The Peasantry

In the situation of the peasants, and especially of the Russian peasants, the paradox of this overbearing yet vulnerable empire was made manifest. The peasants were its mainstay: they provided its food, its troops and most of its taxes. It was to supply the service nobility with the means of existence, to furnish recruits for the army and to ensure the payment of taxes that peasants were attached to the soil and bound to each other by 'mutual responsibility'. As Prince Menshikov said in a report of 1727, 'The army is so necessary that without it the state cannot stand, and for its sake we must take care of the peasants; for the soldier is bound to the peasant, like the soul to the body, and if there is no peasant, then there will be no soldier.'

For all that, the authorities were not generous in their 'care of the peasant'. For the most part peasants had to look after themselves as well as prop up the state. The self-governing communities in which they lived had their origin in Kiev Rus', and the term mir was used to describe them in Russkaiia pravda, its first law code. The custom of 'mutual responsibility' provided that the community as a whole was responsible for the discharge of dues and taxes: if one household fell short on its contribution, the others were expected to make up the difference. That usage was strengthened under Mongol overlordship, and became universal during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, when the Grand Princes were transferring previously 'black' lands – owned by the state or by nobody – to service nobles, and was juridically fixed in the Law Code (Ulozbenic) of 1649, as a convenient way for landlords and the state to ensure that dues were paid promptly and in full.

The agrarian order based on serfdom and the village commune was developing during the sixteenth century and was in place in its essentials by the mid-seventeenth century. Most of its features proved extremely durable and survived even the abolition of serfdom in 1861. The forests of the north and the open steppes of the south and east made flight relatively easy for the peasants, so that elaborate state regulation was needed to ensure that they would stay in one place, cultivate the soil and render their dues. In 1580 the practice of allowing a household to quit and move on elsewhere around St George's Day (in late November, when the annual agricultural cycle reached its natural close) was suspended and finally abolished in 1603. Land cadasters taken in 1581 and 1592 established where a peasant's legal residence was, and could be used for reclaiming and returning him if he moved on illegally. At first a statute of limitations operated, so that after a period of years, which varied, a fugitive became a free man. However, the Law Code of 1649 removed even this last fragile immunity: thereafter a peasant was fixed for life to a certain plot of land, and so were his descendants. In practice, too, if a private rather than a 'black' or state peasant, he was bound to the person of the landlord, who had full police and judicial powers over him, as well as answering for his payment of taxes and other dues. Since most of the Tsars readily used grants of land to reward favourites or servitors who had distinguished themselves, this personal bondage became the lot of an increasing number of peasants. By 1812 serfs constituted 58% of the total male population of Russia, though it fell back thereafter, reaching 45% by 1858, on the eve of emancipation.

The greatest concentration of private serfs was in the heartlands of the old Muscovite principality, and to the west and south of it, areas where conquest had brought the Tsars land they could award to favoured servitors. By contrast, in the north and east private serfdom was much less common, and in Siberia it was unknown. Serfs paid their dues in two alternative forms, as we have seen: harschchina or obrok. The former was commoner in the southern black-earth and steppe regions, for here the fertility of the soil made arable cultivation or specialist agriculture, such as wine-growing, profitable, with the result that working hands were at a premium, especially when some lords began during the nineteenth century to introduce improved scientific farming methods. In the area around Moscow, on the other
hand, and to the north and east of it, the soil was much poorer. Peasants there could often not rely wholly on agricultural income, but would practise some form of cottage industry or go off with permission of the lord, to work in factories, mines or river transport, handing over part of their income to the lord.

A visiting Englishman, William Richardson, wrote in 1784 that 'the peasants in Russia . . . are in a state of abject slavery, and are reckoned the property of the nobles to whom they belong, as much as their horses or dogs'. Indeed, by the mid-eighteenth century it was normal for serfs to be sold at market, sometimes separately from their families, for all the world like slaves, and the unpunished cruelty with which the lords sometimes treated them was reminiscent of Caribbean plantations at their worst.

All the same, the comparison is not completely apt, and the differences between serfdom and slavery remained crucial. Serfs were liable to taxation and military service: not benefits, to be sure, but not characteristic of slavery either. Above all, the serfs were profoundly convinced that, whatever landlord or government might do, the land belonged to them. If it ever came to a frank exchange of views on this subject, the standard peasant refrain was 'We are yours, but the land is ours' – or alternatively 'the land is God's'. Historically, of course, they were right: they had been there first. Even from the classical liberal point of view they had a strong case, having fulfilled in relation to the land Locke's essential condition for a property-owner: 'Whatsoever he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.' As an embodiment of this basic conviction, the peasants had their own self-governing institutions, and ran their own economy: as we have seen, most landowners were not anxious to concern themselves directly with agricultural management, and were content to leave the matter to a steward who would usually try to reach a modus vivendi with the village commune and its elder.

The fact was that, historically speaking, the landlord was a newcomer, and it was most convenient for him to accommodate himself to the existing agrarian practices of the peasants. This he would usually do, unless he had strong ideas about agrarian improvement, and the determination to put them into practice. Besides, in spite

of the obvious clashes of interest between lord and peasants, they had one overwhelming interest in common: the stability and prosperity of the village's life. Poverty and instability endangered the landlord, and ultimately the state, almost as much as they did the peasants.

Usually, then, it was possible for manor and village community to reach a working agreement about how to conduct affairs, and how to discharge dues. It was important to both sides that each household could grow enough produce or in other ways raise enough income to feed itself and to discharge its share of the community's obligations. This basic imperative underlay the complex network of customs and norms which evolved in the village, naturally with variants from region to region.

To ensure survival in a harsh climate and on infertile soils, the overall strategy of the peasant community was to minimize risk by spreading it as widely as possible. This was the rationale of the strip system of land tenure, together with the three-field system of crop rotation, which was very widely practised. They ensured that each household had a share in land of different types, near and far away, dry and marshy, fertile and less fertile, and access to different kinds of cultivation. 'Mutual responsibility' had the same function: it not only suited the landlord, but also ensured minimal subsistence for each household, even in times of difficulty. In fact, the habit of 'mutual responsibility' spread to all aspects of peasant life, colouring their outlook on law, property and authority: it rendered more or less imperative the practice of equality, mutual aid and the taking of decisions in common, which became the distinctive characteristics of peasant political and economic life.

These principles were embodied in the village assembly, the skhod, as it was usually known. It consisted of all heads of households, customarily the oldest male in each – though it might be a younger man if the oldest was infirm. Very seldom was the head of household a woman. The assembly was responsible for apportioning the burden of taxes and dues, regulating land tenure and managing common land (pasture, woods etc), deciding the crop rotation, maintaining communal facilities (roads, bridges, church buildings, stores and so on) and supervising law and order. For the day-to-day discharge of these duties the skhod would elect from among its own members an
was the amount of labour power at the disposal of each household, measured in a unit known as the tiaglo, which was usually reckoned to be that of an able-bodied married couple between the ages of eighteen and sixty. In some places, however, a consumption norm was applied, based on the number of 'eaters' (edoki), or mouths, that had to be fed. The amount of land held by a household then determined its share of the burden of dues borne by the whole village.\(^9\)

Some degree of equality was also maintained within each household. At the death of its head, land was divided up equally among all the male heirs, while in the central Russian provinces a widow usually had a right to a portion of between 1/7 and 1/10 of the holding. This meant that there was a long-term tendency to the fragmentation of holdings and their consequent diminution, a process which led to bitter conflicts and recriminations within families.\(^10\)

These arrangements did not prevent individual state peasants (or private ones after the emancipation) buying or leasing land in addition to their communal allotment and using it to build up a relative degree of wealth, either as agricultural producers, or as publicans, moneylenders or operators of the state liquor monopoly. Such peasants might be successful enough to become independent entrepreneurs, to all intents and purposes outside the commune’s economic provisions. These were the kulaki (fists) or miroedy (commune-eaters) of village demonology.

Because of the relative infertility of the soil, peasants in some regions of Russia had to supplement their income by work outside the village. When they did so, they commonly formed associations analogous to the village commune. These went under a variety of names, though the most common by the nineteenth century was the artel. The Populist Stepaniak called the artel a ‘free union of people, who combine for the mutual advantages of cooperation in labour, or consumption, or both’, while the Brockhaus and Efron encyclopedia defines it more soberly as ‘a contractual association of several equal persons, usually from the lower classes of the population, who together are pursuing economic aims, are joined by mutual responsibility, and who contribute to the common activity either labour, or labour and capital’.\(^11\)

The nineteenth-century German economist Georg Staehr, who investigated the phenomenon, came to the conclusion that the artel was ‘modelled on the archaic
family or family association’ and that it ‘consists of individuals who belong to various different families, and are temporarily separated from them, and it lasts for the duration of that separation’.

If one ignores the word ‘temporary’, that explanation helps one to understand the army artel (see previous chapter).

Artels generally fell into one of two types. Firstly, there were those in which workers hired themselves out together to an employer, who would furnish premises, raw materials, and perhaps tools and equipment, paying them a common wage, which they would divide among themselves. Secondly, there were those in which the artel itself provided these prerequisites of production and concluded a contract with a customer. Procedures in the latter case were naturally more complicated and fully developed.

The artel would be established by written or oral contract, with each member's initial contribution and his share in the revenues minutely stipulated, and a starosta would be elected. This arrangement was normally concluded in front of an icon, to emphasize the solemnity of the mutual undertakings. A similar procedure was followed in the reception of new members—a fateful occasion, since the artel was liable as a whole for the poor work or misdeeds of any of its members, and an ill-advised admission could spell disaster for the whole collective.

A typical artel would contain between half a dozen and twenty members. Its general assembly, like the village skhod, enjoyed ultimate sovereignty within the community, and would take fundamental decisions, such as those about new members. For everyday purposes, however, power was entrusted to the starosta (alternatively known as artel’shchik, desiatnik or ataman—the last an interesting usage, since it derives from Cossack terminology); he had responsibility for securing contracts, ensuring good work discipline and behaviour, planning the details of the work organization and assigning individuals to particular jobs. He also received the wages or revenues, and distributed them to the members, again usually before the icon. In some artels a weekly or even daily meeting of the members would help him with these tasks, and would confirm punishments.

The artels of burlaki, or barge-haulers, on the Volga have become well-known, since one of their songs descended to posterity. These would usually be formed and hired out at a ‘burlak market’ in one of the Volga port towns, to where individuals or groups would go in search of work. Thus, for example, in 1856, a burlak artel signed a contract with a Rybinsk mestchian Ivan Fedorovich Shchapleevskii to take his sailing boat down to the village of Balakhovo, load it up with grain, transport it back to Rybinsk and unload it. The work was to be accomplished as fast as possible, ‘so that the boat does not stand idle or suffer delay through the laziness, lack of zeal or drunkenness of any of us, especially when there is a favourable wind’. For this service, the burlaki were to be paid according to a scale laid down in the local shipping office, plus fifteen silver kopecks a day for board. Detailed instructions were given in case the boat went aground. Each member of the artel was to watch that his colleagues did not shirk, simulate illness or abscond, for if they did, the owner was to have the right to leave them all unpaid and hire a new artel. The owner kept the passports of the members and returned them only with the final payment, once the job was completed.

Other occupations where the artel form of organization was common were construction work, fishing, logging, stevedoring and any form of rural industry which could not be accommodated within the ordinary peasant hut but required outlay on special premises. When peasants went into town to seek industrial work, an artel often tied them over the early difficult period of looking for a dwelling and a job. They would club together to rent rooms, to buy food and fuel, and in some cases would pay a cook to prepare their meals. If they came from the same village or uyezd such an artel would be known as a zemliachestvo, an ‘association of the land’; later immigrants from the same area could then join them. When the young Semen Kanatchikov was brought by his father from the Volokolamsk region to Moscow, he joined just such a group. ‘We rented the apartment communally, an artel of about fifteen men. Some were bachelors, others had wives who lived in the village and ran their households . . . Our food and the woman who prepared it were also paid for communally. The food was purchased on credit at a shop; our individual shares were assessed twice monthly.’

The artel, then, had the same function as the mir: in the absence of a secure legal basis for contracts, to provide a framework for collective economic activity, and at the same time to spread the risks
and share the difficulties of such activity. It could be a self-reliant and democratic group of workmen controlling their own economic lives for mutual benefit; but it might also be a subordinate and internally hierarchical unit in an authoritarian environment. It could even be both at the same time, in which it rather resembled the mir. It mixed economic and moral, democratic and authoritarian characteristics.

Now, communal arrangements of the mir and artel types had been common in many parts of western Europe in the middle ages, but were in decline by the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, along with serfdom. In Russia, however, the modernizing absolutist state perpetuated and strengthened both serfdom and the archaic, introverted village community. This paradox is a key to understanding Russia’s failure to move very far towards nationhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It radicalized the distinction between peasants and the rest of society, confining the majority of the population in what might be called the rural ghetto. In the heartlands of the empire, at least, nobles and peasants were both Russian, but they looked different, they dressed differently, talked a different language, belonged to different worlds of politics, custom and tradition.

In his Gulag Archipelago, Solzhenitsyn called the zeki, the inmates of the Soviet prisons and labour camps, a separate nation, with its own distinctive ethnic characteristics. The same could be said of the Russian peasants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nobles lived in a world defined for them by a cosmopolitan culture, the habit of command, bureaucratic or military service, the hierarchical Table of Ranks and by competition for posts and honours. The peasants, on the contrary, inhabited an egalitarian universe, whose culture was parochial, whose decision-making was done in common, and where the paramount priority was survival. The mentalities generated by these very different life-situations were often not mutually comprehensible: hence the gulf of which most rural nobles were uneasily aware.

‘Mutual responsibility’ came into its own at times of emergency. If one household suffered a major misfortune – a fire, a serious illness, the death of an able-bodied member – then other households were expected to do what they could to help the victims. This custom, known as pomochi or toloka, should not necessarily be interpreted as altruism: a household would offer aid to a neighbour partly in order to minimize the payment of extra dues to cover arrears, partly in the hope of receiving reciprocal benefits one day in case of need. Who knew, for as peasants would say: ‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away’? The beneficiaries of pomochi would if possible offer vodka to those who had rallied round them, so that the work might be rounded off with a bout of celebration: drinking, singing and dancing. But if they were too poor to be able to offer hospitality, it was accepted that the help should be given anyway, free of obligation.

Such arrangements might even include a favoured landower. A.N. Engel’gardt, a professor of chemistry who gave up his chair to become a landlord in Smolensk gubernia in the 1870s, was actually offered pomochi by the peasants who had formerly been serfs on the estate. His dam had been breached in a sudden flood, and to his surprise the peasants offered to repair it free of charge. The rationale they put to him was exactly that which they applied to their own kind. The breach was ‘an act of God, so of course one must help in a neighbourly fashion... If you hire repair workers for money, that means you don’t want to live as a good neighbour (po-sosed blocked), but want to do everything for money, like the Germans. Today your dam needs mending, so you pay us. Tomorrow we need something, so we pay you. No – better to live as good neighbours.’

Mutual aid, then, was motivated partly by good-neighbourliness, partly by the desire to get by with a minimum of cash in a still largely non-monetaryised economy, where the use of money was felt to be a foreign (German) custom. For that reason pomochi was also quite widely practised to get through the difficult times of year, like haymaking and harvesting, when labour demands taxed the resources of most households to the utmost. Again, such common labour might well be celebrated with songs, dancing and drinking.

Mutual dependence was at its most marked in the lean time of year, the spring, when the previous year’s harvest was exhausted and the poorer families had nothing to fall back on. Then they would wander round the huts of their more fortunate neighbours in a silent search for help. This kind of dependence aroused shame, but it was generally acknowledged that help must be offered when needed. ‘A person begging for pieces of bread is embarrassed to ask for it...
directly. He will go into the hut, stand silently on the threshold, crossing himself and muttering, as if to himself, “Please, for the sake of Christ.” No one takes any notice of the visitor: they all go about their business as usual, talking and laughing, as if no one had come in. But the housewife will go to the table, take a small piece of bread, between three and eight square inches, and hand it over. The visitor crosses himself and leaves.¹⁸

Whether welcomed, shamefacedly acknowledged or resented, mutual responsibility had entered the peasants’ blood. For many, it was a stifling form of intimacy, which probably explains why so many young men were anxious to get out of the village, and later looked back on it with repugnance. The affairs of each family, of each individual, were open to everyone to discuss, were in effect common property as much as the grazing land, and offered ample scope for gossip, benevolent or otherwise. Talented or unusual people, or simply eccentrics, could find the atmosphere claustrophobic. So too could young people, especially women, in a collective where the tone was set by older males. Permanently poor peasants were despised, while wealthy ones could easily become the object of suspicion and resentment, unless they made their devotion to the common good unmistakable. Those who transgressed the norms of village life could pay for it dearly, as we can see from the community’s judicial practice.

Village law was customary law. Even after the judicial reforms of 1864 introduced western-style courts for all other social estates, the peasants retained their own segregated courts, governed by distinctive principles. The guardians of the law were the older men of the village, who would convene informal court sessions as required. These were sometimes known as the ‘court of the elder and people of good conscience’ (rud starosty s dobrososvestnymi). If necessary the verdicts of these rustic magistrates could be appealed to the landlord (before 1861), or, in the case of state peasants, to volost officials; but peasants were usually reluctant to take their disputes to higher authority, preferring to settle them within the village, among their own people. This was partly a matter of not washing dirty linen in public, or ‘not carrying dirt out of the hut’, as peasants put it. But in any case peasants drew a clear distinction between the authorities’ law (phanskii zakon or barskii zakon) and God’s law (bozhibi zakon).¹⁹

Even after the 1864 law introduced elected peasant judges at volost

level, many peasants would still try to keep cases within the village, to be settled by an improvised court there, rather than go higher up.²⁰

Some contemporary jurists considered peasant customary law to be no better than lawlessness.²¹ It is quite true that procedures were ill-defined, and the norms guiding village judges, though rooted in tradition, were to some extent arbitrary, open to influence by the standing of the litigants, bribery or drink. All the same, certain underlying principles can be discerned in the practice of peasant courts, and naturally enough they grew out of the sense of mutual responsibility for the economic well-being of the community.

With that in mind, judges would often aim to reconcile two conflicting parties rather than observe strict neutrality between them. Compromise was preferable to an outcome, however just, which drove one household to penury. Sometimes a court would even resort to drawing lots to settle a case, rather than let a conflict fester on, setting households against one another and perhaps dividing the whole community. In the case of a minor criminal offence, peasant judges would usually sentence the accused to a flogging, which would weaken him physically for a few days, rather than to a fine or imprisonment, which might cause long-term economic harm to his household. Or they would decide a case in favour of someone with a good reputation rather than someone who was regarded as a ‘shirker’ or ‘drunkard’.²²

Popular legal consciousness was displayed still more undaunted when villagers took the law into their own hands, disdaining any court procedure, even their own. This kind of samosad took place when they feared that a court would not take the alleged offence seriously enough, or might pass a sentence which would damage the interests of the community. This could be the case with petty theft: unpunished, it could encourage further theft, but a formal punishment would weaken the guilty party’s household. For that reason, the thief would often simply undergo a ritual humiliation: perhaps he would be led along the main street naked, while bystanders threw dirt at him or hit him with a stick, and others would play ‘harsh music’, banging on pots and pans as he went by. After the ordeal was over, the victim might be expected to stand everyone a round of vodka, as a token of reconciliation and re-admission to the
community. There the matter ended. This kind of procedure served as a warning to others, and at the same time reaffirmed the solidarity of the village, without causing serious physical or economic damage to anyone.\textsuperscript{23}

In the case of repeated or more serious offences, however, the reaction of villagers could be far harsher than the expected sentence of an official court. Unrepentant and hardened criminals were a danger to everyone, and were treated as such, being driven out of the village or even killed. Horse thieves were especially abhorred. Not all peasants could aspire to a horse, and those who could relied on it as the mainstay of their husbandry. Since they were usually among the more affluent members of the community, the loss of their horse was a blow to everyone. If a horse thief was caught, he might be lynched, a process in which every member of the village was expected to take part. In that way, if the police got wind of the affair, they could not pin responsibility for the murder on anyone in particular. This is an especially striking example of ‘mutual responsibility’.\textsuperscript{24}

If one had asked a nineteenth-century peasant what nation he belonged to, he would probably have answered by referring to his religion, ‘Orthodox’ (\textit{pravoslavnyi}) or by using the adjective \textit{ruskii}. The two concepts were closely connected in the peasants’ mind, and what they knew of the history of their country usually focused on the victories of the Tsars over the enemies of their faith. Thus peasants, especially in localities directly affected, had preserved the memory of Tatar devastation (though the term ‘Tatar’ might be used for any nomadic raiders from east or south), and of ‘Lithuanian’ incursions (a ‘Lithuanian’ being any Catholic invader). They recalled Ivan IV’s triumphant campaign against the Tatars at Kazan’ and Peter I’s victory over the Swedes at Poltava. Even their historical misconceptions tended to reflect the connection of religion and ethnicity. Peter I was said by some peasants to have lost the battle of Narva because he had ‘disobeyed the Patriarch’, and only to have achieved ultimate victory when had ‘celebrated divine service and received the Patriarch’s blessing’.\textsuperscript{25}

The other dominant feature of peasant historical consciousness was protest against oppression and exploitation suffered at the hands of the landowners. The richest vein of historical folksongs concerned

\textbf{THE PeASANTRY}

\textit{Sten'ka Razin, who exemplified both Cossack vol’nitsa and the restoration of justice by murdering landowners. The sentiment that ‘Razin was not dead’, i.e. that \textit{volia} might still be gained, was widespread. In similar tone, many tales of Pugachev dwelt on the hanging of nobles: ‘Many lords and princes have I hanged, and many unjust people throughout Russia.’ Revealingly, some accounts of Ivan’s Kazan’ campaign showed him anachronistically in alliance with Yermak, the Tsar’s power reinforced by the appeal of Cossack vol’nitsa.\textsuperscript{26}}

In a sense this was the peasant’s ‘ideal Russia’ steering his historical imagination.

It cannot be said, then, that peasants had no concept of ‘Russia’, but their awareness of it was bound by the immediate region, the small towns and villages they inhabited, and was strongly influenced by the guiding principles of military power, religious rectitude and social equality – a Russia both strong and holy. Only in the final decades of the nineteenth century were large numbers of peasants beginning to develop a broader geographical sense, as a result of work in more distant towns or military service.\textsuperscript{27}

Of course many Russian peasants knew about other ethnic groups, since they lived intermingled among them, or at least in neighbouring villages, in various regions of the empire. They were aware of the differences between them, but formulated them mainly in religious terms. In that sense, they conceived of their national identity as ‘Orthodox’ (\textit{pravoslavnyi}). Religious identity was what in their own eyes distinguished them from other peoples of the empire, and it was what, at least on the surface, they had in common with their own elites. Yet their Orthodoxy did not necessarily resemble that of the nobles – many of whom in any case were less than lukewarm in their adherence to the faith. Some observers denied that the peasants were Christian at all, seeing them as superstitious and semi-pagan. Nowadays the notion of \textit{dvoeverie} or ‘dual faith’ (pagan and Christian) is widely used to describe the beliefs of European peasants, especially in the middle ages, and we need not feel embarrassed in applying it to Russians. Right through to the late nineteenth century, most peasants had not learnt to read and write – and even if they had, there was no modern Russian Bible for them to read – nor had they undergone the Reformation process of the authorities banning their pagan rituals. The authenticity of their Christianity manifested itself
in many ways: they would regularly attend divine service, take holy communion when the church allowed, would observe fasts and celebrate the sacraments for birth, marriage and death. Most peasants would cross themselves on passing a crucifix or on hearing bad news. A good many would occasionally go on pilgrimage to shrines and monasteries, or would make a visit for confession to a starets (holy man). Their sayings testified to the fact that Christianity had penetrated deep into their mentality: of an unscrupulous person they would say 'there is no cross on you' (kresta na tebe net), or of a gentle, honest person, 'he lives according to God's will' (zhivet po-bosbetski).

Yet their Christianity was only partly connected to the official church. During the eighteenth century, the funds and personnel of the parish came under ever stronger control from the diocese, and by the nineteenth century were little influenced by decisions of the village assembly, though it is true that the assembly usually continued to appoint the churchwarden and to set aside sums for church repair. For most purposes the parish had become the lowest rung of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy rather than a constituent element of village life. Since peasants were accustomed to take an active part in decisions concerning their community, their attitude to the parish tended to be rather remote.

Much of course would depend on the character of the parish priest. Those who were pious, open-minded and sympathetic to need could get on well with their parishioners and mitigate the growing alienation which peasants felt towards the church. But the situation of the clergy in the village was a very difficult one, and there is plenty of evidence of priests whose behaviour fell well below the ideal, who were arrogant, uncaring, miserly or even habitually drunk. External circumstances predisposed to such deficiencies. Priests were educated people, but with a scholastic Latin-based education which prepared them poorly for pastoral duties in the countryside. The priest received from the diocese either a minimal salary or none at all, so that he had to look to the indigent villagers for his principal source of income, by charging for any sacraments he performed for them. In addition, to make ends meet, he had to cultivate a small plot of land, with the help of his wife and family, so that in his lifestyle he was both a peasant. Nor was there any prospect of promotion, since the episcopacy and the higher ranks of ecclesiastical administration were reserved for the 'black' or monastic clergy. Spiritually robust clergymen could endure these circumstances and even turn them to advantage, but not all of them were so resilient.

It is scarcely to be wondered at, then, if the peasants conducted much of their religious life outside the framework of the official church. Many beliefs and rituals centred on the home and garden plot. Most peasants were convinced of the existence of a guardian-spirit of the home, the domovoi, whose benevolence was essential to a well-run household. It was said that if the domovoi was well-disposed, he would help the family by completing unfinished jobs, or by feeding and grooming the animals, but that if he was in a bad mood, he would tangle needlework, spread manure on the threshold or put tools where no one could find them. To appease him, peasants would hang old bast shoes out on the fence as a gift, or buy animals of a colour he was known to favour. When moving house, the head of the household would combine Christian and pagan motifs by crossing himself, then holding an icon in one hand and bread and salt in the other and formally inviting the domovoi to accompany them.

The bath-house, usually a log hut set at some distance from the main hut, was the home of another spirit, the bannik, who could be extremely dangerous if offended: he might react by burning down the bath-house, and perhaps the main dwelling too. For fear of him, people did not bathe alone or at night, and they would leave soap, fit branches or a little water for him on leaving, saying a formal 'thank you'.

Sorcery and folk magic were still widely practised in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some elderly women were suspected of possessing the power of 'spoiling' (porcha) or casting the evil eye, causing their victims to suffer crop failure, illness, infertility, family discord or the drying up of milch-cows. As protection against them, prayers and the sign of the cross were employed, but so also were certain potions or plants offered to their potential victims. Newly-wedded couples were considered especially vulnerable: they might be offered onions, garlic, amber or incense, or a cross could be sewn into the bride's head-dress. Alternatively, villagers could proceed as they did against persistent criminals, by driving witches out or murdering them.
All these beliefs and practices coexisted with official Orthodoxy in a mixture which did not seem to the peasants incongruous. Nor was it: similar eclecticism can be found amongst most sects in the middle ages and even well after. In fact, one should probably regard it as ‘popular Christianity’ rather than ‘dual faith’. 33

What was peculiar about the Russian version of ‘popular Christianity’ was that it persisted so long, and moreover did not seem to be losing its strength during the late nineteenth century. This trend accompanied the survival and even growth in sectarian and schismatic forms of Christianity. Much the most popular of them were the various varieties of the Old Belief. As we have seen, the Old Belief contained encoded within it an older form of Russian national consciousness, an attachment to the idea of Rur as a sacred land, ‘Holy Russia’, the only place where Christianity was professed and practised in its integrity, as Christ had intended. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the intensity of the Old Believers’ apocalyptic fervour faded somewhat. The persistent failure of the Last Judgement to arrive compelled all but an implacable few to devise ways of compromising with this life and even with a state run by the Antichrist.

To sustain their independence, Old Believers studied the scriptures avidly and deliberately fostered a level of literacy much higher than that prevailing among the ordinary Orthodox peasantry. In the words of one historian, they were a ‘textual community’. Their use of what they read, however, reflected the limitations of their culture: they would seize on scraps of text uncritically and without any awareness of context, interpreting them as ultimate revelations. Dostoevskii, who observed them in the Siberian convict camp, remarked that ‘they were highly developed people, shrewd peasants, skilled in argument, who believed pedantically and uncritically in the literal truth of their old books’. 34

Their attachment to the Muscovite view of ‘Holy Russia’ helps to explain their extreme tenacity: they represented a long-standing protest against the way in which the imperial state had lost touch with the older roots of Russian national identity. They were an extreme expression of the Russian peasants’ alienation from the secular state: they thus had a constant reservoir of potential devotees from which to replenish their numbers.

Parallel to the Old Belief there were other sectarian movements also generated by the peasant need to create forms of religious life independent of the official church. Whereas in most countries religious experimentation takes place among the urban orders, in Russia it took root among the peasants because they were the social class most alienated both from the state and from the established church. Significantly, most sects had their origin in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the crisis of popular religious consciousness caused by the schism and the rise of the secular state was at its deepest.

Congregations without an ecclesiastical framework have to base their devotion on some principle independent of the church. It may be the scriptures, but, since they were in an ancient language, Church Slavonic, they were difficult for peasants to study independently. Instead, some congregations deified their own spiritual experience, interpreting it in the light of the collectivism and ‘mutual responsibility’ with which we are familiar.

Such were the Khrisstovery, (Believers in Christ), who held that the coming of the Holy Spirit to Christ after his baptism could be repeated in the life of contemporary humanity. Their congregations, known as ‘ships’ (korabli), each formed around their own ‘Christ’, who had undergone such an experience. Divine worship was begun by the ‘Christ’, who would read from the scriptures, and it would continue with hymn singing and then dancing, and conclude with the radenie, during which the dancing became frenzied – as with Muslim Dervishes or American Shakers – reaching ecstasy and exhaustion, in the course of which there would be uttering in tongues, which the believers held to be outpourings of the Holy Spirit. Evil tongues rumoured that at this stage sexual orgies would take place. There is no convincing confirmation or refutation of this allegation, but it is clear that their rituals at the very least generated an intense collective experience. 35

The Dukhobory (Wrestlers of the Spirit) took a similar spiritual orientation. They appeared in the eighteenth century, though it is not clear by whom they were influenced. They rejected the priesthood and the sacraments, and downplayed the scriptures, teaching that the Holy Spirit was sufficient unto itself, and dwelt within each individual in the form of conscience. They denied the incarnation
and the resurrection of the body, and believed in the transmigration of souls, which suggests an eastern influence, likely enough in a Eurasian empire. At their meetings they sang psalms and expound the word of God ‘without books’, relying on memory and spiritual inspiration. Their cardinal tenet was mutual love, and some of their settlements practised the communal ownership of all property and the pooling of financial resources. They were pacifists and refused military service, which brought them into conflict with the state on those grounds alone.36

The Molokane (milk-drinkers) broke away from the Dukhobors and became more numerous in the end. They modified the extreme spiritualism of the Dukhobors by returning to the scriptures and some of them to the sacraments of communion and marriage. But they rejected the church’s fasting precepts and introduced Jewish dietary laws instead: their name derived from their drinking of milk on fast days, which was forbidden to the Orthodox. They enjoyed the reputation of being highly literate, extremely neat and clean in their dwellings, and prosperous in their agriculture and business dealings.37

Overall, the importance of the sects lies partly in their numbers, but partly in the alienation they embodied and the permanent challenge they represented to the official church. Sectarianism could also represent a direct political threat. In 1839, for example, the Third Department warned that serfdom was a ‘powder keg threatening the state’ and that the schismatics and sectarians were well positioned to exploit the grievances arising from it in their seditious agitation.38 Count Buturlin, investigating unrest in Tambov gubernia in 1842–4, singled out the Molokane as an especially pernicious source of trouble. As a result of their preaching, he reported, ‘the villagers in their ignorance regard the authorities and the community as two opposite and, as it were, competing and hostile principles . . . They are therefore convinced that people persecuted by the authorities are victims who are persisting for their devotion to the community, and they believe that only concerted action by the whole community can preserve them from oppression by hostile authorities.39

The imperial state remained so alien to the peasants in all its manifestations that, in so far as they understood what it was, they never really reconciled themselves to it. They acknowledged its strength and they personally revered the Tsar, so that most of the time they behaved in an orderly manner, but the intermediate agents of the state — landowners and their stewards, policemen, court officials, tax collectors, recruiting officers, even sometimes priests — they regarded with reserve, which might burst out into active malevolence and even resistance if some incident aroused their resentment. The imposition of serfdom, with its accompanying obligations, was a major grievance, though not the fundamental one, since disorder was almost as frequent among state peasants as among private serfs, and besides, as we shall see, peasants were not reconciled to the existing order by the abolition of serfdom in 1861. Nevertheless, it is indicative that the two most serious peasant rebellions of all took place (i) that of Sten’ka Razin in 1670–1, soon after the final codification of serfdom in the Ulozhenie, and (ii) that of Emel’ian Pugachev in 1773–5, soon after the roughly equivalent landlords’ service duty was abolished in 1762, removing the last vestige of moral justification for the serfs’ subjection. [See Part 2, Chapter 3]

Did the peasants have a social ideal to counterpose to the arrogant practices of the secular state? The collectivism, egalitarianism, mutual responsibility and participatory self-government of the mir did potentially offer an alternative ideology, but it was one which the peasants, for the most part, could not articulate themselves — although one summed it up not badly in a pamphlet he wrote in the 1830s: ‘Freedom, the Tsar and one Christian law for all’. Many peasants used the word pravda to sum up that ideal, plus the notion that all who needed land and were prepared to work it should have access to it.40

In general, however, peasants needed outsiders to articulate their alternative social ideal in a persuasive statement, and to organize and lead unrest that went beyond the horizon of a few villages or a volost. In the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries those outside leaders were Cossacks, with their intoxicating and vividly projected ideal of vol’nitsa: the democratic, participatory frontier community with its elected leader, the ataman or hetman. In the case of Bulavin and Pugachev (see Part 2, Chapter 3), those rebel leaders were also Old Believers — or at least, what is just as important, they believed that to assume the mantle of the Old Belief would advance their cause. Thus Cossackdom and the Old Belief became
the banners of peasant rebellion. The characteristic mixture can be seen in the proclamation issued by Pugachev on 31 July 1774.

We know from the extent and strength of Pugachev's rebellion just how attractive this manifesto proved to be. Of course, his ideas were completely impractical as a basis for a state, but they probably represent a close approximation to what most peasants regarded as the ideal society: self-governing, without serfdom, taxes or recruitment, with the cultivators owning the land, and ruled over by a benevolent, patriarchal monarch professing the ancient Russian faith. As we have seen, few Old Believers actually took part in his movement: it was the old Russian ideal which counted rather than the precise confession.42 On the other hand, many non-Russians, Bashkirs, Mordvin and others, were caught up in the movement: in this case, as in others, Russian peasants worked together with non-Russians against their own empire.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, Cossacks were becoming more and more integrated into the imperial system, and particularly the army (indeed the Pugachev rebellion began as a last desperate protest against that process). Thereafter the peasants were leaderless till the late nineteenth century when, as we shall see, the radical urban intelligentsia moved in to fill the gap. That does not mean that in the meantime peasant protest ceased: it merely became less coherent, more limited in spatial and political scope. During the first half of the nineteenth century, it seems that the frequency of incidents of unrest increased with each passing decade, to reach a climax in the years 1856–62, when emancipation was in the air and rumours intensified the peasants' excitability. It is difficult to be certain of the extent of this increase, because of the difficulty of defining exactly what is meant by 'unrest' (in Russian volhenie). But the general trend is clear, and seems to indicate that, even without outside leaders, peasant discontent was at the very least persistent and active.43

In general, it was times of turbulence, sudden changes or unusual happenings in the village or manor which would spark off rural unrest: anything which disturbed the uneasy equilibrium peasants had come to accept as justified by custom if by nothing else. It might be the death of a landlord, a raising of the dues, the behaviour of a new steward, a harsh punishment imposed by the lord, or many other contingencies. Whatever it was, the peasants would usually act collectively: individual protest was acknowledged to be futile and was strongly discouraged as likely to bring down retribution on the whole community.

Normally, the village assembly was the forum in which the major decisions were taken: first of all, very often, was the despatch of some kind of petition to the authorities requesting a rectification of the alleged abuse, and often citing other problems as well. Then, if this was not satisfied, there would come a resolution to refuse obedience to landlord, steward or police. Typically, though, peasants tried to avoid violence: they knew that their opponents commanded much greater resources in this respect. As a result, disputes could drag on for a long time. The landlord, steward or volost elder would send for the ispravnik (local magistrate and chief of police) who would come down and try to talk the peasants round, promising to investigate their grievances and threatening them with serious punishment if they should persist in their defiance. If that did not work, then 'gendarmerie' (armed police) would have to be sent in to arrest 'ring-leaders' — though these were often difficult to identify, in view of the peasants' normal strategy of joint responsibility. In a few cases the army had to be summoned to overcome stubborn resistance: then peasants would be flogged, exiled or sent to penal servitude. This, however, was an outcome both sides did their utmost to avoid, for it seriously damaged the village economy on which both depended.44

Let us take an individual case which exemplifies some of the issues involved. In November 1823 twenty-five peasants from the Vereia okrug of Moscow gubernia presented a petition to the Governor, speaking on behalf of colleagues from a number of surrounding villages and hamlets, all part of one large estate. They complained that after the death of their pomeshchitsa two years ago, her steward, one Lapyrev, had continued to demand obrok at the rate of 26 rubles 'per soul': 'and what that obrok gets used for we do not know, and the steward will not let us check up'. The ispravnik went down to inform the peasants that their estate was now owned by two under-age members of the Shuvalov family, and in the trusteeship of a senior relative. The peasants gathered in large numbers at the estate office and 'declared unanimously that without
having personally seen the new pomeshchiki they would not obey the steward and the elder and would not pay obrok'.

Next morning about two thousand peasants gathered from all over the volost in front of the manor house 'and unanimously, with great shouting and boorishness, demanded that they be allowed to install a new kurennik in place of the steward and to elect new elders to replace the old ones, and that the new ones be let into the office containing the estate papers and finances'. In spite of the ispravnik's objections, they set about electing their new officials, and sent for two priests to administer the oath of office.

The ispravnik managed to persuade the priests not to do this, and to prevent the peasants breaking into the office. The next day, anticipating yet another big meeting, the ispravnik called in the army to forestall it, and later a whole battalion was quartered on the villages.

When the peasants gathered and declared they would not accept the quartering, the troops managed to surround them and arrest those suspected of being 'ring leaders', after which the rest dispersed. In the end, nine villagers were imprisoned for a year and then sent to Siberia.55

This case well illustrates how a change of situation, the death of the owner, made obligations earlier accepted now seem intolerable, how an absentee landlord aroused suspicions, and how the peasants acted collectively, trying to take control of the situation by electing new officials. It is also noteworthy that both sides several times tried to avoid pushing the conflict to irreversible extremes, which were in the interests of neither.

Events in the macrocosm of the empire could also generate turbulence in the microcosm of the village. In 1796, for example, the accession of the Emperor Paul gave rise to rumours that the serfs would be freed, and there was a wave of unrest. Comparable waves followed the Napoleonic invasion, the Decembrist rising and the year 1848, when there was a bad harvest, accompanied by news of revolutions in Europe and in particular of a peasant rebellion in neighbouring Galicia, in the Habsburg Monarchy.66

Examining peasant reactions of this kind, David Moon has come to the conclusion that their meaning was located on two levels. One was what might be termed 'utopian': behaving as if the world were arranged the way the peasants would like it to be. This was 'a safety-valve for pent-up feelings, or psychological wish-fulfilment', rather like the function of carnival in many societies. The other was more practical, 'taking advantage of the situations presented by legislation [and other acts of the authorities] to achieve those of their aims and aspirations which seemed attainable'. Sometimes they exercised what might be called 'creative misunderstanding' of laws or instructions: this could arise from loose wording, from the peasants' own poor education, or from deliberate misreading. Rumours were a frequent source of exaggeration and misinformation: they represented a distorting channel of communication which reflected peasant hopes and resentments as much as they did reality.47

In many areas the peasant reaction to emancipation in 1861 exemplified such 'creative misunderstanding'. It was clear that the emancipation edict did not embody volia as the peasants understood it. They learned that they were not to receive all the land they cultivated – which would have satisfied their understanding of economic justice – and that the portion of it if they were allotted would be awarded to them only if they started a long programme of paying for it. [For an account of the emancipation terms, see below, p. 321]

To steer round the affront, some peasants exercised 'creative misunderstanding', claiming that the Tsar had granted them true volia, but that the landowners and bureaucrats had withheld the genuine emancipation charter and had substituted for it a bogus document upholding their own power. And so, according to a report from the Tsar's Adjutant General, A.S. Apraksin, 'when they saw that no one could extract from the Statute the volia they dreamed of – that is, barschina is not abolished and the pomeshchiki are to retain control of the land – they began to distrust educated people and to seek readers among the literate peasants'.48

One such who presented himself in the village of Bezdyna in Kazan gubernia was a certain Anton Petrov, variously described as a schismatic or a sectarian. He claimed to speak in the name of the Tsar, who, he asserted, had indeed granted the peasants full volia to those who knew how to read it, the Emancipation Statute contained the necessary provisions, encoded in the mysterious figures and percentages of the appendices and sealed with the 'cross of St Anne'. Peasants from villages around Bezdyna flocked to hear the prophet interpret
the document, and resolved that they would refuse all labour on the lords’ land until ‘the Tsar’s will’ was accepted.

Troops were sent in to arrest Petrov and quell the disorders, but Petrov persuaded the peasants that this was the Tsar testing their resolve: if they stood firm in the face of fire, then they would at last receive *volia*. To all attempts to persuade them to desist, the peasants would merely reply with shouts of *volia!* The troops then fired, but the peasants did not budge, although some of them were killed and wounded. Only after several volleys had been fired did they disperse.

It is not clear how far Petrov and the peasants really believed what they claimed. But one thing is certain: the peasants were utterly convinced of the justice of what they were demanding – so much so that they were prepared to stand firm in the face of bullets. The emancipation edict did not satisfy them because it did not cede them the full right to control the land they cultivated and to run their own affairs in deference to a distant and benign Tsar.

These are the themes which run like a thread through the numerous, but sporadic episodes of peasant discontent of the decades following emancipation. They tended to put the blame for their disappointed hopes on the pomeshchik, whose broad acres were a permanent mockery of their own meagre strips. Often they turned to renting parts of those broad acres, either for cash or for labour, in a partial restoration of the dependent relationship of *obrok* and *barschchina*. When this relationship turned sour, peasants would sometimes express their feelings in more or less coercive or violent acts, which would vary according to season and circumstance: withholding labour, grazing cattle on the lord’s pastures, stealing his grain or his tools, setting fire to his barns or even his manor house. Or they would obstruct officials come to survey the land prior to redrawing boundaries.

The epicentre of such disturbances was the Central Agricultural Region, where peasant dependence on agriculture was highest and urban markets and alternative employment most distant. It was not till 1905 that such outbursts became sufficiently widespread to constitute a threat to internal security, for reasons we shall examine later, but throughout the post-emancipation decades it was impossible to say that the Russian countryside was free of discontent.60

In emancipating the serfs, the government had taken the decision not only to preserve the village commune under the new name of ‘rural society’ (*sel’skoe obschestvo*), but to give it increased powers as the basic unit of local administration in the countryside. Several ‘rural societies’ constituted a *volost*, also headed by elected peasant officials. Yet, although they gained new powers, the commune and volost were not integrated into the new local government structure at uezd and gubernia level, nor were they given jurisdiction over non-peasants. Even government supervision over them was weak till the establishment of the office of ‘land commandant’ (*zemskii nachal’nik*) in 1889. They remained segregated peasant institutions outside the formal administrative and judicial structure, running their affairs in their own customary ways.

This reinforcement of archaic forms was intended to ensure that peasants would continue paying their taxes, and also to provide against the possibility of rural immiseration leading to mass vagrancy. But it stood in blatant contradiction to what was happening in the peasant economy. In recent decades there has been sharp controversy over whether peasants as a whole were becoming poorer or less poor between 1861 and 1905, but both sides of the argument would agree that peasants were becoming more involved in the imperial economy as a whole, whether as participants in a growing market, or as victims of rapacious exploitation.61

Here the evidence is overwhelming. The personal freedom bestowed by the emancipation edict plus an improving communications network far outweighed the institutional obstacles posed by the commune, and enabled peasants to travel widely round the country, seeking work in towns, in factories, on the railways and rivers. Even the village back at home did not remain unchanged: the money economy became generally accepted, retail trade spread and cottage industry expanded. Peasants bought and sold land, buying overall much more than they sold, and increasing inequalities within the village. The traditional *artel* began to yield as an economic association to the more market-oriented cooperative. Primary education gave young men (far more than young women) broader horizons and the chance of more varied employment. Military service gave some a period of encounter with other people and unfamiliar parts of the empire, perhaps even with a foreign land.

The effects of a change of scenery could be unsettling for
traditional authority patterns. Peasant-soldiers returning from the
Turkish war of 1877–8, like their predecessors from the Crimean
War, spread rumours that the Tsar would now at last redistribute
the land in their favour. In more general terms, literacy and travel
began to reorient the peasant's conception of Russia from a fixation
on the Orthodox Church and Tsar to a more complex and inclusive
picture, of diverse peoples and landscapes, in which Russians as a
people helped their less civilized brethren to progress and prosperity.
It became possible to take a pride in Russianness. How far this
transformation of national identity towards geography and ethnicity
had moved before 1914 is uncertain, but it seems clear that it had
started.

Yet, in the midst of these economic and cultural changes, the
peasants gained no new outlets for their political aspirations. Other
than the zemstvos (which had limited functions and powers – see
Part 4, Chapter 1), they had no institutions through which they
could express their grievances and seek solutions to them. Even as
they were beginning from below to bridge the gap between them-
selves and the empire's elites, there was no sign of a civic nation
which they could join.

In many European countries, especially the Pro
church played a vital role in creating and susta
nationhood by mediating between high and low co
schools were the anteroom to a wider world for
peasants and workers. Its priests, trained in the hi
tered in the course of their daily work to the need
town and country, who spoke a dialect and m
The scriptures, translated into the vernacular, were
by which those ordinary people first encountered 
guage and the accompanying high culture, if they
then explore further and work out their own
One thinks especially of the formative influence
Bible in Germany and of the Authorized Versio
fixing a national language and encouraging indivi
d their personal feelings through the medium of the

From a knowledge of its early history, one mig
t that in Russia the church would be at the very cent
Like the Spanish church, it had been the ideolog
 crusade against the Muslims and had played a decis
ing empire. The idea of Moscow the Third Rome
its own position within that empire. Ivan IV had int
 to be the keystone of his united and centralized re
 death the establishment of the Patriarchate in 151
Russia's independent position, even hegemony, at
Orthodox churches. During the Time of Troubles
taken the initiative in recreating a unified and sov
state. Over the centuries, moreover, the church ha
owner of land and serfs.