

The Economics of Serf Manumission in Imperial Russia, 1800-1860

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Abstract

Russian serfdom was a profoundly important institution that finally came to an end in 1861. However, serf owners could and did manumit individual serfs, families, and, enabled by early 19th-century laws, entire estates prior to the end of serfdom. This paper considers novel and previously unexplored data on over 450 estate manumissions conducted between 1803 and 1858 across European Russia. To motivate an analysis of these data, I argue for a simple set of explanations for why and where owners freed their serfs, based on local economic conditions, the regional variation in serf obligations, and other factors. The findings suggest the usefulness of a bargaining framework between serf communities and owners to interpret the evidence and that these types of “deals” set the stage for the subsequent settlements that ended serfdom.

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I. Introduction

Prior to the formal emancipation of the serfs over most of the Empire in 1861, the Russian state passed a small number of laws that enabled individual estate owners to more easily free their serfs.¹ While manumission of serfs in wills and through idiosyncratic acts (often for large sums of money) occurred with some frequency over the 18th and 19th centuries (Smith, 2013), these legislative measures – particularly the Free Cultivator Act of 1803 and subsequent decrees in 1842 and 1847 – resulted in a non-trivial number of estate-wide emancipations.² According to various estimates, between 110,000 and 150,000 male “souls” were freed (along with their families) through settlements enacted via these laws.³

What were the determinants and consequences of these and other varieties of Russian serf manumissions? Other than anecdotal accounts and limited references to the aggregate scale and the laws themselves, relatively little has been written on either the incentives to manumit serfs or on the subsequent impact that the granting of freedom had for owners or peasants. Smith (2013) has recently emphasized the relative importance of this practice, suggesting that the Russian case can be usefully compared with manumissions in other coercive labor societies. Furthermore, the final

¹ Emancipation laws were passed for the Baltic serfs in the 1810s.

² Dolgikh (2008), Field (1976, Chp. 1), Semevskii (1888, vol. 1), and Smith (2013) provide summaries of the background and particulars of these reforms. Russian fiction and memoirs of the period are rife with examples of manumissions of individual or small numbers of serfs, including famous serf artists and entrepreneurs, but comprehensive data on the extent of such cases are lacking.

³ While my data include approximately 110,000 such souls (close to the number noted in Kolchin, p. 145), other sources (e.g. Semevskii, vol. I, pp. 253-281) suggest totals up to 150,000, apparently due to the inclusion of manumissions under other laws. These data exclude the large-scale “emancipation” of more than 400,000 Baltic serfs that occurred in the 1816-19 period. On manumission as one source of the relative decline in the portion of peasants who were private serfs in Imperial Russia, see Hoch and Augustine (1979) and below.

emancipation reforms occurred in the wake of these pre-1861 manumissions, but scholars have done little to investigate how the former built off of the latter. Although scholars such as Patterson (1978) have emphasized that manumission and emancipation were largely unrelated phenomena in most slave societies, there are important parallels in the Russian case that deserve exploration.

In this paper, I argue that estate-level manumissions occurred as the result of an implicit or explicit bargaining process between serfs and their owner, with the latter playing a dominant or first-mover role. While I do not have definitive evidence on the decision-making processes of either side, the evidence suggests that landlords made decisions about manumission at a particular point in time while considering whether coercive or free labor was more profitable (given productivity and monitoring costs), whether converting seigniorial obligations to manumission payments offered a higher expected returns in present value (and in expectation), and whether such a change made it easier to address estate indebtedness. Moral concerns may have played a role for some landowners, but this was likely a small minority.⁴ The proposed settlement would then be subject to at least tacit approval by the affected serfs.

In exchange for their freedom from formal seigniorial control (and sometimes a formal transfer of land rights), most cases of manumission in my data involved former serfs remitting compensation of some form back to the lord. While the serfs would not have much legal agency to bargain over terms, the potential for unrest and resistance (including “weapons of the weak” ala Scott) meant that peasants would have had some

⁴ There is little evidence of a strong emancipatory strain of Russian Orthodoxy during my time period, although there were some signs of growing discomfort with serfdom (and support for serfs) in the decades leading up to 1861. See Freeze (1989), who argues that, if anything, the church was really not concerned with secular matters, including serfdom.

power in setting terms, even if limited. Critically, these deals occurred in an environment of high landlord indebtedness, absentee ownership, and fundamental uncertainty over the long-term future of serfdom as a formal institution. I hypothesize that beliefs over the likelihood of future reform and the opportunity costs of maintaining the status quo on both sides of the transaction (in turn, reflecting local economic conditions and variation in ex-post market power – across space and the type of estate) affected the incidence and composition of these settlements. At the end of the first part of the paper, I propose a simple formal “model” of serf manumission that frames the Russian case using comparative insights drawn from the broader literature on slavery. As in that literature (e.g. Findlay, 1975; Engerman 2002; Patterson, 1978), my framework incorporates the possibility of manumission as a “carrot” to incentivize effort among Russian serfs.

To further investigate serf manumissions, in the second part of the paper I turn to a unique source: a newly collected dataset of over 450 cases enacted under the 1803 measure.⁵ The data include information on the estate owner, the number of freed (male) serfs, the date of the agreement, the land involved in the transaction, and the compensation paid to the owner. I match these cases to the districts (*uezdy*) of European Russia in which they occurred, and to a wealth of other socio-economic information coded at that level of aggregation (approximately N = 500). In the subsequent analysis, I run a series of regressions to document the correlates of the incidence and rate of manumission. Variables that I consider include geographic factors (soil quality, waterways, etc.), population density, industrial production (the location of factories and

⁵ These data were collected from an anonymous essay published in the *Journal of the Ministry of State Property* in 1858 – see Appendices 2 and 3 of “Krest’iane.” (hereafter, “Vedomost,” 1858). The data were published in that Ministry’s journal, because the newly freed serfs were subsequently to be registered as “free cultivators” under the administration of the Ministry of State Property.

cities), the characteristics of local serfdom, and the presence of non-serf peasants, among others. Although the current analysis is preliminary, I find evidence consistent with the importance of opportunity costs (i.e. outside opportunities) in the bargaining over free vs. coerced labor arrangements.

Despite the relatively limited share of the total serf population (which was approximately 20 million in European Russia by 1860) that these manumissions represent, it is important to understand the forces underlying these early grants to evaluate the subsequent economic drivers and consequences of the end of serfdom, given the similar ways that the eventual (post-1861) emancipation process played out at the estate level (McCaffray, 2005; O'Meara, 2019). Thus, in the final part of the paper, I study the empirical relationship between manumission and various parameters of the post-1861 emancipation and land reform processes. Were districts that experienced pre-1861 manumissions more likely to experience quicker take-up of the redemption deals formulated as part of the later reform? On average, were the final emancipation deals different in districts with a prior history of manumission? Intriguingly, I find evidence that areas with an experience of early manumission saw *less* rapid progress in the land reforms after 1861. Whether this represents selection, learning, or some other factor is a question deserving of further exploration.

II. Historical, Comparative, and Theoretical Context

Individual manumission by the voluntary act of seigniors was always possible under Russian serfdom.⁶ As is well known from accounts of serfdom, estate owners could

⁶ I am somewhat loose with terminology here by using freedom, abolition, and manumission interchangeably. I try to only employ “emancipation” in the Russian context to refer to the 1861 reform. For the other terms, I am largely equating them to the definition employed by Patterson (1978, p. 431) for

(and did) manumit individual serfs or household, often for a payment, and often in wills to be executed upon the death of the serf owner.⁷ Frequently, such acts did not entail the transfer of any property to the newly freed serf, although this was possible as non-serf peasants and other social estates could own property in their own name (at least by the early 19th century – O’Meara, 2019, p. 178). Serf narratives and memoirs of the period often reference strong individual demand for freedom in various forms.⁸ While individual estate owners did engage in manumissions throughout the history of serfdom, this occurred alongside the generation of a number of proposals and pilot measures for broader serf emancipation, beginning in the late 18th century (O’Meara, 2019; and below). The 1803 law was a manifestation of this trend, while the Baltic emancipations of the late 1810s were another. However, real movement towards broad emancipation had to wait until Alexander II initiated the reform process in the late 1850s, with the resulting Edict and associated laws issued in early 1861.

Overall, the exact scale of serf manumissions prior to 1861 is unknown, but we do have some rough estimates over specific time period. Based largely on anecdotal evidence, Smith (2013) argues that they took place fairly often in the case of individuals and families. However, while major avenues for emancipation, such as the reforms of the Baltic serfs and through military conscription are well known, Hoch and Augustine

manumission within slave societies: “the legal release of an individual from slavery, either by the master or by a superior authority, such as the state.” Note that in the current study, the “manumissions” applied to all serfs on an estate (at least, in theory). Finally, I am focused here on (manumissions from) serfdom as an institutional system that emerged in its final form from the 17th century onwards. Russia did have a heritage of slavery, primarily as a form of debt bondage, although this practice – and associated manumissions – was largely gone by the 18th century (Hellie, 1982; Smith, 1968).

⁷ Hoch (1986, pp. 120-122) notes that women marrying off an estate could, in the case of the serf community he studies in Tambov province, petition for manumission through self-purchase. Hoch notes a purchase price of 52.5 paper rubles in the 1850s, which he asserts was “standard.”

⁸ A particularly evocative serf memoir that strongly expresses a wish for emancipation but the unwillingness of the seignior to oblige is that of Nikolai Shipov, translated and reproduced in MacKay (2009).

(1979) emphasize that there is limited quantitative evidence on the more run-of-the-mill forms of serf manumissions. These authors study indirect evidence from the tax *revizii* (rough censuses undertaken prior to 1860) and other sources to back out the scale of manumission from changes in peasant social status amidst overall and differential demographic trends.

Following the pioneering work of Kabuzan (2002 and earlier studies), Hoch and Augustine note that the overall size of the serf population was static at about 20 million after 1830, while the non-serf peasant population almost doubled from 15 to 28 million. They then detail (*ibid.*, Table 4) that between 1833 and 1858, roughly 350,000 male serfs changed legal status and 433,000 were military recruits whose descendants were “freed.”⁹ Of the former, state purchases or confiscations of estates and manumissions granted under the 1803 law were the two most frequent mechanisms through which privately owned serfs gained a new status. Thus, less than 0.5% (and likely much lower) of serfs received “freedom” from seigniorial obligations through voluntary acts of their owners on an annual basis in the decades leading up to 1860.¹⁰

As Hoch and Augustine (1979) and Smith (2013) emphasize, a key aspect – perhaps interpretable as a cost – of manumission in the Russian context was the requirement that newly freed serfs had have their subsequent social status resolved.¹¹ This

⁹ They emphasize that the 350,000 total is almost surely an underestimate. Note that it does not cover the period prior to 1833, when the 8th tax revision was conducted. In particular, it does not include the transfer of monastic serfs to “economic” and then state peasant status beginning in 1764, nor does it include the reforms that happened in three Baltic provinces between 1816 and 1819. In those reforms, serfs were freed but with an initial transition periods of continued (re-negotiated) obligation, followed by complete emancipation but without land.

¹⁰ A rough estimate of the total male serf population at any given time during the 1833-1858 time period is 10,000,000 (Hoch and Augustine’s population divided by two). Thus, perhaps an estimate of the annual manumission rate is roughly 350,000/25 or 14,000 males per year, divided by 10,000,000, or 0.14%.

¹¹ This is an important theme of Patterson’s (1978) comparative work.

necessarily meant the assignment to a different legal social status, whether the state peasantry (*gosudarstvennye krest'iane*), townsmen (*meshchanstvo*), or some other social estate (*soslovie*). In practice, it seems like this requirement – which often entailed substantial paperwork and costs to either the serf, their owner, or other parties (including the accepting social estate) – may have imposed significant frictions in the manumission process. To some degree, this is what the 1803 law aimed to fix by easing the manumissions of entire estates AND the subsequent transfer of the former serfs to state peasantry (as “free agriculturalists” – Statute 4 of the law).¹²

In doing so, the law issued on February 20, 1803 called for mutually agreed upon settlements that guaranteed the livelihoods of each party; the 1803, 1842, and 1847 laws were all geared around manumission with land, although not every settlement followed this norm.¹³ A key concern in the 1803 law was the conveyance of land to peasants who were not previously able to claim ownership rights as “serfs.” While Statute 1 stated that an allotment should be assigned to all freed serfs, individual access to transferred land was likely left to the community to determine. The law (Statute 2) emphasized the mutual contractual nature of the required settlements, and that these should be upheld by both parties and their descendants (Statute 3). Former household serfs could be included in such settlements as long as they received access to land or were formally manumitted to another status (Statute 5). Manumitted serfs with land were now liable for poll taxes, recruitment, and other local obligations to the state, requirements that

¹² The 1803 law was issued as Russia, *PSZ*, Series I, No. 20620. Statute 1 of the law did allow for individuals and families to receive land through manumission. Moon (2001, pp. 137-138) provides an abbreviated translation of the introductory material and seven of the ten statutes of the 1803 law. Semevskii

¹³ Other pre-1861 laws related to other types of manumission. The 1842 law (Russia, *PSZ*, Series II, No. 15462) allowed for mutual agreements with “obligated peasants” that temporarily continued obligations but formally ended serf status. The 1847 law (Russia, *PSZ*, Series II, No. 21689) allowed self-purchases when estates were put up for auction. While the former did generate some tens of thousands of freed serfs, the latter was relatively inconsequential.

were previously made of the serf owners (Statute 6). Newly freed serfs and their property rights were governed by the relevant laws for the state peasantry (Statute 7). Once all payments and applicable conditions were completed, the former serfs possessed alienable rights to their land, including the right to sell, mortgage, or divide their land into individual allotments of a minimum size. They could also buy more land or move with the approval of local state peasant authorities (Statute 8) and under the laws governing peasant contractual rights (Statute 9). Finally, the law allowed the peasants to accept mortgaged land with the permission of the creditor (Statute 10). Despite these *ex-post* conditions, specific guidelines as to the structure of the underlying settlements were left out of the law, with only “mutual agreement” clearly emphasized

In theory, the resulting manumission petitions were to be submitted to the Tsar or the Ministry of Internal Affairs through the provincial Marshals of the Nobility for eventual ratification by the Senate (Statute 1). I am not aware of any evidence that all these procedures necessarily happened. O’Meara (2019), utilizing archival materials from Nizhnii Novgorod province, does find a number of cases where specific manumission requests under the 1803 law were denied by provincial or central authorities. Indeed, he argues that official resistance, foot-dragging, and bureaucratic incompetence led to relatively frequent rejections of petitions. He also notes that settlements that failed to address estate indebtedness were unlikely to be accepted (although the records do not indicate whether Statute 10 was ignored). Regardless, it is this 1803 law that I examine through newly codified data on the settlements that it governed.

*Comparative Perspectives*¹⁴

¹⁴ This is a selective discussion of a very large literature.

Scholars and commentators have long emphasized the central role that manumissions played in the slave societies from Hellenistic Greece onwards. By holding out the “carrot” of possible manumission, potentially through self-purchase, slave owners could incentivize greater effort and more careful work with less reliance on pure coercion (Fenoaltea, 1984; Findlay, 1975). This has been interpreted as a particularly important mechanism in societies where slave labor was wide-spread in non-manual tasks that required skill and attention. In addition, the emergence of abolitionary thought from the 18th century onwards led numerous slave owners in the Atlantic world to manumit due to moral concerns. While this seems less prevalent in other (and earlier) slave societies, many manumission documents in all settings were often couched in redemptive or moralizing language.

Orlando Patterson’s highly influential volume *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) outlined the central definitional issues and problems of post-freedom social status inherent in the manumissions. He also asked, empirically, what drove manumission decisions, why some slaves received their freedom while others did not, and why some societies with coercive labor systems exhibited more or less prevalent voluntary abolitions. In his view, manumission was embedded in an exchange where the slave owner gifted freedom, thereby negating the “social death” that occurred under slavery. Along the way, Patterson identifies seven main “modes” of manumission common across pre-modern and modern slave societies: post-mortem (testamentary or otherwise following the death of the slave owner), cohabitational (upon marriage or concubinage), via “adoption,” political (where an outside authority steps in, often to reward military service), sacral (through appeals to religious authorities), and purely contractual. It is

the first and the last of these that seem to bear upon the Imperial Russian case, as I outline below.¹⁵

Manumission practices across the Americas have seen a large number of stand-alone studies in individual systems.¹⁶ Overall, this literature suggests incredible heterogeneity among legal manumissions of individuals, households, and even entire estates prior to formal slave emancipations in South and Central America, the Caribbean, and different U.S. states. In some places and times, the practice became quite prevalent, often as economic or political shocks hit the underlying institutional structures. Useful quantitative information is presented in Patterson (1978, Chps. 9-10), pulling in data from a variety of secondary sources on slavery in the ancient world, in non-European societies, and, although few, some European ones. While many Latin American societies saw large numbers of freed former slaves (up to 2/3 of the population in parts of Brazil), the U.S. South was a slave society with relatively few manumissions. Citing Fogel and Engerman, along with other studies, Patterson (Table 10.4) shows that 0.1% (Jamaica, c. 1830) to 3.2% (Colombia, late 18th c.) of slaves were manumitted across Latin America, while only 0.04% of U.S. slaves were freed in 1850.¹⁷ While the U.S. approaches the low manumission rate for Russia presented above, the rest of these estimates are quite a bit

¹⁵ Patterson (1978, Chp. 8) frames manumission as granting (gifting) freedom in exchange for cash or other payments, as the former owner acts in a munificent manner by giving up priceless power and control. He emphasizes the role of rituals and ceremonies that often occurred with manumissions.

¹⁶ Many studies of slavery and emancipation in the Americas dedicate some attention to pre-reform manumissions, with a few works focused almost entirely on such acts. Patterson (1978) discusses numerous works that touch on Roman and Greek manumissions and on practices in other European and non-European settings from the medieval period onwards, but he focuses exclusively on slavery or close equivalents. He notes the presence of slavery in medieval Russia, following Hellie (1982).

¹⁷ Patterson also draws on Murdock's anthropological data (Table 10.3) to qualitatively – low, medium, high – classify pre-modern societies by the frequency of manumission, and on numerous secondary sources to do something similar for many “large-scale” slave societies from the ancient period to the 19th century (Table 10.5). Two findings that Patterson emphasizes are the lack of association between racial differences or religious beliefs and variations in manumission rates (although at some times and place, Islam and Christianity emphasized manumission as a pious act).

higher. In terms of individuals, manumission data across Latin America suggests that roughly one-third occurred without conditions, about 40% occurred through a payment, and the rest were conditional in some way. More skilled slaves were more able to accumulate the oft-required purchase payment and so tended to see greater rates of manumission.

The granting of freedom from (social) estate-based serfdom in Europe prior to full emancipation has received comparatively little attention among social science historians.¹⁸ In his important comparative study, Blum suggest that the “second serfdom” in Eastern Europe saw relatively limited efforts at voluntary manumission, as the institution became dominant in the 17th-18th centuries. Indeed, the sheer brevity of Blum’s (1978, pp. 324-326) discussion of voluntary emancipations (as opposed to broader emancipatory reforms) in Central and Eastern Europe suggests that they were a relatively minor phenomenon.¹⁹ Hellie (1982) documents a robust set of manumission possibilities for slaves (*raby*) in Muscovite Russia, but as such forms of coercive labor came to an end with the rise of serfdom (with peasants tied to privately owned land), manumission seems to have become less regular. In general, few estate owners in Eastern Europe acted to free their serfs prior to the large-scale reforms of the late 18th and 19th centuries. As hinted at in the next section, this may reflect the “dominant large-

¹⁸ Although “serfdom” receives relatively little attention in Patterson’s (1978) work, his division of manumitting societies into six types (Chp. 9) would appear to place Imperial Russia somewhere between the 3rd (of highly formalized but constrained freedom) and the 4th (economic freedom but continued dependence) categories.

¹⁹ Blum asserts that the earliest example of voluntary serf abolition in the region was in 1688 in Holstein, which sparked a small stream of subsequent manumissions and generated momentum towards Denmark’s fitful abolishment of serfdom over the 18th century.

scale rural economy” characterization of much of the region (Patterson, 1978, pp. 284-5).²⁰

In her recent work, Smith (2013) juxtaposes Russian serf manumissions and the disparate practices that have occurred in other coercive labor regimes. But Smith – and scholars of manumission in other contexts – necessarily utilizes anecdotal evidence from relatively few case studies. The lack of comparable and comprehensive quantitative evidence on manumissions from Russian or other contexts precludes some questions one might want to ask about the scale, incidence, timing, and costs of practices in different societies.²¹ Thus, this paper makes a novel contribution towards quantifying manumission in the Russian context.

*Towards a “Theory” of Russian Serf Manumission*²²

To set up the empirical work that follows, I outline some theoretical perspectives on voluntary manumissions under the specific conditions of the early 19th-century Russian context. The rough “game” that I have in mind involves three parties: the serf owner (I also employ lord or landlord, interchangeably), the serfs as members of a village community, and the Imperial state. For now, I assume that the state simply acts to enforce (landlord) debt contracts and the formal requirements of the manumission law and estate agreements but otherwise has no direct interest in the outcomes.²³ In postulating this framework, I draw on the insights of Fenoaltea (1984), Findlay (1975),

²⁰ One could also speculate that relative labor scarcity may have discouraged Eastern European serf owners from manumission. The role that serfs played in determining political and social power in the region also likely played a role.

²¹ For a rare example of convincing quantitative evidence in the drivers of manumission in a slave society, see the work by Cole (2005) on antebellum Louisiana. Patterson (1978) is another rare quantitative counterexample, albeit a more descriptive one.

²² This is a very preliminary sketch of the components of a possible model.

²³ This means that the state is not directly concerned about serf resistance or any broader economic effects of manumission.

and related works. In future drafts, I hope to formalize some of the ideas presented here.

From the landlord's perspective, the decision to undertake an estate-level manumission was potentially linked to whether free or coerced labor offered the higher expected net present value return when applied to an estate.²⁴ Critically, the former also would include any possible compensation paid by the newly freed serfs. Such a consideration depended on the tradeoff between output and the net-of-agency-costs price of labor, assuming that coercion entailed less of both. "Output" might include the longer-run consequences of giving up (at least some of) the estate's land entirely to the former serf community.

At the same time, the owners traded off the ownership of serfs as productive (including non-economically in terms of status and political influence) assets against their immediate liquidity needs in an environment where debt levels, in the form of mortgage credit backed by land *and* serfs, have long been viewed as high (e.g. Markevich and Zhuravskaya, 2018).²⁵ Moreover, the legal future of serfdom and the possibility of eventual emancipation (and whether it would involve compensation) were uncertain. Although it appears that the serf economy was not in crisis over the early 19th century (Dennison, 2011; Domar and Machina, 1984), at least until the failures of the Crimean War, indebtedness and growing uncertainty over future reform may have increased the appeal of cashing out. This echoes Patterson (1978, pp. 285-293), who

²⁴ I use the word "potentially" because of the absence of direct evidence on the managerial thinking of serf owners.

²⁵ According to the single 1858 cross-section of provincial data that Markevich and Zhuravskaya (2018) employ in their paper, approximately 27.5% of serfs were mortgaged. I am aware of no comparable data on overall serf owner indebtedness, nor the mortgage rate for slaves in other societies.

argues that slave owners might manumit slaves in bad times due to the need to “free up” capital embedded in the coerced labor force.

A small set of influential studies has expanded on simple cost-benefit frameworks by emphasizing that coercive labor relationships are more profitable in effort-intensive but low-skilled environments (e.g. Fenoaltea, 1984). Where more care was needed, particularly in skilled tasks, the carrots of incentive pay and the possibility of manumission through self-purchase were important components of the coercive labor system (e.g. Ancient Greece; see Engerman, 2002; Findlay, 1975). However, Acemoglu and Wolitsky (2011) have recently argued that labor effort and coercion can be considered complements in many settings. In situations with greater labor scarcity, demand would generate incentives for coercion, but at the same time, this scarcity also means outside options are more attractive to workers, which can make such enforcement (of effort) costlier.²⁶ This suggests the need to treat the particulars of the underlying tasks and the nature of outside options of serfs as central in any consideration of the move away from coercive labor towards market transactions. Such outside options could have varied depending on the characteristics of the local economy, ability to access more distant opportunities, and the potential local (labor, land, etc.) market power of the landowner. Finally, the seigniorial relationship – *corvee* labor, quit-rent payments, or some mixture – not only determined the amount of costly supervision required, as enforcing effort in the former required active monitoring, but it generated different cash holdings for the serfs. The ability of quit-rent serfs to generate

²⁶ Labor scarcity has long been a factor emphasized in the literature on the emergence of coercive labor regimes. Famously, Domar (1970) postulated this argument for serfdom in the Russian context.

cash for manumission settlements may have played a role in the decisions of serf owners regarding manumission.²⁷

Serf communities were not likely the first-movers when it came to manumissions, particularly given the petitions necessary for the process.²⁸ But the law emphasized that the manumission settlement was to be mutually agreed upon, which suggests that the serf community would have held some bargaining power in the process. Peasant unrest and violence – potential or actualized – were abiding concerns to the landed elite and the Imperial regime, and the conditions of serfdom (and, eventually, emancipation) were drivers of such episodes of collective action (Dower et al., 2019).

Manumission implied the retention of all personal earning by the former serfs, including what was generated by agricultural production on the land received in the settlement and labor income in non-agricultural activities, net of the direct tax burdens – soul tax, conscription, etc. – formerly imposed on the landowners. Again, the potential earnings after manumission might very well depend on the market power – in labor, land, and goods – retained by the former serf owner (potentially even colluding with other local economic elites). For estates where a large number of the peasants were utilized as “household” rather than “field” serfs, their role as potential hired employees and as potential stakeholders in the larger peasant community may have been an

²⁷ In general, Patterson (1978, pp. 284-5) emphasizes that the importance of scarce labor in agriculture and the absence of urban alternatives (useful, in part, to generate funds for buying freedom) led to low rates of manumission in agricultural societies like the U.S. South. Manumission played little role as a way to incentivize labor in such a context, with physical punishment relatively more common. This has some parallels with the Imperial Russian context, although the discussion here highlights several additional considerations.

²⁸ Both Hoch (1986) and the accounts provided in Mackay (2004) offer examples of petitions for manumission submitted by individual serfs, but these did not involve entire communities. For now, I am largely abstracting away from costs of collective action or internal heterogeneity within serf communities, although see the discussion of household serfs.

important consideration for both sides. Overall, for the serfs to agree to the new arrangement, the net present value of these “gains” could not be outweighed by the present value of the cash, in-kind, or labor requirements owed in the manumission settlement.²⁹

Two other considerations are worth considering in any sort of theoretical framework of serf manumission. First is the possible utility generated for the serf owners by the potentially pious act of manumitting their serfs. While this has largely been discredited as a broad phenomenon in comparative work on manumissions (Patterson, 1978), and there is little sense that the Orthodox church emphasized such a channel (Freeze, 1989), certain owners may have acted with this in mind (although that does little to help us understand the timing). A second consideration was that serf owners were possibly concerned with ensuring the maintenance of relatives and descendants. While it is not likely to be a testable assumption, framing both parties of the manumission settlements as families and communities, rather than individuals, might be a more accurate way of representing the implicit bargaining process. At minimum, landlords and serfs would likely have some bequest and intergenerational concerns at play in arriving at a settlement.

Taken together, a Russian serf estate owner considering manumission conceivably would have compared the net present value of continuing the status quo under serfdom to the return from freeing their serfs. The former likely depended on the nature of the seigniorial relationship (inclusive of supervisory costs), current economic conditions

²⁹ The manumission payments might be required for an uncertain length of time, such as the lifespan of the current owner or a relative. This and the possibility of future emancipation would have made the serf community’s calculations probabilistic (i.e. an expected value over various possible states). From their perspective, the landlord was annuitizing the underlying “asset” in such drawn out compensation schemes.

(e.g. grain prices or the market for off-farm serf labor) that determined outside options and estate profitability, and the evolving uncertainty over the future of serfdom and emancipation. The returns from manumission were comprised off two parts: the compensation paid by the former serfs (potentially including labor services) and the profits generated from running the remaining parts of the estate, possibly employing the newly freed peasants as hired labor. Uniquely in the Russian context, the high level of serf owner indebtedness might have played a key role in determining current liquidity needs relative to maintaining the status quo.³⁰ Idiosyncratic and to-the-historian unobservable preferences for manumission relative to serfdom may have also played a role, as might have the local market power of the landowners (and their political power) in helping to set their bargaining power in the settlement process.

On the other side, assuming enforceability, any acceptable manumission deal for the peasantry would have required them to be at least as well off as under serfdom. The unobserved part of the valuation of “freedom” in this context is essentially unknown, but the few memoirs we have (e.g. Mackay, 2009) and the reaction to emancipation in 1861 would suggest that it was substantial. Serf communities did present the threat of unrest and resistance, which likely gave them some implicit bargaining power in the resulting manumission settlements proposed by the landowner. Thus, depending on all these factors, Russian serf owners may have been differentially motivated to “cash out” of the system by taking advantage of the conditions on offer under the 1803 law, subject to the willingness of the serfs to go along with the settlement. To examine the empirical relevance of this framework for thinking about Russian serf manumission, I turn to an analysis of a newly collected, novel data source.

³⁰ Converting serfs to more liquid assets or even “perpetuities” may have been optimal in such circumstances, particularly for aiding the broader extended family given future uncertainty over the institution.

III. Data: Sources and Definitions

This paper draws on unique data from 462 cases of estate-level manumissions executed under the auspices of the 1803 law. Information on these cases was published in an appendix to an unattributed article on peasants who were currently resident on their “owned land” as members of the state peasantry.³¹ Appendix Figure A1 shows the first page of this source. Each case was dated by the time of manumission, with additional information on the owner, their social rank, the estate’s location, the number of souls (male serfs) party to the manumission, the amount of land transferred with the settlement, and the conditions (compensation) required of the former serfs as part of the deal. While the number of manumitted souls in these data do not exactly match references by other authors (i.e. Kolchin, 1988, p. 135), it seems like this source does document the overwhelming majority of finalized settlements under the 1803 law.³² While serfs in the 19th century were also manumitted (or at least transferred to other peasant or social estates) under the 1842 and 1847 laws, the Baltic reforms, through individual emancipation deals, and through various other means (completed military service, estates gifted to and purchased by the state, etc.), I focus on this source and

³¹ This article was published in published the 4th issue of the 1858 volume of the *Zhurnal Ministerstva gosudarstvennykh imushchestv* (Journal of the Ministry of State Property). In referencing the data appendix utilized in this paper, I refer to this article as “Vedomost” below.

³² Again, O’Meara (2019) cites a number of archival cases from Nizhnii Novgorod province where a request to manumit under the 1803 was denied by the authorities. According to Hoch and Augustine (1979), 58,225 souls were freed under the law of 1803 between 1836 and 1858, 27,173 under the 1842 law (1842-1858), and the 964 under the 1847 law (1848-1852). Our corresponding number for the same years under the 1803 law is 59,411. I do not have data on emancipations under the 1842 law. Appendix 2 from the same journal article documents the 22 manumissions obtained by former serfs purchasing their freedom under the 1847 law (see above). These settlements involved the 964 souls noted by Hoch and Augustine. As these 1847 deals did not really involve two parties to the manumission “bargain”, I do not include them in the analysis here.

these data as the most complete and comparable over time and space. However, the particulars of this source should be kept in mind in interpreting the findings below.

According to these data, 108,873 souls were manumitted under the 1803 law over the roughly 55-year period beginning in spring of 1804 and continuing into the spring of 1858.³³ Figure 1 shows the spatial pattern of these manumissions over the entire period. While more estates underwent this process in north-central provinces (especially in Tver, Iaroslavl' and Kostroma), there were some larger estates with a great number of manumitted serfs in the Volga and southeastern provinces of the European part of the Empire. While 151 distinct districts (*uezdy*) saw at least one manumission settlement, a large share of these were relatively small estates (mean souls = 233, sd = 837; median = 56). The distribution of these deals by estate size is depicted in Figure 2.³⁴

Figures 3 and 4 depict the pattern of these settlements over the period 1804 to 1858. There was a spike upward in the number of manumission settlements in the wake of the Napoleonic War and in the lead-up to the Decembrist Revolt of 1825. Noticeable increases in the incidence also occurred during the state peasant reforms of the late 1830s and in the last decade of the period. This somewhat higher level at the end of the period – exempting the Crimean War years (1853-56) – may be indicative of some growing worry about the future of serfdom among owners. However, this pattern was not clearly reflected in the numbers of souls who gained their freedom in these settlements. As Figure 4 suggests, the numbers of manumitted serfs in a given year

³³ This differs slightly from the 109,531 denoted in a summary table from the same source. I have no evidence on whether any further settlements occurred under the 1803 law between May of 1858 and the emancipation decree in February of 1861.

³⁴ I am beginning to compare the size of these manumitted estates to the size distribution of estates from data collected by the Editorial Commission in preparation for the 1861 Emancipation reforms. See below for some initial discussion.

were driven by a small number of settlements involving very large estates, and these did not follow any clear timing.

To get a better sense of scale, Figure 5 maps the total number of manumitted serfs over the period as a share of the sum of total serfs in 1858 *and* manumitted serfs (with the components defined for males only), all at the district level and using the 1803 manumissions only. While most of the affected districts only saw a small share of serfs freed through these estate-level settlements, there were a scattering of districts in Vologda, Kharkov, and Voronezh that saw a significant share manumitted prior to 1861. For a number of these, the share of manumitted serfs out of the total district population (also defined in 1858) exceeded 10%. The correspondence between the geography of manumissions and the geography of serfdom can be seen by comparing Figure 5 to the map of the population share of serfs in 1858 (Appendix Figure A2), to the map of the share of serfs who were subject to quit-rent obligations only (Appendix Figure A3), and to the share of serfs who were denoted as “household” serfs (Appendix Figure A4). In considering Figures 1 and 5, the extensive and intensive margins of manumission appear largely unrelated to the incidence of serfdom or to the share of serfs in household service, but they do seem correlated with the extent of quit-rent obligations. Additional empirical work below further unpacks these relationships.

It is possible to go beyond district-level means and say something about how the size of manumitted estates fit into the distribution of estates within each district. Data on all estates with more than 100 male souls over much of European Russia were collected by the Editorial Commission in the late 1850s (*Svedeniia*, 1860). With an average size of over 300 male souls on such estates, this misses a large number of small estates but covers

the majority of serfs in the districts with data.³⁵ A preliminary coded version of these data allows me to generate the district size distribution for such “large estates” defined in terms of the number of male souls.³⁶ Using this information, I find that 80 manumitted estates (roughly 18%) were larger than the median large estate c. 1858. This very rough evidence suggests that manumissions were perhaps more common among smaller estates that, potentially, generated lower gross revenues.

Estate owners who manumitted their serfs under the 1803 law ranged from minor officials and military officers to princes, major generals, and a number of high-level officials Imperial bureaucracy. A large number were noted as retired or former officials of one sort or another, while a substantial number were simply described as “land owner” (*zemlevladets'*). Of the 462 cases, 48 occurred under female serf owners, largely of three types: daughters of a deceased serf owner, widows of a serf owner, or noble women (Table 1 presents examples of each). The data do not let me draw connections between the owners other than through the district and date of the manumission settlement.

From immediate or multi-year cash payments, to labor requirements over a period of time, to in-kind contributions of grain or livestock, the manumission deals were incredibly heterogeneous and often quite complicated. A significant number were comprised of conditions that applied during the serf owner’s lifetime, followed by other conditions that related to the heirs upon the owner’s death. Table 1 illustrates this variation by displaying a random 2% sample of the manumission deals (the top entry

³⁵ “Estates” refer to holdings within a district under one landowner. Serf owners often owned estates in multiple districts. For some reason, data on large estates are unavailable for Bessarabia, Grodno, Kiev, Olonets, Orenburg, Podol’lia, Ufa, Volynia, and parts of several other provinces.

³⁶ In future work, I intend to compare the land and compensation schemes of manumitted estates to the size and seigniorial obligations of these “large estates.”

on alternate pages of the original source). While several entailed an immediate payment, most involved some continuation of serf-like obligations – cash, labor, and recruitment – up to the current owner’s death, followed by debt payments and/or maintenance payments to descendants after death (thus suggesting the role of intergenerational considerations). A couple explicitly mention what could be interpreted as charitable giving, including the possible support of religious institutions, suggesting a possible role for religious considerations. For a number of these cases, it is unclear whether payments were one-time or annual.³⁷ Finally, it is worth noting that the settlements of Table 1 entailed different subsequent land endowments for the former serfs, ranging from 8.3 *desiatiny* (roughly 22.5 acres) per soul in the first deal from 1808 to 4.5 *desiatiny* (roughly 12.2 acres) per soul for the Vologoda manumission in 1857. Unfortunately, the land involved in many deals was either not recorded or simply noted as “All” (especially in the first two decades) making further empirical analysis difficult. However, we can roughly document whether the steady decline in the land allocated per soul in Table 1 is a broader trend, ignoring the non-quantifiable entries. The result of such an exercise is depicted in Appendix Figure A5, where there is little evidence of any sort of downward trend in the land allocated per male serf.

Given the heterogeneity in the forms of manumission compensation, I have lumped different types of settlements into five broad categories (Table 2). The majority of cases (294 or 64%) involved a single or series of cash payments. Some (60 or 13%) settlements continued to call for some form of labor obligation, therefore extending the coercive labor conditions of serfdom. Only 32 manumissions (7%) occurred without conditions, often delayed to the time of death of the serf owner. Finally, a large share involved

³⁷ To provide perspective on the amounts implied in Table 1, limited data on the sales of serfs without land c. 1820 indicate a price of 15-40 rubles per person (O’Meara, 2019, p. 208). As noted above, Hoch (1986) asserts that 52.5 rubles per person were a standard manumission payment in the 1850s.

either a mix of cash and in-kind payments, or they included one or more other conditions (acceptance of existing estate debts being a particularly prominent one).

IV. Descriptive Empirical Analysis

To investigate the underlying factors potentially driving these manumission decisions, I aggregate the case data to the district level and match them to a wealth of other socio-economic variables.³⁸ A weakness of the Russian empirical record over the 19th century is the relative dearth of comparable data at the district-level, particularly from before the Great Reforms of the 1860s. However, in prior work, I have collected, coded, and utilized much of the available cross-sectional data from tax revisions, work by the Editorial Commission that ended serfdom, official government statistical publications, and other sources (Bugge and Nafziger, 2021; Dower et al, 2018; and Nafziger 2013). In part, these other studies drew on newly constructed GIS shapefiles of late 19th century district and provincial borders that allow us to connect historical data to various forms of geographically coded information. These earlier studies and their appendices document the underlying sources for all of the variables employed here; I provide summary statistics in the regression tables below.

To better understand the potential drivers of the estate manumissions, I undertake a simple series of cross-sectional regressions with two dependent variables: whether or not a district experienced an estate manumission (the extensive margin – Table 3) and the share of manumitted serfs (the intensive margin – Table 4). The common set of

³⁸ This suppresses the time variation in the manumissions, which will be explored in more detail in future work that relies on the interaction of macro variables or shocks (for example, in key agricultural prices) with local conditions to derive plausibly exogenous drivers of manumission in a panel regression framework. The time dimension might also be useful in thinking about the spatial spread of manumissions across European Russia.

controls include the share of the population that were serfs in 1858 (representing the potential for “treatment”), population density c. 1860 (indicative of overall labor scarcity; defined as total population per sq. mile), and geographic factors related to agricultural productivity and local economic development (forest cover, river presence, and wheat suitability).³⁹ In both sets of regressions, I focus on the sample of districts that had at least one serf in 1858 (the results are robust to including all districts). The main specifications are simple OLS with robust standard errors, although I do show the stability of the results under a probit model for whether districts experienced a manumission or not (Table 3, last column).⁴⁰

I also dial in on other potential drivers of manumissions suggested by the discussion above, sequentially or jointly. I consider the urban population share as measured in 1863 (an indicator for local economic development and off-estate opportunities) and the presence of factories in the 1860s (ditto; this is the earliest date such data exist). I also run specifications that control for the share of serfs on quit-rent obligations in 1858 (as in Appendix Figure A3), which I take to be indicative of non-agricultural opportunities, [serf] monitoring costs, and the availability of cash for settlements as noted earlier. Similarly, I include the share of household serfs in 1858 (Appendix Figure A4), who may have faced different outside opportunities or manumission costs. Finally, although not reported in the tables presented here, I have experimented with including rough,

³⁹ I do not include the share of serfs c. 1858 in the share manumitted regressions (Table 2), but the results are unchanged if I do so. The serf incidence variable is the same one reported in Appendix Figure A1, and the population density and geographic controls are taken from Buggle and Nafziger (2021).

⁴⁰ Including provincial fixed effects tends to diminish the results, as these soak up much of the variation of interest. I have experimented with spatially correlated standard errors (which would partially help in addressing spillover effects between manumissions), but the results in this current draft do not include those specifications. Note that the variables considered in these specifications do not represent all that were explored, but they were chosen to match specific possible theories underlying the manumission decision. Practically speaking, data limitations often forced me to consider imperfect proxies for underlying manumission drivers.

provincial-level measures of serf owner indebtedness measured as the share of serfs mortgaged in 1858 (from Markevich and Zhuravskaya, 2018) – I comment on the findings from that extension below.

Before considering the results, it is worth noting that these specifications are not meant to depict causal relationships. There could be a number of unobservable factors generating biases in several coefficients. Moreover, many of the right-hand side variables are defined *after* the dependent variables, hinting at the possibility of reverse causality. Perhaps more importantly, the underlying manumission data are individual cases, while the explanatory variables are defined at the district-level. This raises a possible ecological fallacy in interpreting the coefficients as representing the influence of various factors on the decision-making of individual estate owners (or estates). In the absence of matched estate-level covariates, my goal with these regressions is simply to provide suggestive evidence that deserves deeper consideration in future work that can hopefully make use of micro-data.

Despite these caveats, the findings in Tables 3 and 4 are highly suggestive.⁴¹ Denser populations and a greater share of serfs among a district's population were both robustly associated with a greater incidence of manumission (Table 3, first two rows). The former just reflects a greater likelihood of "treatment." The latter is possibly indicative of a Domar-like consideration regarding the (lack of) scarcity of labor inducing less need for coercion (or a lesser outside option ala Acemoglu and Wolinsky). However, this second result disappears once I consider the *share* of manumitted serfs (Table 4). There are some signs in Table 3 that forested areas *and* those in areas more

⁴¹ I focus on the sign and statistical significance, rather than the size of the coefficient estimates in this discussion.

suiting to wheat production were more likely to see a manumission, but again these associations go away when I consider the share of manumitted serfs in Table 4.

More interesting results emerge when I consider other variables directly related to the framework developed in Section 3. Urban population share and the incidence of factories show little consistency in their relationships with manumission. However, the share of household serfs and the share of serfs on quit-rent only, both c. 1858, are associated with a greater likelihood of manumission and with more manumitted serfs, at least in the full models (column 6) in each table. There are several possible reasons for these findings. Household serfs may have been in a particularly bad position in terms of bargaining, but their presence was also likely tied to a greater landlord presence on the estate, where manumission could be offered as a reward for work that tended to require more care and attention. Moreover, many such peasants engaged in occupations (blacksmithing, coopering, etc.) that could generate cash through the labor market, thus making compensation easier to fund. In areas where serfs were more likely to be obligated for cash payments only, estate agriculture and the control of land were less important, while cash-earning non-agricultural activities (petty trading, proto-industrial work, urban factory jobs, etc.) predominated. This not only made options outside the estate more central (and the cash to pay for manumission for readily accessible), but it also meant that retaining coercive control of labor was less important to the serf owner. Rather, they could “cash out” through manumission in the face of indebtedness or the growing uncertainty over serfdom’s future.

I can extend the analysis of the extensive margin by considering some additional, (possibly even more endogenous), variables related to the local nature of serfdom and

non-agricultural opportunities in Table 5.⁴² Column 1 of Table 5 controls for the gap in land prices between populated and unpopulated properties, a measure of the value of serfs employed by Domar and Machina (1984). Neither this measure, nor an indicator for the relative importance of the estate demesne (Column 2), nor a measure of average serf estate size (proxying for the implicit costs of bargaining / collective action – Column 3), nor a measure of factory labor productivity (and, therefore, outside options; Column 4) exhibit a statistically significant association with the incidence of manumission. That being said, the signs of the estimated relationships are all consistent with priors suggested by the discussion above.⁴³ Finally, I did experiment with including a control for landlord indebtedness: the share of serfs mortgaged in 1858 (Markevich and Zhuravskaya, 2018). This is only available at the provincial level, making interpretation tricky in the absence of provincial fixed effects, but if included in the model of column 6 (Table 3), the estimated coefficient is positive and statistically significant, while the other coefficients barely move (results available upon request). This is consistent with

In the last column of Table 5, I explore the conditions placed on these manumissions by considering the share of settlements in a district that required some form of ongoing labor. This focuses only on those 161 districts that experienced a manumission over the period. While, overall, I explain relatively little of the variation in this variable, the positive correlation between population density and the inclusion of labor requirements goes against a simple scarcity story of bargaining power (ala Domar, 1970) and points more towards a reduction in outside options, and therefore a lower bargaining position

⁴² The coefficient results for forest cover (not shown), share of household serfs, and share of serfs on quitrent in Tables 3 and 4 are largely replicated in Table 5.

⁴³ The first three of these variables are from Nafziger (2013) – all were collected from the research undertaken by the Editorial Commission that was charged with producing the emancipation reforms. The factory productivity measure is discussed in Buggle and Nafziger (2021).

for serfs on an estate (as in Acemoglu and Wolitzky, 2011). Additional analysis of the specific conditions attached to all settlements could help unpack this result.

The relatively small share of serfs who were manumitted under the 1803 law, the long right tail of manumitted estate sizes, the scarcity of appropriate pre-1861 district-level data relevant for this analysis, and the, frankly, odd timing of our measure of the share of serfs manumitted, may all explain why these regressions are less successful in explaining the variation in the intensive than the extensive margin of manumission. If serf owners were always behaving as denoted in Section III, then one might expect a greater scale of serf manumissions. The findings do suggest some room for local non-agricultural opportunities, the relative importance of household serfs, and the specific type of serfdom in creating conditions more conducive to manumission, possibly through a bargained process. But it appears that idiosyncratic, estate- and owner-level factors were key for why certain estates saw manumission at specific times.

V. From Manumission to Redemption

On February 19, 1861, Tsar Alexander II emancipated the serfs, formally ending legal coercion and instigating a process of land reform and property transfer that would last over much of the rest of the century. The declaration began a two-year period when “land charters” were written (during which serf obligations largely continued) to define the existing obligations and rights peasants held on each estate. This was followed by a period of “temporary obligation,” where obligations were regulated, as both sides engaged in a bargaining-like process to resolve the property to be transferred and its associated price (collectively assigned to the newly formalized peasant commune). When these “redemption settlements” were finally agreed upon, obligations ended and

formal property rights to some portion of the estate were transferred, often financed through a mortgage-like arrangement through the State Bank.

These processes generated resistance among former serf communities. As Figure 6 shows, there were many areas where more than 50% of former serfs failed to even ratify a land charter setting down the *status quo*. As noted in Dower et al. (2018), former serf unrest spiked upward in the two years when land charters were to be written, likely because reality did not match expectations. When it came to redemption, many of these deals remained unresolved between former serf communities and owners into the 1880s, when the Imperial government mandated the onset of redemption for all former serfs

Given all of this, I explore the simple (and definitely non-causal) question of whether a district's history of pre-1861 manumission was associated with the ways that the reform processes unfolded.⁴⁴ I have no strong priors on this question, as plausible negative or positive relationships could well be imagined. While Patterson (1978) suggests that manumission and emancipation were generally unrelated in most slave societies, one recent study has asserted that the 1803 law "gave rise in Russian society to a definite concept of peasant emancipation" (O'Meara, 2019, p. 179).

To operationalize this question, I consider four indicators of the pace or outcome of the redemption land reform process. Drawing on Dower et al. (2018), I study the incidence of peasant unrest between 1851 and 1863, defined as a portion of years that a district

⁴⁴ If I include the provincial-level measure of the share of former serfs that *did* sign land charters by 1863 in the column 6 specification of Table 3, the coefficient is positive and statistically significant. This perhaps signals easier bargaining conditions in such areas, whether through lower costs of collective action among serfs or some additional power of the landed elite.

experienced any or large events in that period. The associated regressions are reported in Table 6. Then, using land statistics for 1877 (see Nafziger, 2013; for a discussion), I define two variables: the shares of former serf communes and of male former serfs who had formally entered redemption in a district by that point.⁴⁵ Finally, I focus on a measure of the “success” of redemption: the ability of former serfs to make the associated payments, defined as accumulated redemption debt per *desiatina* in 1886. I interpret this variable, in part (once geographic controls are included), as an outcome of the relative bargaining power held by former serfs, which may have determined the level of extraction codified in the redemption loans. The specifications of Table 6 and 7 largely follow the prior models but include the measures of manumission as right-hand side variables.

While many of the covariate coefficients are interesting in themselves, I focus here on just the manumission variables. Focusing first on Table 6, the occurrence of a manumission in a district but not the share of serfs manumitted was positively related to the incidence of unrest (the results are essentially unchanged if we focus on narrower time periods of unrest). Following the interpretation of Dower et al. (2018), peasant communities in those places where manumission occurred appear to have displayed a greater capacity for collective action in the form of resistance to serfdom and the terms of emancipation.

Turning to Table 7, there is little evidence that pre-1861 manumission was linked to the redemption indebtedness of former serfs by 1886.⁴⁶ In contrast, the first three columns

⁴⁵ As some Western provinces saw mandatory redemption well before 1877, and there are a number of missing observations, this variable is an imperfect indicator of the pace of reform.

⁴⁶ If I take seriously the slightly positive estimated relationship in the fourth column, early manumission was associated with worse redemption deals for the former serfs.

all find negative and statistically significant relationships between manumission (defined either way) and the extent of redemption by 1877. Thus, greater local experience of prior manumission was associated with a lower likelihood of entering into a redemption deal (although I am again mindful of the ecological fallacy). Two possible explanations come to mind (others are surely plausible, including omitted variable concerns). First, this association could represent selection: early manumission whittled away the number of estates likely to easily settle after 1861. This seems implausible given the limited number of manumissions. Second, earlier manumission produced a demonstration effect that led remaining former serfs to resist coming to terms with their former owners in what they perceived as unfair settlements – i.e. those areas saw greater capacity for collective action and bargaining power among peasant communities. This is largely suppositional, but I view these results as a first step in considering how the local history of manumission may have affected the subsequent processes of emancipation and redemption.⁴⁷

VI. Concluding Thoughts

Numerous authors have noted the presence of pre-1861 serf manumissions in Russia, but to date there exists little empirical work on these settlements. This paper offers a preliminary look at new evidence on Russian serf estate manumissions prior to Emancipation. I find signs that labor availability, geographic conditions, and/or outside non-agricultural options were associated with incidence of manumission under an 1803 law, which seems consistent with possible theories of labor coercion and manumission, albeit filtered through specific Russian conditions of landlord indebtedness and the

⁴⁷ Of particular future interest is to explore the dynamic interactions between estates that settle at different times and with different proximities to previously manumitted communities (and to state peasants and other non-serf settlements).

nature of serfdom. Future work will expand this quantitative analysis to investigate how uncertainty over the future of serfdom might have impacted the incentives of the Russian nobility to free their serfs through formal estate manumissions, to mortgage their “assets,” or to extract even more while they could. Along the way, I hope to make greater use of estate-level information and to deepen the connection between the analysis and the broader scholarship on manumission in other settings with labor coercion institutions.

O’Meara (2019) notes that previous scholarship has largely argued that the 1803 law had little to no effect on the broader institutional structures or development of the Russian countryside. However, he emphasizes that the resulting settlements did serve in an exemplary role for future reforms in providing “freedom” with land in exchange for compensation paid to the former seigniors. In exploring a possible expression of this idea, I find that districts that experienced manumissions showed slightly greater unrest and resistance to entering into land settlements after emancipation. This suggests a deeper and longer-run dynamic that deserves further research.

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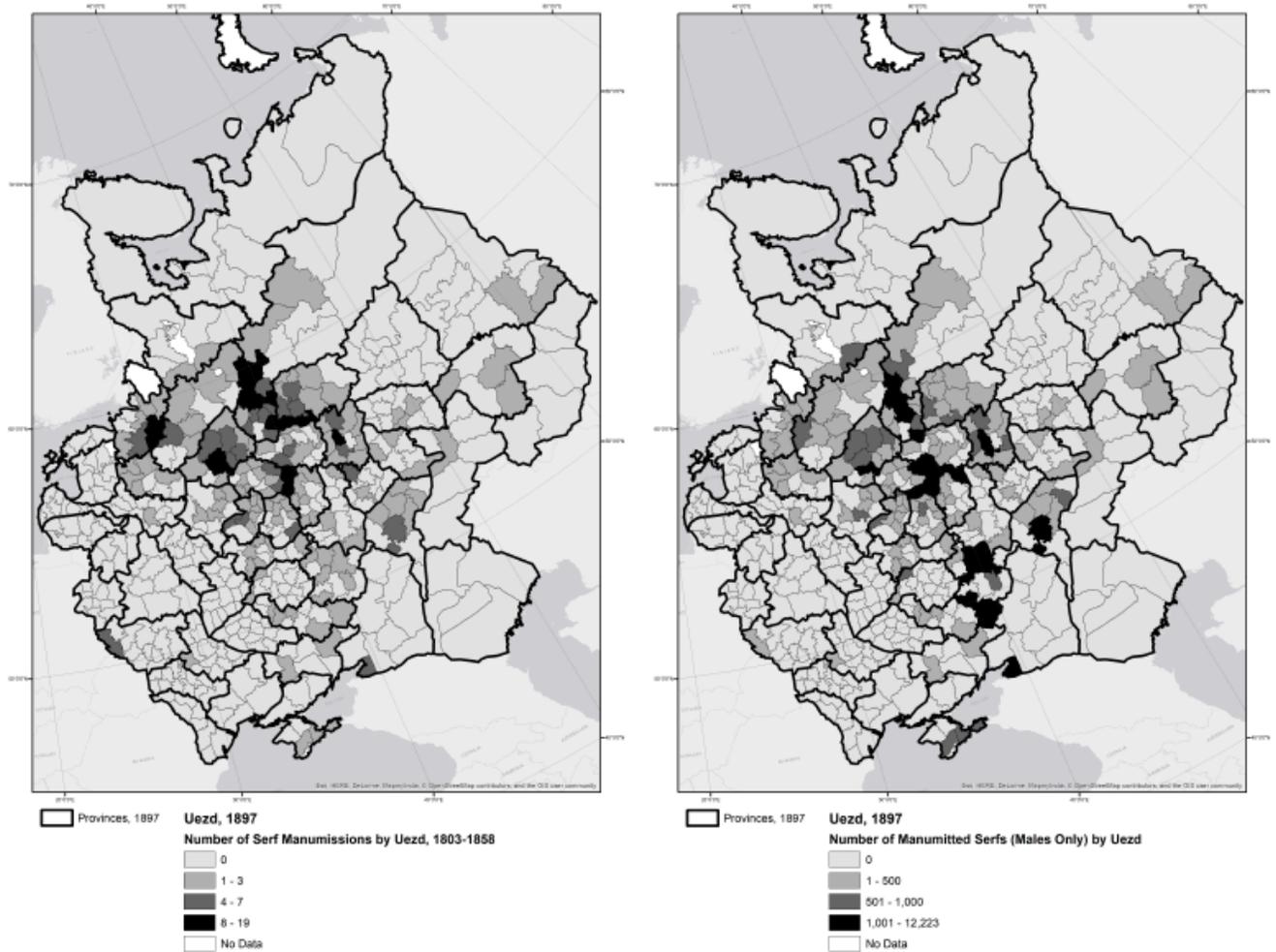
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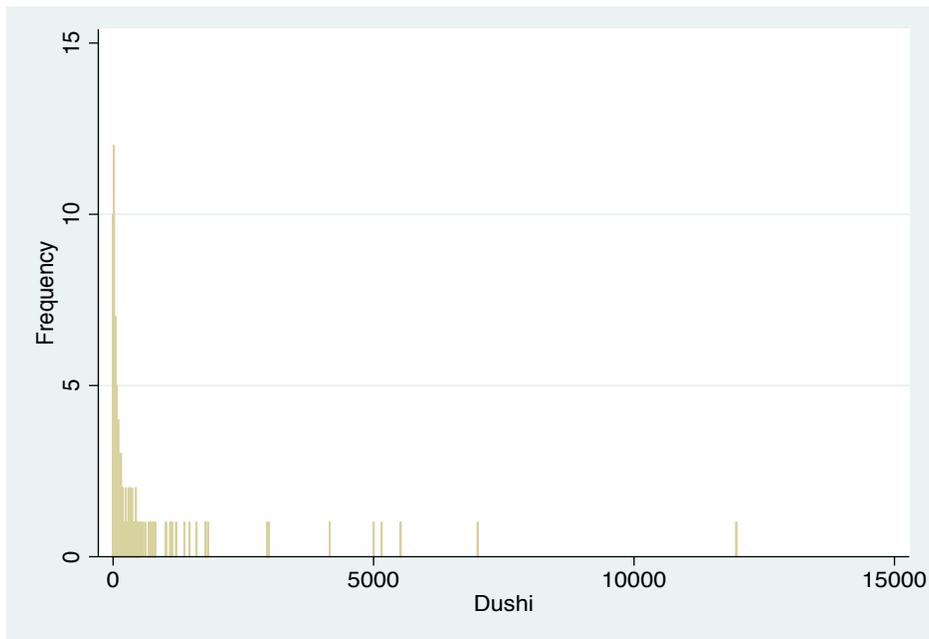
"Vedomost' o krest'ianakh, uvolennykh po dogovoru s pomeshchikami i vstupivshikh po raznym drugim sluchaiam, v zvanie gosudarstvennykh krest'ian vodvorennykh na sobstvennykh zemliakh," Appendix 3 from "Krest'iane vodvorennye na sobstvennykh zemliakh," *Zhurnal Ministerstva gosudarstvennykh imushchestv* 69. 4, ot. II (1858): 295-348.

Figure 1: The Distribution of Manumitted Estates and Serfs



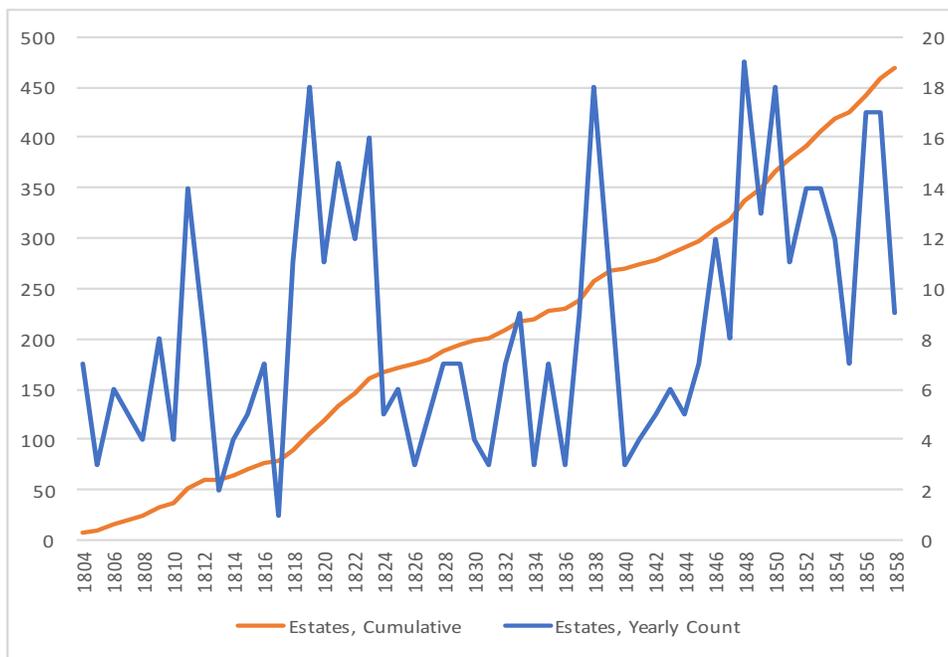
Note: The source of the underlying data is "Vedomost'" (1858). The shapefiles were generated by the author based on late 19th century maps. Additional GIS aid was provided by Cory Campbell at Williams College.

Figure 2: The Size Distribution of Manumitted Estates, 1803-1858



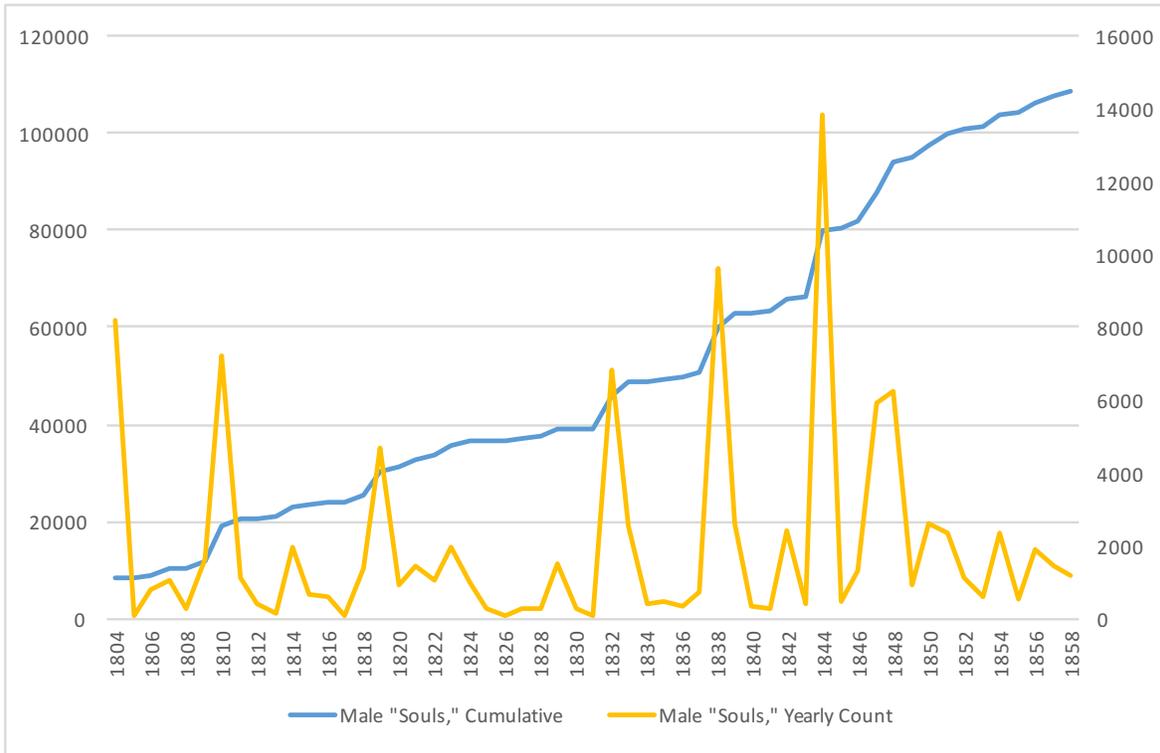
Note: The source of the underlying data is “Vedomost” (1858). The “frequency” is the number of estates with a certain number of souls affected by manumissions.

Figure 3: The Pattern of Estate Manumissions, 1803-1858



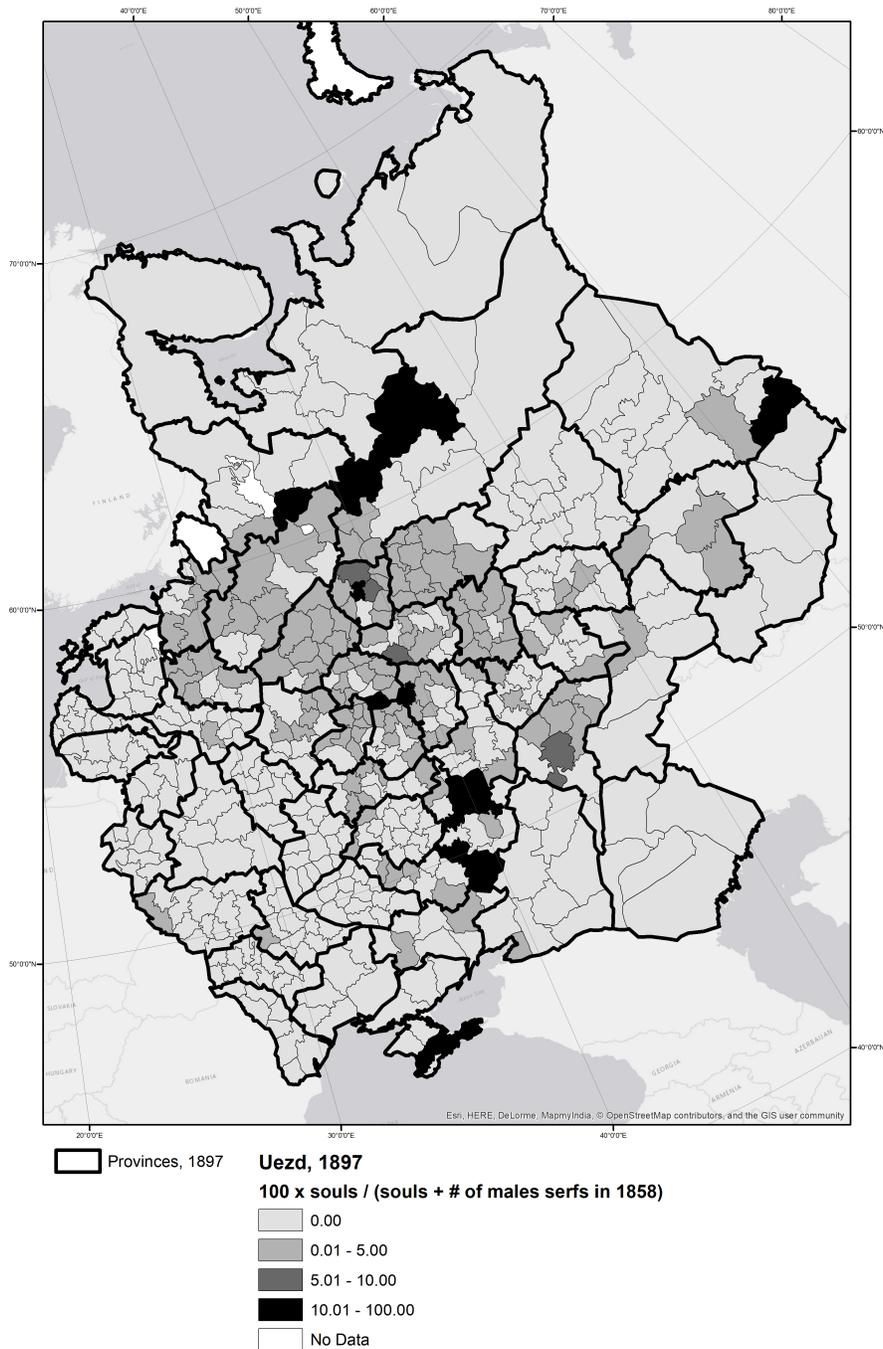
Note: The source of the underlying data is “Vedomost” (1858). Cumulative is the running total (left axis).

Figure 4: The Pattern of Serfs Manumitted by Estate Settlements, 1803-1858



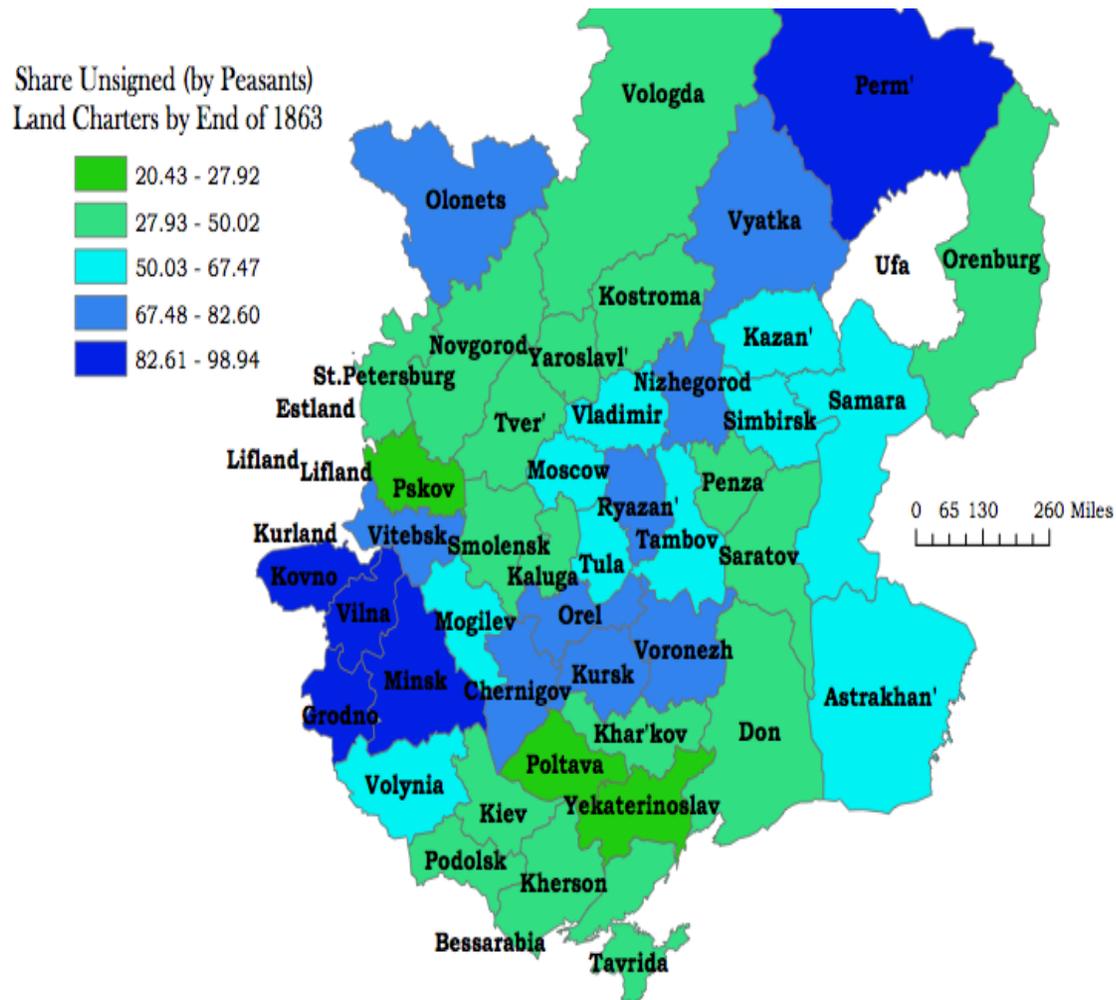
Note: The source of the underlying data is "Vedomost'" (1858). "Souls" represents the number of male serfs that were party to the manumission agreements. Cumulative is the running total (left axis).

Figure 5: The Relative Incidence of Serf Manumission, 1803-1858



Note: The source of the underlying data on manumitted “souls” is “Vedomost’” (1858). The total number of male serfs in 1858 at the district level (derived from the 10th tax census) is taken from Troinitskii (1861). The shapefiles were generated by the author based on late 19th century maps. Additional GIS aid was provided by Cory Campbell at Williams College.

Figure 6: Former Serf Resistance to Emancipation, 1861-1863



Note: The source of the underlying data is an archival report from the Ministry of Internal Affairs reproduced in *Otmena* (1950).

Table 1: Random 2% Sample of Manumission Deals Under the 1803 Law

Date	Location	Owner	Souls	Land	Conditions
18.7.1808	Rybinskii uезд, Iaroslavl'	Daughter of 2 nd Lieutenant Boboedov	14	116 d.	Until death of owner (f), pay 100 rubles/year and work land; two peasants pay 300 rubles over the next two years; after owner death, pay 1 ruble/year to the nearest Iaroslavl' almshouse in perpetuity
24.1.1819	Poshekhonskii, uezd, Iaroslavl'	Court Counselor Saburov	85	"All"	Payment of 50,000 rubles
14.9.1824	Tverskii uезд, Tver	Noble family Epishevs	63	"All"	Payment of 1600 rubles/year for 15 years
10.3.1837	Petrovskii uезд, Saratov	Major Novikov	60	--	Pay 23,400 rubles to the Moscow Guardianship Council; pay 600 rubles yearly to the owner (f)
7.2.1841	Kirilovskii uезд, Novgorod	Noblewoman Khodneva	64	"All"	Pay 274.28 silver rubles to the monastery
10.9.1848	Staritskii and Novotorzhskii uezd, Tver	Collegiate Counselor Rtishchev	446	3674.5 d.	During life of nobleman: work as before or pay 15 silver rubles/ <i>tiaglo</i> and to recognize his authority to name army recruits; upon his death, pay 80,000 paper rubles to St. Petersburg Guardianship Council, 15 kopeks/soul for 20 years for a station building, 1000 silver rubles to the Guardianship Council for children and nieces of I.M. Zilova, to be paid out no earlier than their 25 th birthdays
15.2.1852	Tverskii uезд, Tver	Widow of Headquarters Captain Kosarskii	53	378.125 d.	Remain with previous obligations until death of widow; upon her death pay debt of 9,130 rubles to Moscow Guardianship Council and pay 143 rubles to the church, 143 rubles for the priest of the church, 100 rubles to the daughter of Artiushkov if unmarried, and to pay fees required of the nobility
15.9.1854	Liubinskii uезд, Iaroslavl'	Nobleman Konstantinov	31	186.833 d.	During life of owner, pay 10 rubles/revision soul; upon his death pay descendants 1 silver ruble/soul, pay off debt to Iaroslavl' Order (Prikaz) of 2170 silver rubles, and pay fees required of nobility
1.2.1857	Vologodskii uezd, Vologoda	Noblewoman Sadokova	21	96.125 d.	Pay debt to the Vologoda Order for Social Charity of 1440 rubles and obligations/fees of nobility while peasants remain assigned to owner

Note: d. = desiatina or 2.7 acres. These deals were randomly chosen 2% sample as the first listed one on every 6th page in "Vedomost" (1858). The Guardianship Councils and Orders for Social Charity were credit institutions with charitable and trusteeship functions. *Tiaglo* was a work unit (typically a married couple). See the text for more commentary.

Table 2: Conditions on the Estate Manumissions, 1803 - 1858

No conditions	27
Freed in wills	5
Payment only, one-time and/or repeated	294
Some work requirements	76
Other types	60
Total Deals	462

Note: The source of the underlying information is “Vedomost’” (1858). The underlying coding was done for more than 20 categories of conditions, which were then combined into these five.

Table 3: The Extensive Margin

Dependent variable:	Manumission in District? [0/1]						
	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS	Probit/mfx
Serf Share, 1858 (x 100) <i>Mean = 41.4, SD = 23.4</i>	0.00215** (0.000982)	0.00253** (0.000996)	0.00224** (0.000981)	0.00213** (0.00107)	0.000958 (0.000987)	0.00235** (0.00110)	0.00272** (0.00135)
Ln(Pop Density, 1858) <i>Mean = 3.97, SD = 0.81</i>	0.109*** (0.0339)	0.0916*** (0.0350)	0.101*** (0.0339)	0.109*** (0.0340)	0.0891*** (0.0321)	0.0679* (0.0347)	0.0963* (0.0508)
Forest Cover (% ,x100) <i>Mean = 35.0, SD = 23.7</i>	0.00741*** (0.00102)	0.00769*** (0.00102)	0.00722*** (0.00102)	0.00741*** (0.00102)	0.00503*** (0.00102)	0.00527*** (0.00106)	0.00720*** (0.00156)
River? [0/1] <i>Mean = 0.55, SD = 0.50</i>	-0.0313 (0.0418)	-0.0321 (0.0416)	-0.0285 (0.0418)	-0.0313 (0.0418)	-0.0715* (0.0400)	-0.0682* (0.0397)	-0.0789 (0.0508)
Wheat Suitability (0 - 10) <i>Mean = 6.87, SD = 1.99</i>	0.00971 (0.0148)	0.0167 (0.0152)	0.0126 (0.0150)	0.00979 (0.0150)	0.0297** (0.0140)	0.0321** (0.0146)	0.0501** (0.0196)
Urban Pop Share, 1863 (x100) <i>Mean = 8.92, SD = 10.26</i>		0.00347 (0.00247)				0.00357 (0.00243)	0.00414 (0.00311)
Factories per 1000, 1868 <i>Mean = 0.20, SD = 0.36</i>			0.0856* (0.0509)			-0.00422 (0.0396)	0.000665 (0.0536)
HH Serf Share, 1858 (% ,x100) <i>Mean = 10.8, SD = 16.8</i>				-5.22e-05 (0.00127)		0.00588*** (0.00213)	0.00880*** (0.00330)
Share Serfs on Quit-Rent (% ,x100) <i>Mean = 25.77, SD = 30.3</i>					0.00612*** (0.000716)	0.00630*** (0.000705)	0.00685*** (0.00101)
Constant	-0.484*** (0.114)	-0.517*** (0.116)	-0.487*** (0.112)	-0.483*** (0.116)	-0.549*** (0.0989)	-0.636*** (0.104)	
Observations	458	458	456	458	430	429	429
R-squared	0.148	0.153	0.152	0.148	0.271	0.286	0.2448

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Specifications are run on the sample of districts with non-zero-serf share. MFX = marginal effects. Data, methods, and the sources of the variables are described in the text.

Table 4: The Intensive Margin

Dependent variable:	Share of Manumitted Serfs (Mean = 1.2, SD = 6.1)					
	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS
Ln(Pop Density, 1858) <i>Mean = 3.97, SD = 0.81</i>	-0.227 (0.533)	-0.375 (0.547)	-0.319 (0.536)	0.518 (0.332)	0.0134 (0.422)	0.266 (0.347)
Forest Cover (% , x100) <i>Mean = 35.0, SD = 23.7</i>	0.0110 (0.0118)	0.0152 (0.0119)	0.00942 (0.0122)	0.0133 (0.0123)	-0.0178 (0.0128)	-0.00377 (0.0117)
River? [0/1] <i>Mean = 0.55, SD = 0.50</i>	-0.781 (0.615)	-0.797 (0.617)	-0.767 (0.619)	-0.732 (0.576)	-0.596 (0.438)	-0.488 (0.439)
Wheat Suitability (0 - 10) <i>Mean = 6.87, SD = 1.99</i>	-0.0520 (0.114)	0.0269 (0.122)	-0.0106 (0.131)	-0.228* (0.119)	0.0274 (0.145)	-0.0833 (0.110)
Urban Pop Share, 1863 (x100) <i>Mean = 8.92, SD = 10.26</i>		0.0391 (0.0388)				0.0220 (0.0389)
Factories per 1000, 1868 <i>Mean = 0.20, SD = 0.36</i>			1.048 (0.731)			-0.228 (0.842)
HH Serf Share, 1858 (% , x100) <i>Mean = 10.8, SD = 16.8</i>				0.121* (0.0698)		0.262* (0.140)
Share Serfs on Quit-Rent (% , x100) <i>Mean = 25.77, SD = 30.3</i>					0.0365* (0.0194)	0.0463** (0.0184)
Constant	2.530 (1.968)	2.093 (1.991)	2.450 (1.987)	-0.630 (1.570)	0.876 (1.164)	-2.558 (1.658)
Observations	458	458	456	458	430	429
R-squared	0.009	0.013	0.012	0.111	0.036	0.256

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Specifications are run on the sample of districts with non-zero-serf share. Data, methods, and the sources of the variables are described in the text.

Table 5: Additional Results

Dependent Variable:	Manumission in District? [0/1]				Share of Manumissions Requiring Labor
	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS	Mean = 17.6, SD = 32.3
Serf Share, 1858 (x 100) <i>Mean = 41.4, SD = 23.4</i>	0.000875 (0.00145)	0.00292** (0.00126)	0.00271** (0.00110)	0.00200* (0.00117)	-0.111 (0.193)
Ln(Pop Density, 1858) <i>Mean = 3.97, SD = 0.81</i>	0.0284 (0.0516)	0.130** (0.0622)	0.0670* (0.0348)	0.0737** (0.0360)	7.709* (4.180)
Urban Pop Share, 1863 (x100) <i>Mean = 8.92, SD = 10.26</i>	0.00246 (0.00261)	0.00155 (0.00292)	0.00375 (0.00244)	0.00258 (0.00249)	0.245 (0.262)
Factories per 1000, 1868 <i>Mean = 0.20, SD = 0.36</i>	0.0433 (0.0452)	-0.000786 (0.0423)	-0.00877 (0.0386)		-1.104 (5.224)
HH Serf Share, 1858 (% , x100) <i>Mean = 10.8, SD = 16.8</i>	0.00983** (0.00381)	0.00544** (0.00240)	0.00707*** (0.00243)	0.00569** (0.00225)	-0.241 (0.254)
Share Serfs on Quit-Rent (% , x100) <i>Mean = 25.77, SD = 30.3</i>	0.00607*** (0.00102)	0.00670*** (0.000975)	0.00647*** (0.000700)	0.00627*** (0.000745)	-0.124 (0.128)
100 x % Gap in Land Prices, Populated - Unpopulated Land, 1850s <i>Mean = 32.4, SD = 44.2</i>	0.000597 (0.000466)				
100 x % Estate Land Allocated to Serfs, c. 1858 <i>Mean = 41.0, SD = 23.1</i>		-0.00161 (0.00101)			
100 x % Estates with < 21 Male Serfs, c. 1858 <i>Mean = 46.0, SD = 16.9</i>			-0.00117 (0.00149)		
Ln (Factory Turnover per Worker), c. 1867 <i>Mean = 13.0, SD = 0.93</i>				0.0194 (0.0239)	
Constant	-0.553*** (0.200)	-0.690** (0.274)	-0.527*** (0.157)	-0.880*** (0.316)	-24.33 (29.94)
Observations	361	369	424	391	151
R-squared	0.295	0.278	0.299	0.282	0.054

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Specifications are run on the sample of districts with non-zero-serf share. Specifications also include the % forest cover, the presence of a river (0/1), and soil suitability for wheat. Data, methods, and the sources of the variables are described in the text.

Table 6: Manumission and Peasant Unrest, 1851 – 1863

Dependent Variable:	Portion of Years with Peasant Unrest, 1851 - 1863		Portion of Years with Peasant Unrest (Large events), 1851 - 1863	
	OLS Mean = 0.28, SD = 0.17	OLS	OLS Mean = 0.12, SD = 0.1	OLS
Manumission in District? [0/1]	0.0258* (0.0156)		0.0160* (0.00890)	
Manumitted as % of Serfs in 1858 (Males; x 100)		-0.000190 (0.000763)		0.000148 (0.000371)
Serf Population Share, 1858 (x 100)	0.00221*** (0.000310)	0.00228*** (0.000305)	0.00125*** (0.000182)	0.00130*** (0.000181)
Ln(Pop Density, 1858)	0.0260*** (0.00919)	0.0281*** (0.00892)	0.00617 (0.00523)	0.00755 (0.00519)
Forest Cover (% ,x100)	-0.000656** (0.000327)	-0.000459 (0.000322)	-0.000374** (0.000187)	-0.000264 (0.000186)
River? [0/1]	0.0154 (0.0135)	0.0144 (0.0136)	0.0121 (0.00787)	0.0118 (0.00792)
Wheat Suitability (0 - 10)	0.00549 (0.00492)	0.00602 (0.00497)	0.00747*** (0.00258)	0.00775*** (0.00258)
Constant	0.0664* (0.0340)	0.0541 (0.0339)	0.00117 (0.0190)	-0.00684 (0.0191)
Observations	480	480	480	480
R-squared	0.231	0.227	0.232	0.227

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table 7: Manumissions and the Pace of Post-1861 Land Settlements

	100 x % Former Serf Communes Communes in Redemption by 1877	100 x % Former Male Serfs in Redemption by 1877		Redemption Debt (Rubles) / Desiatina on Former Serf Allotment Land, 1886	
	Mean = 76.4, SD = 19.0	Mean = 80.7, SD = 18.4		Mean = 1.33, SD = 0.49	
Manumission in District? [0/1]	-9.918*** (1.779)	-7.025*** (1.779)		0.0525* (0.0314)	
Manumitted as % of Serfs in 1858 (Males; x 100)			-0.226** (0.109)		-0.00215 (0.00469)
Serf Population Share, 1858 (x 100)	0.0818* (0.0438)	0.0782* (0.0443)	0.0574 (0.0464)	0.00131* (0.000760)	0.00139* (0.000743)
Ln (Pop Density, 1858)	3.106 (2.133)	3.458* (2.055)	2.784 (2.066)	0.300*** (0.0287)	0.310*** (0.0290)
Forest Cover (% ,x100)	-0.214*** (0.0663)	-0.238*** (0.0673)	-0.290*** (0.0618)	-0.00534*** (0.000816)	-0.00503*** (0.000790)
River? [0/1]	1.097 (1.701)	1.302 (1.652)	1.370 (1.678)	-0.0192 (0.0294)	-0.0216 (0.0298)
Wheat Suitability (0 - 10)	-2.422*** (0.651)	-2.507*** (0.601)	-2.584*** (0.617)	0.0747*** (0.0112)	0.0731*** (0.0115)
Constant	87.83*** (10.62)	91.18*** (10.36)	94.79*** (10.48)	-0.257** (0.114)	-0.271** (0.114)
Observations	441	441	441	366	366
R-squared	0.145	0.134	0.109	0.705	0.703

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Specifications are run on the sample of districts with non-zero-serf share and non-missing variables. Data, methods, and the sources of the variables are described in the text.

Appendix

Figure A1: Original Source of Manumission Information

ВѢДОМОСТЬ

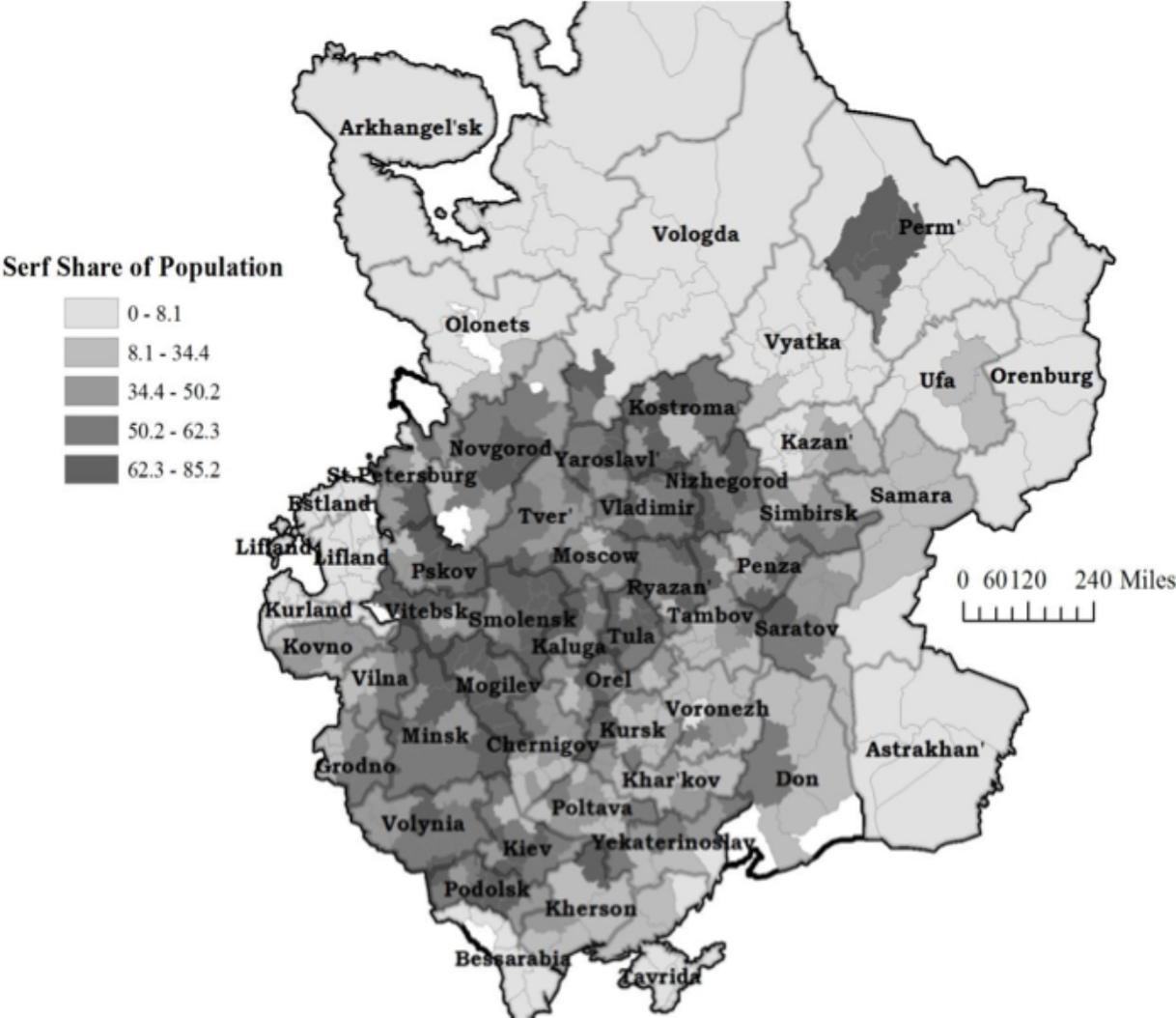
О КРЕСТЬЯНАХЪ, УВОЛЕННЫХЪ ПО ДОГОВОРУ СЪ ПОМѢЩИКАМИ И
ВСТУПИВШИХЪ ПО РАЗНЫМЪ ДРУГИМЪ СЛУЧАЯМЪ, ВЪ ЗВАНІЕ ГОСУ-
ДАРСТВЕННЫХЪ КРЕСТЬЯНЪ ВОДВОРЕННЫХЪ НА СОБСТВЕН-
НЫХЪ ЗЕМЛЯХЪ.

Время уволь- ненія.	Отъ кого уволены, какой губерніи и уѣзда.	Число душъ.	Количество земли. дес. саж.	На какихъ условіяхъ уволе- ны крестьяне.
1804. Апрѣль 12.	Статскаго Совѣтника Пет- рово-Соловово, <i>Воронеж-</i> <i>ской губерніи</i> Валуйскаго уѣзда	5001	Вся земля, принадлежа- щая къ имѣ- нію.	Уплатить 1 ¹ / ₂ мил. руб. ас- сиза въ 19 лѣтъ, съ 1804 года.
Августъ 27.	Гвардіи прапорщика Прота- сова, <i>Орловской губерніи</i> Болховскаго уѣзда	5	14	—

Крестьяне сіи предоставле-
ны были съ землею въ поль-
зу Орловскаго Приказа Обще-
ственного Призрѣнія, и по
Высочайшему повелѣнію 27
августа 1804 года причислены
въ званіе свободныхъ хлѣбо-
пашцевъ, съ обязанностью
вносить Приказу, въ пользу
его заведеній, бездомочно
оброчныя деньги, на томъ
основаніи, какъ платятъ ихъ
въ казну казенные крестьяне.
Въ слѣдствіе накопленія на
нихъ недоимокъ съ 1811 по
1845 годъ, крестьяне сіи
были приняты въ казенное
управленіе, съ вознагражде-
ніемъ Приказа 189 р. 42³/₄ к.

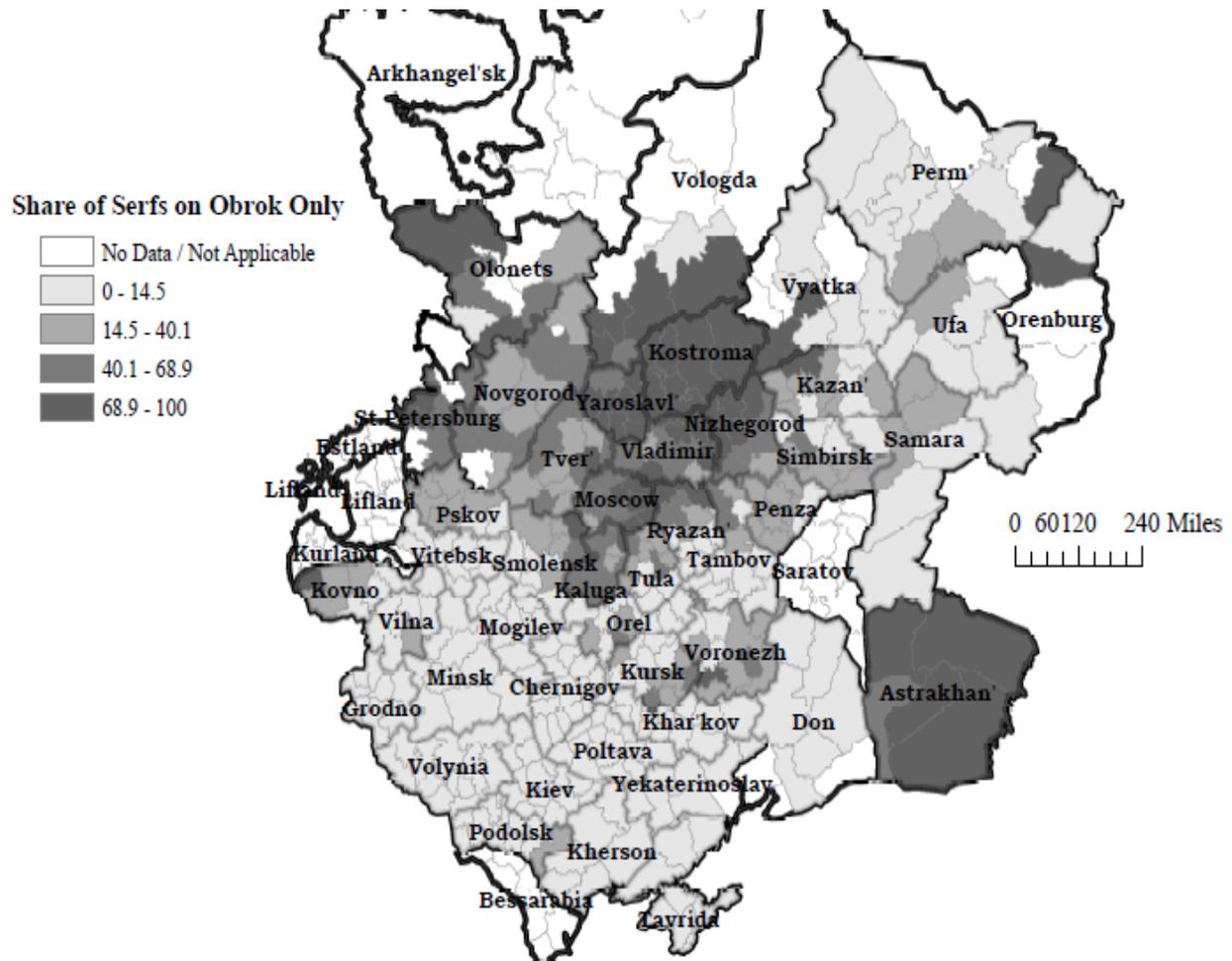
Note: This image is a photo of the first page of “Vedomost’” (1858), which was the appendix that summarized the estate-level manumissions under the 1803 law.

Figure A2: The Distribution of Serfdom in European Russia, c. 1858



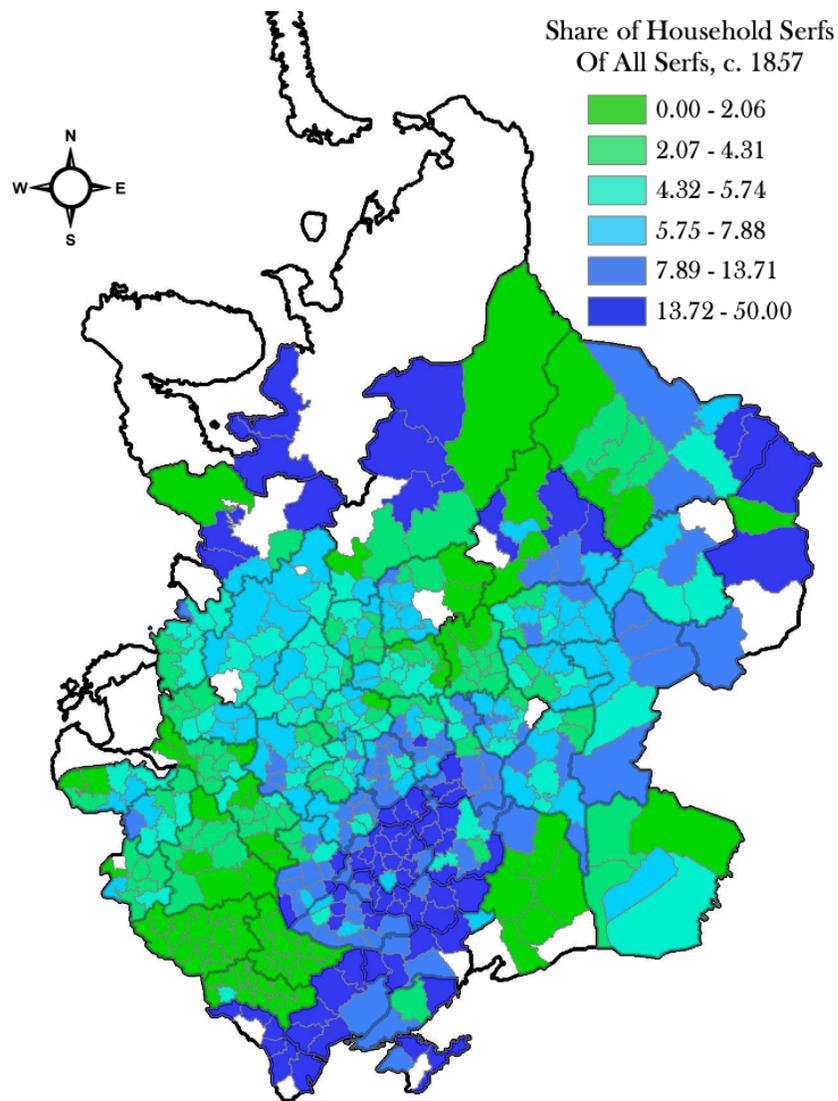
Note: This district-level measure of serfdom is the number of serfs (from the 10th tax revision as published in Troinitiskii, 1861) divided by a measure of the total population, c. 1858, based on tax records and provided in Bushen (1863).

Figure A3: The Geography of Serf Obligations, c. 1858



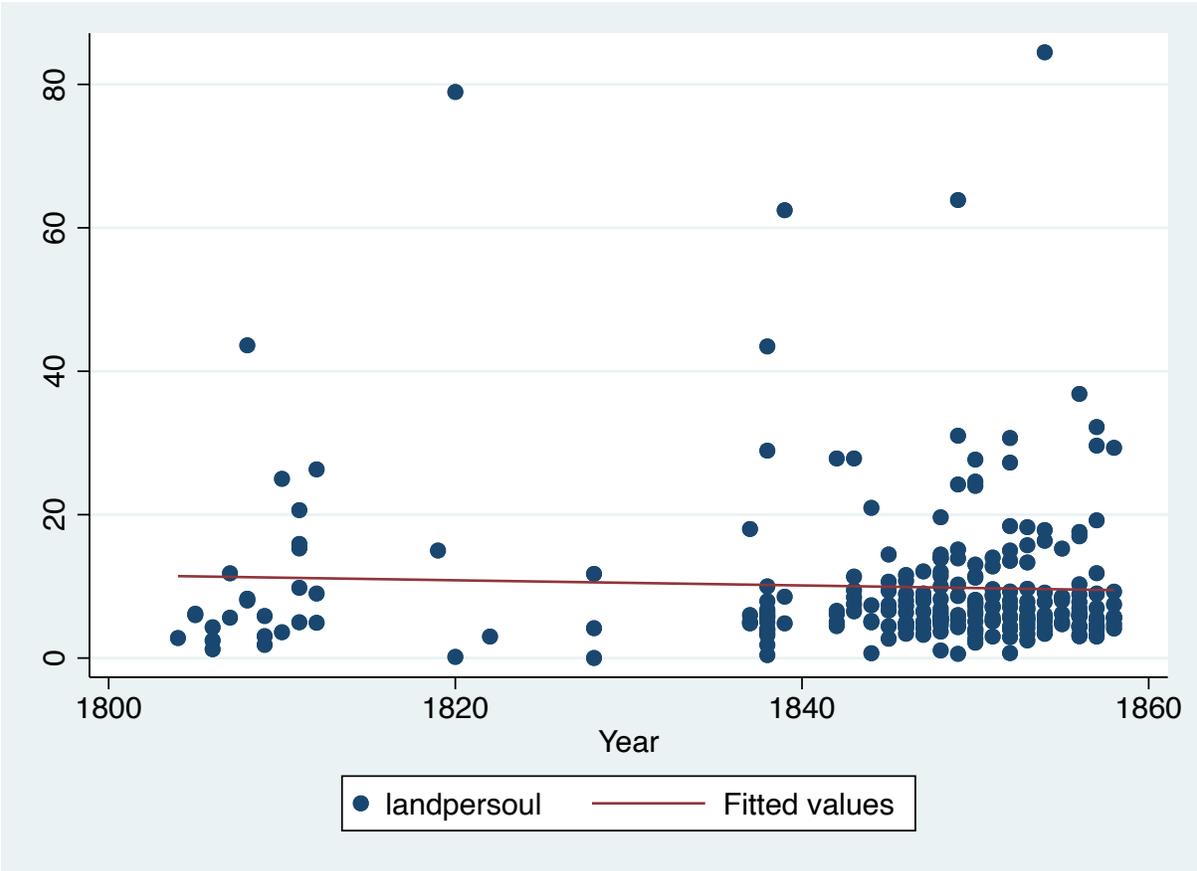
Note: The figure presents the district (*uezd*)-level distribution of serf obligation type, c. 1858, as indicated by the share of peasants *only* on *obrok* (quit-rent), as opposed to *barshchina* (corvee labor) or some mix of the two. White colored districts reflect either the absence of data or the share does not apply, as there were no serfs. The breakdown of obligations is provided in Skrebnitskii, ed. (1865/66) from data collected by the Editorial Commission. The denominator comes from Troinitskii (1861).

Figure A4: The Geography of “Domestic” Serfdom, c. 1858



Note: These data come from Troitskii (1861), who breaks down serfs by whether they were *dvorye* (“household” – i.e. engaged in artisanal work or domestic labor integral to the running of the estate) or *krest’ianskie*, (“peasant,” meaning they worked in agriculture on the demesne or engaged in their own activities while paying quit-rent). This map reflects the totals summed across males and females. 1857 is a misprint – the data are from 1858.

Figure A5: Land per Soul Across Manumission Settlements



Note: Each dot (N = 246) indicates a manumission settlement where the land transferred to the freed serfs was given as a numeric value. Settlements where the land transferred was missing or “All” are not included. The denominator underlying each data point is the number of male serfs involved in the settlement. The y-variable is the land per male serf denoted in *desiatiny* (1 = 2.7 acres): mean – 10.0; SD – 11.0; median – 6.4; Min – 0.015; Max – 84.5. The red line is a simple fitted one to these data. See the text for more on the underlying data.