even choose to marry with the permission of their landowners (Wirtschafter, 1998). These inhumane restrictions served to protect the existing system of slavery psychology that the nobles used to practice and this also allowed each of the upper-class in the serfdom system to function as slave masters while the serfs lived latently as slaves (Metz, 2018).

Evidence regarding the economic value of serfdom seems both conflicting and inconsistent among research scholars in the historical sciences. For example, Moon (1996) observed that serfdom was incorporated with some positive characteristics like flexibility and economic growth when compared to other forms of slavery practiced in the West. Also, the class system of serfdom which had emerged out of the Feudal System of the economy was seen as more balanced with the monarch and the nobles at the higher levels of management. According to these scholars, the upper

class managed the society and production affairs better than the peasants especially when it came to crises like famine.

Additionally, the supremacy of nobles at the top guaranteed the maintenance of law and order among the serfs to ensure social order. Nonetheless, many authors and evidence showed that the system of serfdom was just like any form of slavery until its collapse in 1861 (Domarand, Machina, 1984).

This paper examined the psychology of slavery within the frame of Russian serfdom in Eastern Europe. It also sought to describe the legal basis of the serfdom system and socioeconomic factors that existed with this system of bondage between the 16th and 19th centuries. In addition, the paper explored the psychosocial problems that were associated with the system of serfdom during and after its practice.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. The study's materials were acquired from several scholarly articles and monographs of researchers in the field of serfdom in Eastern Europe like Bohac, Blum, Metz, Wirtschaftfer, Stanziani, McCaffray, and others. Additionally, valuable materials were obtained from the official websites of historical societies in Europe and the world regarding slavery between the 16th and 19th centuries.

2.2. The study used the systematic review method for historical literature review was selected. This methodology has been used by Engerman (2000) to understudy the concept of slavery at diverse periods and places. Additionally, Molchanov (2019) described this methodology as "*a variety of general research methods such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, specialization, etc.*" (p. 20). This approach is suitable for the topic under study as it had been used by several recent scholars in the history of slavery such as Finkel et al. (2017) and Such et al. (2020).

3. Discussion

3.2. History of Russian Serfdom

Russian serfdom as a social institution started as the answer to available land but limited labour force (Such et al., 2020). The peasants also received security or protection from the Tsars and nobles of the state who owned lands. Essentially, serfdom though seen by few studies as lucrative till the emancipation of serfs (Domar, Machina, 1984), it imposed several limitations on peasants' human rights especially in freedom of movement, economic empowerment, and social decision-making (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017; McCaffray, 2005). These human rights abuse and slavery practices during the serfdom era were able to occur because serfdom though was founded on the Code of Law, "was never clearly introduced institutionally in Russia" (Stanziani, 2008, 183).

Until the emancipation of serfs, there were three different classifications of peasants in the Russian State. These groupings include free agricultural labourers, state peasants, and private serfs (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). While the state peasants lived and worked on state owned-lands as free persons without lands, private serfs were owned by the upper class or nobles who owned the lands that these peasants lived and cultivated (see Figure 2 and 3 for the groupings of the state and private serfs respectively).

According to Nafziger (2013), though serfdom has been described as different from the system of slavery in the West, they share many similarities as a system of forced labour control between the 16th and 19th centuries. As of 1858, private serfs in rural Russia formed 43 % of the total population of residents (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). Notwithstanding the increasing populations of peasants, the 1949 Code of Law that regulated the practice of serfdom gave the nobles limitless advantages and power over their peasants (Massie, 2012; Millward, 1982).

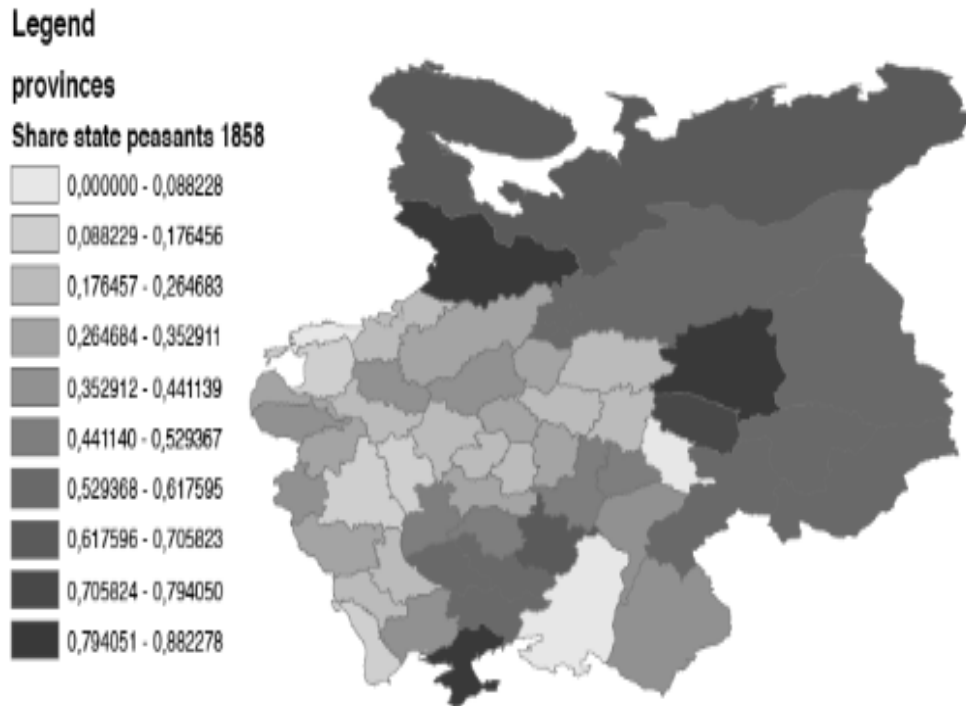


Fig. 2. Populations of state-owned serfs in the Russian State
Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

Aside from the forced system of labour, serfs had two methods of work contracts subject to what is profitable to their landlords. The first type of contract is called *corvee* (*barschina*) where the peasants work for particular times as prescribed by nobles in their estates or land. Also, the second type of contract is called the quit rent (*obrok*) where serfs cultivated the lands they occupy to pay their landowners an agreed amount of money or food products (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017; Metz, 2018). See Figure 4 for their geographic distribution.

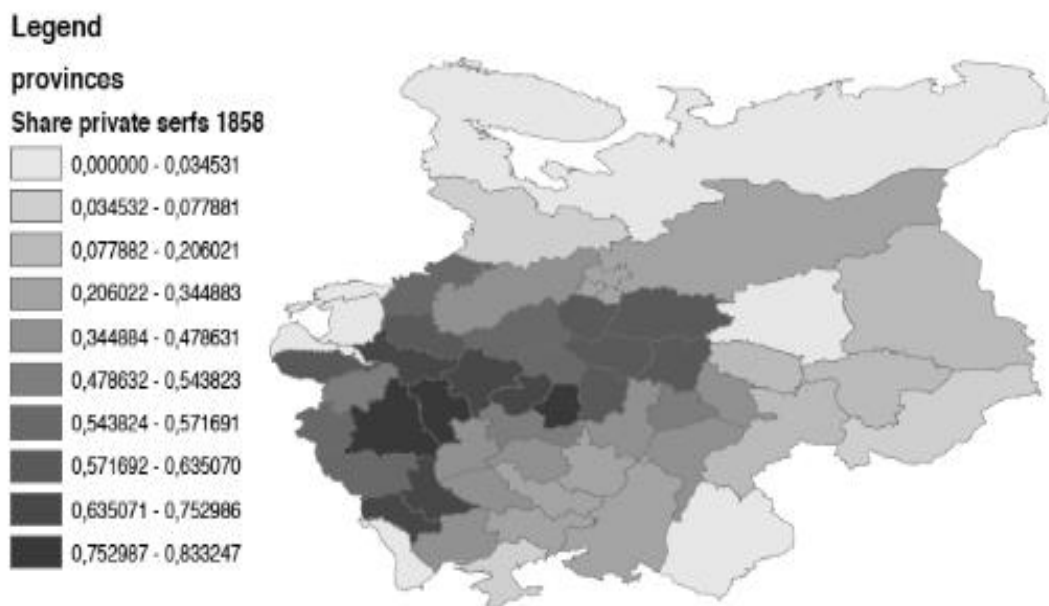


Fig. 3. Populations of privately-owned serfs in the Russian State
Source: Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017)

Among all the categories of serfs, the state-owned had better standards of living and health conditions than private-owned serfs (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). In contrast, there existed a group of free agricultural labourers who were the “Cossacks with community land ownership, peasants in the three Baltic provinces without lands, indigenous people living in Bessarabiya and Astrakhan provinces who were non-Russians, and colonials who worked on fields belong to the state” in 1858 (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017: 5). Due to this unfair system of labour terms that allowed the landowners to review contracts on every occasion, peasants who operated under the Corvee contract were seen as less productive and malnourished compared to those with Obrok contracts (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). See the geographic distribution of the Obrok.

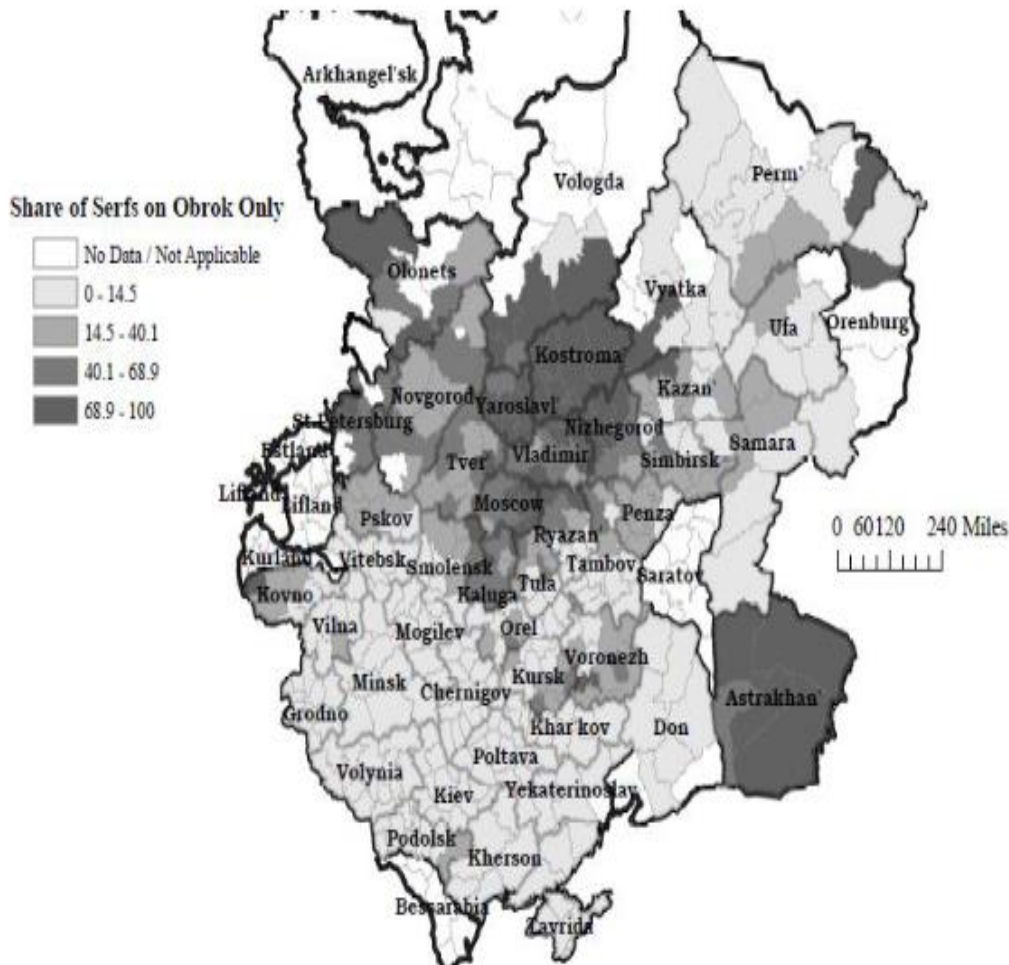


Fig. 4. The Geographic distribution of Serf Obligations in 1858 (peasants only on Obrok)
Source: Nafziger (2013).

Although the landowners were not legally allowed to kill serfs, their status as slaves and possessions of their masters did not change up until the emancipation (Massie, 2012). With time, serfs even had the opportunity to be recruited into Russian factories or the Russian military as their population increased (Metz, 2018). On the other hand, serfs who were employed even in these sectors had no respect because they were still seen as slaves (Massie, 2012; Metz, 2018; Pipes, 1974). The common assertion among several historical scientists like Finkel et al. (2017), Markevich and Zhuravskayaa (2017), Metz (2018), and Pipes (1974) is that serfdom was destructive.

Between 1777 and 1859, there was a marked increase in the population of serfs in the Russian state. Nonetheless, Pipes (1974) indicated that this growing number of serfs in each province as shown in Figure 5 did not promote agricultural production across the Russian state. Even with the enlistment of serfs into the then Russian army, it was noted that serfs were only recruited to reduce

2018). Naturally, the free Russian peasants were psychologically not “freed” due to the nature of the existing class system. Thus, it was not surprising that the peasants were in the Russian State were declared as serfs or properties of the state and upper-class who owned estates in the 1649 Code of Law (Sobornoye Ulozhenie).

Serfdom as an agrarian reform was seen as a legal practice under the Feudal land ownership system (Wirtschafter, 1998). The state and the nobles were seen as the superiors by owning estates. This advantage allowed them to dictate the sequence of livelihood for the peasants who depended on their lands for survival. Essentially, the Russian peasants became poorer and dependent during the Feudal period and much more during the serfdom era as poverty has been seen as a driver for slavery even in modern times (Adesina, 2014).

The second key psychosocial factor that promoted Serfdom in the Russian State was the social acceptance of the abuse of peasants’ human rights in many provinces in the Russian State as shown in Figure 5 (Wirtschafter, 1998). Peasants who were seen as serfs were psychologically perceived as commodities instead of human beings. Thus, their value initially lied in the lands they were attached to until they were even sold without lands (Nafziger, 2012; Melton, 1987). For example, it was acceptable then to see serfs and their children being sold in open markets within and outside the Russian Empire as far as the Ottoman Empire and Persia even without lands (Stanziani, 2008). This was illegal but socially acceptable to keep the agrarian economy running (Nafziger, 2012; Wirtschafter, 1998).

4. Results

4.2. The Psychology of Slavery During the Practice of Serfdom in Russia

The psychology of slavery in Eastern Europe between the 16th and 19th centuries seems to be one of the latent drivers of serfdom between 1649 and 1861 (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). Though a law had been enacted to govern the practice of serfdom in the Russian state, the perceptions regarding the nobles as lords while the peasants appeared as slaves maintained the social order instead (Millward, 1982). To a greater extent, only the parts of the law that favoured the upper class were upheld. For instance, the state laws permitted only the state and nobles the legal right to use the labour of their serfs and transfer them with the lands they live and farm on. Also, it was illegal for serfs to flee from their owners or their lands. Even so, some peasants were sold without lands in open markets by the nobles (Massie, 2012; Millward, 1982).

It is obvious that the peasants during the period of serfdom had a disoriented self-view of being slaves. This allowed them to be exploited as slaves even during the weak economic state of Tsarist Russia. As stated by Ensign (2019), certain life events through a distinctive kind of learning called “transformative learning” make people revise their mental framework to accept the uncertainties to make life meaningful. Thus, a critical look at serfdom clearly shows evidence of a stronger psychological system with a rather weak trade law that was never fully enforced by the state. Also, serfdom depicted a disorganised system of communal land tenure, and a weakening political system (Nafziger, 2013).

Furthermore, it took quite a lot of external influence for the emancipation of the serfs in Russia to occur. Intrinsically, a person with an accepted disoriented self-view as a slave will need much external push to begin a fight for freedom. Stronger external push like the formal acceptance of the 1856 Treaty of Paris by Tsar Alexander II after the Russian state lost the Crimean War (Simkin, 2020) and the political weakness of Alexander II’s governance following the war pushed for the emancipation of serfs (Metz, 2018; Simkin, 2020).

4.2. The Psychology of Slavery After the Emancipation of Serfs in Russia

In 1861, Alexander II proposed some liberal reforms to help end serfdom (Metz, 2018). These privileges for serfs received serious opposition from the nobles who were the owners of the estates at the period (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017). One major reform was to allow serfs to purchase lands from their lords under a system of payment termed as “Redemption Payments” (Metz, 2018). Through the state, the freed peasants were mandated to make forty-nine annual pay instalments for their acquired lands (Metz, 2018; Simkin, 2020). Though this policy appears good, to perpetuate the psychology of slavery and class-system offered most Russian peasants a complicated and expensive process to acquire land titles (Nafziger, 2013).

The need to keep the peasants below the socioeconomic class of the nobles might have accounted for Redemption Payments (Simkin, 2020). As compared to the state-owned serfs who

had been freed, most privately-owned serfs acquired no land title from their landowners after the emancipation. This might have been as a result of the slave trade of selling peasants without lands by most of the private owners. Additionally, freed privately-owned serfs who were able to obtain some land titles during the Redemption got smaller land sizes to accommodate and feed their families. These peasants were not able to produce enough to pay for the redemption costs (Metz, 2018; Simkin, 2020).

The process of redemption had little legal commitment from the nobles who continued to see the freed peasants as their slaves. Thus, the emancipation negatively influenced the distribution of productive dynamics in most of the rural populations. This period of economic hardship for the peasants was worsened by famine across as most peasants forced sold all their produce to pay for their redemption (Metz, 2018; Simkin, 2020). In modern times, the psychosocial deficits inherited from serfdom still lives on even after emancipation. Buggle and Nafziger (2017) in their study of developmental data between 1800 and 2002 noted that geographical locations that accommodated higher percentages of serfdom after the emancipation had lesser industrial development and urbanisation compared to areas with lesser serf tenancy.

5. Conclusion

The study reviewed scholarly materials and several relevant internet sources on the system of serfdom, its socio-economic impact, and the existing psychology of slavery influenced the Russian State between the 16th and 19th centuries. The results of the study indicate that the serf system could not have survived its era without stronger psychology of slavery. Though serfdom only benefited the monarch and upper class following the passage of the 1649 Code of Law, the peasants continued to live in deplorable states even after their emancipation. Thus, the modality for freedom and ownership of lands by the 'freed serfs' even worsened their overall quality of life. Though the argument among scholars about the effects of serfdom on Russia's national development appears inconclusive, the role of the psychology of slavery is undisputable (Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017; Simkin, 2020). Additionally, illegal gains by the nobles, especially in the sale of privately-owned slaves without lands might have also affected the poor productivity during the serfdom period (Parmele, 2018). Based on these suggestions, this current study has an implication for future research on the subject of slavery and historical pedagogy.

6. Acknowledgements

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

References

- Adesina, 2014 — Adesina, O.S. (2014). Modern day slavery: poverty and child trafficking in Nigeria. *African Identities*. 12(2): 165-179.
- Blum, 1957 — Blum, J. (1957). The rise of serfdom in Eastern Europe. *The American Historical Review*. 62(4): 807-836.
- Bohac, 1985 — Bohac, R.D. (1985). Peasant inheritance strategies in Russia. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. 16(1): 23-42.
- Buggle, Nafziger, 2017 — Buggle, J.C., Nafziger, S. (2017). The slow road from serfdom: labor coercion and long-run development in the former Russian Empire. *Review of Economics and Statistics*. 1-46.
- Cherepanov, 2018 — Cherepanov, V. (2018). Is it Possible to Abolish the Serf Suffrage in Russia? *Studia Politologiczne*. 48: 186-195.
- Domar, Machina, 1984 — Domar, E.D., Machina, M.J. (1984). On the profitability of Russian serfdom. *The Journal of Economic History*. 44(4): 919-955.
- Engerman, 2000 — Engerman, S.L. (2000). Slavery at different times and places. *The American Historical Review*. 105(2): 480-484.
- Ensign, 2019 — Ensign, T.G. (2019). The seed of transformation: a disorientation index. Theses and Dissertations. Pepperdine University, California, United States of America. 1056. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/etd/1056>
- Finkel et al., 2017 — Finkel et al. (2017). (Good) Land and freedom (for former serfs): Determinants of peasant unrest in European Russia, March–October 1917. *Slavic Review*. 76(3): 710-721.

- [Markevich, Zhuravskayaa, 2017](#) — *Markevich, A., Zhuravskayaa, E.* (2017). Economic effects of coerced labor: Evidence from the emancipation of serfs in Russia. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.hhs.se/contentassets/209c2f9a34b4435e8976a074dc2e275b/markevich.pdf>
- [Massie, 2012](#) — *Massie, R.K.* (2012). *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a woman*. New York: Random House Incorporated.
- [McCaffray, 2005](#) — *McCaffray, S.P.* (2005). Confronting serfdom in the age of revolution: Projects for serf reform in the time of Alexander I. *Russian Review*. 64(1): 1-21.
- [McCaffray, 2005](#) — *McCaffray, S.P.* (2005). Confronting serfdom in the age of revolution: Projects for serf reform in the time of Alexander I. *Russian Review*. 64(1): 1-21.
- [Melton, 1987](#) — *Melton, E.* (1987). Proto-industrialization, serf agriculture and agrarian social structure: Two estates in nineteenth-century Russia. *Past & Present*. 115: 69-106.
- [Metz, 2018](#) — *Metz, K.* (2018). Serfdom in Russia: What is feudalism? Center for Slavic and East European Studies. Ohio State University, Ohio. [Electronic resource]. URL: https://kb.osu.edu/bitstream/handle/1811/85512/1/CSEES_MetzK_Serfdom2018_slides.pdf
- [Millward, 1982](#) — *Millward, R.* (1982). An economic analysis of the organization of serfdom in Eastern Europe. *Journal of Economic History*. 42(3): 513-548.
- [Molchanova, 2019](#) — *Molchanova, V.S.* (2019). Modern slavery in India: The essence, forms, distribution. *Slavery: Theory and Practice*. 4(1): 20-28.
- [Moon, 1996](#) — *Moon, D.* (1996). Reassessing Russian serfdom. *European History Quarterly*. 26: 483-526.
- [Nafziger, 2012](#) — *Nafziger, S.* (2012). Serfdom, emancipation, and off-farm labour mobility in Tsarist Russia. *Economic History of Developing Regions*. 27(1): 1-37.
- [Nafziger, 2013](#) — *Nafziger, S.* (2013). Russian serfdom, emancipation, and land inequality: New evidence. Economics Department. Williams College. [Electronic resource]. URL: https://web.williams.edu/Economics/wp/SerfdomEmancipationInequality_Long_May2013_2.pdf
- [Parmele, 2018](#) — *Parmele, M.P.* (2018). Liberalism-emancipation of serfs. *Russia, China and Eurasia*. 34(1): 109-112.
- [Peters, 2018](#) — *Peters, M.* (2018). Government Finance and Imposition of Serfdom After the Black Death. Available at SSRN 3320807. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3320807>
- [Pipes, 1974](#) — *Pipes, P.* (1974). *Russia under the old regime*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- [Simkin, 2020](#) — *Simkin, J.* (2020). Tsar Alexander II. Spartacus-educational.com. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://spartacus-educational.com/RUSalexander2.htm>
- [Stanziani, 2008](#) — *Stanziani, A.* (2008). Serfs, slaves, or wage earners? The legal status of labour in Russia from a comparative perspective, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. *Journal of Global History*. 3(2): 183-202.
- [Such et al., 2020](#) — *Such et al.* (2020). Modern slavery and public health: A rapid evidence assessment and an emergent public health approach. *Public health*. 180: 168-79.
- [Vernadsky, 1939](#) — *Vernadsky, G.* (1939). Feudalism in Russia. *Speculum*. 14(3): 300-323.
- [Wirtschafter, 1998](#) — *Wirtschafter, E.K.* (1998). Legal identity and the possession of serfs in Imperial Russia. *The Journal of Modern History*. 70(3): 561-87.