

WIRTSCHAFTER, ELISE KIMERLING. *Russia's Age of Serfdom, 1649–1861*. Blackwell, Malden, MA [etc.] 2008. xiv, 287 pp. £22.99; € 31.10; doi:10.1017/S0020859008003775

Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter is a former student of Marc Raeff, renowned historian of Tsarist Russia, well-known primarily for his comparison between the state and the administration (especially the police) in Prussia and Russia. Since the early 1990s, Wirtschafter has published quite a number of original analyses in the field of Russian history. Her Ph.D. thesis, which appeared in 1990, focused on the peasant-soldier in Russia and highlighted the relationship between imperial expansion, state building, training an army, and the rise of serfdom.¹ The author also stressed the complex legal and social relationship between the soldier and the farmer.

Wirtschafter's second book focused on "social orders" (or legal estates under the old regime).² She showed in particular that soldiers, having completed their military service, were reclassified into groups other than serfs: either as peasants of the state or urban residents, especially in the subgroup of *raznochintsy*, i.e. "people of different ranks", a residual category which also included artisans and merchants outside corporations, worker-peasants, and musketeers. The existence of this category in itself led the author to question the traditional argument which claimed that the legal and social "orders" under old-regime Russia were completely fixed until 1905, if not 1917. Wirtschafter, however, stressed the significant degree of social mobility in Tsarist Russia, even before serfdom was officially abolished in 1861.

Wirtschafter subsequently published a volume on all social groups in Russia in which she extended her analysis of soldiers and *raznochintsy* to the whole society.³ In recent years, Wirtschafter has studied the Russian theatre as an expression not only of the arts but also of politics (the representation of the court and absolutism).⁴

All these elements are present in her latest book, a synthesis on Russia at the time of serfdom, i.e. from 1649, the year in which the code enserfing the peasantry was adopted, to 1861, when serfs were emancipated. This book is the first of a series of three, coordinated by Simon Dixon, a scholar of Tsarist Russia, that will provide a new synthesis of Russian history from the seventeenth century to the present day. The main aim of this series is to incorporate the historiography of the past fifteen to twenty years, which has seen the opening of the archives of the former Soviet Union. Dixon believes that these new materials will add significantly to our understanding of many aspects of Russian history.

Wirtschafter takes this task seriously; her book covers politics, culture, the economy, religion, and society. It is divided into three parts, each comprising three chapters. Part 1 studies the formation of the absolutist monarchy and the role of Peter the Great in the construction of the administrative and fiscal apparatus, in the definition of ranks, and in the "Westernization" of Russian culture. Part 2 is devoted to the author's specialist field, society and the legal "orders". The third and final part examines the dynamics of Russian society, particularly the emergence of a civil society and the limits of bureaucratic control.

These three parts are ordered by subject and chronology. Part 1 focuses on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until the death of Peter the Great in 1725, the second part covers much of the eighteenth century (from the death of Peter the Great to that of Catherine II in 1796), while Part 3 ends with the abolition of serfdom in 1861. The image of Russia that emerges is one of a country far less rigid than that suggested by the

1. Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *From Serf to Russian Soldier* (Princeton, NJ, 1990).

2. *Idem*, *Structures of Society: Imperial Russia's "People of Various Ranks"* (DeKalb, IL, 1994).

3. *Idem*, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL, 1997).

4. *Idem*, *The Play of Ideas in Russian Enlightenment Theater* (DeKalb, IL, 2003).

traditional historiography, though it would be an exaggeration to speak of a genuine “modern”, industrial, and democratic society. The question is whether this fluidity was consciously aimed at the Tsarist elites or whether it had been imposed on them “from below”. In that respect, Wirtschafter partially revises her previous approach in affirming that the ranks are “best understood as tools of administration imposed by the government on subject and servitors of the tsar [...] the gap between official definitions and concrete realities suggests that the government remained legally free but practically limited in its ability to mold social relationships and institutions” (p. 22).

This argument is different from that maintaining that the porosity of the social order was ultimately intended by the Tsarist leaders themselves, to reconcile social stability and economic dynamics. Now, a greater emphasis is put on the emergence of a civil society fighting absolutism, but also on the functional role of serfdom. That role can be summed up in terms of two major achievements: serfdom protected the rural population from the risk of famine and was thus a form of social insurance; and serfdom provided the state with military recruits, a more reliable basis for taxation, and, therefore, an entitlement to play a role on the wider European stage.

These arguments are very much consistent with the current tendencies in Russian historiography: instead of a subjugated and passive society, the analysis focuses on the tensions between the overwhelming ambitions of Tsarist (and Soviet) rulers and the emergence of a civil society. These features combine to explain both the continuities and discontinuities in Russian history. This is one of the major goals not only of this book, but of the whole series too, as Simon Dixon stresses in his preface. According to Dixon, each of the three volumes will cross a significant caesura in Russian history: Peter’s reforms, the Bolshevik revolution, and the collapse of the USSR in 1991. We cannot but welcome this ambition and the main conclusions of this book, and presumably of the whole series.

At the same time, these general guidelines, and those of Wirtschafter in particular, raise a number of questions. We shall consider two, one concerning the geographical and the other the chronological dimension of serfdom. As regards the first, we should question the relevance of an analysis of Tsarist Russia limited to its European territories. After all, the expansion of the Tsarist state, the enserfment of peasants, and the identification of social identities were closely related to the development of the Russian Empire. It therefore seems problematic to ignore it. The author is conscious of this limitation, but concludes that it does not change the substance of her argument.

The second question relates to the discontinuities and continuities in Russian history. We applaud the aim of the author and the editor to overcome the traditional caesura evident in the historiography (Peter the Great, the Revolution of 1917, the collapse of the USSR in 1991). At the same time, one might ask why one traditional caesura is retained, namely the establishment and abolition of serfdom – a sort of historiographical icon for Russia. Indeed, in her previous studies Wirtschafter has stressed the legal, economic, and social dynamics of Russia and the continuities between the period before and after 1861. It is therefore all the more curious that those elements are relegated to the background in her current synthesis. This approach echoes that of recent Russian historiography, which, while raising doubts as to the real discontinuity introduced by the Revolution of 1917 and, in part, by the reforms of Peter the Great, continues to sanctify 1861 and to consider the abolition of serfdom as one of the most crucial events in the whole of Russian history. In terms of comparative history, this orientation differs strongly from that in the history of slavery and serfdom in Eastern Europe, which highlights the limited impact of the official abolition of these institutions and thus questions the conventional opposition between slavery (and serfdom) and the “free” world. At the moment, this more complex consideration is lacking in the historiography of serfdom in the Russian Empire.

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