Fighting for a Living

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Military service and the Russian social order, 1649-1861

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From roughly the mid-fifteenth century, a centralized monarchy developed in the Moscow region of the Russian lands, and the building of the Russian service state got underway. Critical to the monarchy's accumulation of powers was the linking of noble status, including the possession of land and serfs, with service to the prince. Although a core of great noble families held patrimonial lands in hereditary tenure, the majority of nobles possessed landed estates on condition of service. By the mid-sixteenth century, all nobles, including holders of patrimony, performed obligatory service and, following the conquest of the khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan, and Siberia, Muscovy joined the ranks of the world's multiethnic, multiconfessional empires.

The process of political centralization, military consolidation, and imperial expansion came to a temporary halt due to Tsar Ivan IV's reign of terror (the notorious oprichnina of 1565-1572) and the biological demise of the dynasty in 1598. A period of civil war, social rebellion, and foreign occupation known as the “Time of Troubles” ensued. Order returned after 1613, when the “election” of a new tsar, Mikhail Romanov (r. 1613-1645), ended the troubles and inaugurated a period of institutional restoration and modern state-building. In the reign of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (r. 1645-1676), the Law Code (Ulozhenie) of 1649 codified serfdom, the social ranks of Muscovite society, and the tsardom's legal-administrative apparatus. Throughout Russia's age of serfdom, until the emancipation of 1861, the Law Code provided the starting point for much of the legislation that defined the relationship between social status and military service.

Alongside a centralized bureaucracy and legally defined social groups, seventeenth-century Muscovy also produced a European-style military. Reform began between the 1630s and 1660s with the introduction of new-model infantry and cavalry regiments, large-scale conscription levies, and lifelong service, all of which constituted significant steps toward the formation of a regular standing army. The acquisition of Left Bank Ukraine...

1 Keep, Soldiers of the Tsar; Stevens, Russia's Wars of Emergence; Fuller, Strategy and Power in Russia.
and the city of Kiev in the period 1654-1667 revealed that Muscovy had indeed achieved a degree of military effectiveness. Still, the process of reform remained tentative and the monarchy’s military capacity limited. The inability to sustain combat operations in distant theaters, illustrated by the failed Crimean campaigns of 1687 and 1689, led to a flood of innovation in the reign of Tsar Peter I (r. 1682/9-1725).\(^2\) Under Peter annual conscription levies, lifelong year-round service for noble officers and peasant conscripts, unprecedented levels of taxation, tighter administrative controls, and the massive importation of European technology and cultural models set the stage for Russia’s rise to great-power status.\(^3\) The consolidation of Russian power in the Baltic and Black Seas, the partitions of Poland, the defeat of Napoleon, and Alexander I’s (r. 1801-1825) leadership in the Concert of Europe are just a few of the military and diplomatic successes that over the next century and a half exemplified the empire’s international stature.

Russia’s ongoing military strength has long baffled historians, given that well into the twentieth century society remained overwhelmingly peasant and the economy overwhelmingly agrarian. A critical reason for the effectiveness of Russian power has been the ability of successive governments, and forms of government, to mobilize human and material resources over the long duration. As early as 1630/1, decades before the reforms of Tsar Peter I, regular levies of recruits and lifelong terms of service began. During the Thirteen Years’ War (1654-1667) with Poland, military drafts swept up about 100,000 men and, although this was no small number, it paled in comparison to what would come in the early eighteenth century.\(^4\) Historians estimate that inductees into the Petrine army numbered 205,000 in 1700-1711 alone and at least 140,000 in 1713-1724. At the time of Peter’s death in 1725, the Russian army consisted of 130,000 regular troops; 75,000-80,000 garrison troops; and 20,000 Cossack irregulars.\(^5\) In the post-Petrine era, the military continued to grow, along with the empire’s population and territorial expanse. By the mid-eighteenth century, the army numbered 292,000 troops in a population of 23,230,000; and in 1800, 446,000 troops in a population of 37,414,000. Between 1705 and 1801, roughly 2.25 million men

\(^2\) Between 1682 and 1689, Peter I and co-tsar Ivan V ruled under the regency of Sophia, Peter’s half-sister and Ivan’s full sister. In 1689 Peter and his supporters broke with Sophia, who was confined to a convent. Peter’s effective reign began in 1694, when his mother died, but he did not formally become sole ruler until the death of Ivan in 1696.

\(^3\) Cracraft, The Revolution of Peter the Great.

\(^4\) Moon, The Russian Peasantry, pp. 82-83; Keep, Soldiers of the Tsar, pp. 50-62, 80-92; Fuller, Strategy and Power in Russia, p. 7.

\(^5\) Fuller, Strategy and Power in Russia, pp. 45-46.
were drafted; in the years 1796 to 1815, 1,616,199; and in the period 1816 to 1855, 3,158,199. Just a few years prior to the outbreak of the Crimean War, a time of relative peace for the empire, the size of the army reached 859,000.6

The actual “burden of defense” imposed on Russian society is difficult to calculate, and the figures that are available should be viewed only as rough estimates.7 Russian data from the period are generally inadequate for sophisticated statistical analysis. Nor is it always clear which troops historians are counting. In addition to the empire’s regular standing army, the military establishment included garrison troops, veterans’ units, military colonies, Cossacks, and various irregular hosts manned by ethnic minorities. The point here is not to measure the burden carried by the Russian people – surely it was substantial – but to highlight the organizational effort needed to conscript, train, and maintain such a large military force. However inefficient and arbitrary this effort sometimes appears, it was effective in sustaining costly military victories and ongoing imperial expansion.

Decades before the appearance of revolutionary France’s citizen army, Russia developed a system of mass conscription based on the institution of serfdom, the social arrangements set forth in the Law Code of 1649, and the reforms of Tsar Peter I. Both the Muscovite Law Code and Petrine legislation bound individuals to local communities and social categories that were defined by their privileges and obligations to the state. Beginning in 1719-1728, periodic censuses identified male taxpayers liable for conscription and payment of the capitation. The combination of census registration, conscription levies, and collection of the capitation facilitated resource mobilization and greatly increased state revenues. The groups counted in the censuses included all categories of peasants and townspeople who lacked the capital to qualify for merchant status. Sons of clergy and ecclesiastical ranks who did not have church appointments also could be conscripted by special levy, even though they were not inscribed in the census rolls and did not pay the capitation. Nobles likewise remained exempt from census registration and payment of the capitation, but they continued to serve in the military or in civil administration until the emancipation of 1762 made their service voluntary. With the exception of elite merchants, who paid an annual fee in return for specific socioeconomic privileges, all of these statuses, taxed and untaxed, were inherited from the father at birth. Changes of status

6 Hartley, Russia, 1762-1825, pp. 10-11; Wirtschafter, From Serf to Russian Soldier, p. 3; Curtiss, The Russian Army under Nicholas I, p. 108.
7 Pintner, “The Burden of Defense in Imperial Russia”.
could occur through service, marriage (for women only), or monarchical decree; however, such changes rarely affected peasants, who by most counts comprised 80 to 90 per cent of the overall population. Whether peasants were attached to seigneurial, state, ecclesiastical/economic, or crown lands, they remained bound to their village of origin, paid the capitation, and at age seventeen became liable for military service.8

Military service and the peasant commune

Russian military achievements from the reign of Tsar Peter I to the Crimean War of 1853-1856 cannot be understood apart from the history of serfdom, an institution, or social mechanism, that made possible the effective mobilization of human and material resources across a vast and sparsely populated territory. The imposition of legal restrictions on peasant movement had begun already in the late fifteenth century, when the Muscovite monarchy consolidated its authority in the central region of the Russian lands. For the next two centuries, the development of serfdom paralleled the development of noble classes that served the Moscow grand prince. A basic calculus emerged, according to which Russian peasants provided for the Muscovite elite so that the elite could in turn serve the tsar. From the outset, then, serfdom functioned as the means to support military servicemen and mobilize resources for the prince. These statist goals, more than the estate culture of noble landlords, determined the role that serfdom would play in Russian society and polity.9

The basic unit of peasant society was the commune, governed by a village assembly composed of the heads of member households. The origins of the commune remain obscure, but the institution most likely evolved out of the agricultural practices of the East Slavic tribes who, prior to the emergence of the Kievan polity in the ninth century, occupied what would become the Russian lands. When Muscovite state-building began in the fifteenth century, the commune was already managing village relationships and access to resources. From that point onward, successive Russian governments linked monarchical and seigneurial authority to the commune in order to extract resources and exploit peasant labor. Controlled by village patriarchs and elected peasant officials, the commune exercised economic,

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8 The Recruitment Statute of 1766 set the age of conscription at seventeen to thirty-five.
9 Hellie, Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy.
social, and judicial authority and acted as the intermediary between the peasant community and the landlord or government.

From the peasant perspective, the commune’s most important functions were to regulate production in open fields and to guarantee that each household enjoyed access to common resources such as water, forest, and pasture. Although environmental conditions and agricultural arrangements varied across the empire, the communal structures that developed in the central and steppe regions of European Russia provided the foundation for Russian social and political arrangements. One of the key mechanisms that developed out of communal structures, particularly communal land tenure, was the periodic repartition or redistribution of arable fields based on the number of husband/wife work teams in a household. The goal of this mechanism was to ensure that each household possessed sufficient land to support its members and meet its obligations to the community, landlord, and state. During both the Muscovite and the imperial periods, it was the commune that enforced the fulfillment of labor, monetary, and service obligations. Based on the principle of collective responsibility (krugovaia poruka), the entire peasant community assumed liability for the obligations of individual members. Whether the task at hand concerned the delivery of recruits, the performance of labor, or the payment of taxes and feudal dues, the commune guaranteed that government and seigneurial demands were met. If a household could not meet its obligations, fellow villagers took up the slack.

In addition to extracting resources, communal authorities, in cooperation with noble landowners, also policed the countryside. Communal authorities disciplined noncompliant peasants, and the village community provided assistance in times of illness, death, or natural disaster. When social order broke down, peasant officials punished troublemakers or cooperated with the landlord to do so. In cases of collective disobedience or outright rebellion, the arrival of troops usually sufficed to restore calm. The peasant commune most certainly did not embody the natural communism imagined by nineteenth-century Russian socialists, but it was a vibrant and deeply embedded institution that for centuries met the economic and social needs of Russian peasants. Ultimately, the commune proved more resilient than either the monarchy or the nobility. Weathering the storms of political centralization, foreign invasion, capitalist industrialization, social revolution, and wartime crisis, the commune adapted to changes in Russian society and economy. Through World War I, the February and Bolshevik

Moon, The Russian Peasantry.
Revolutions, and the civil war of 1918-1921, the commune continued to structure peasant life, disappearing only when the Soviet regime used violence and brutal repression to impose collectivization during the First Five-Year Plan.

In imperial Russia, the process of conscription, which started at the village level, highlighted key problems of social development resulting from the intersection of military service and the peasant commune. Although state-imposed social arrangements defined conscription, particularly liability for service, realities on the ground also affected the official arrangements. Whether the demands of the state or the organization of peasant life determined the parameters of conscription is not always clear. Orders to conduct conscription levies came from St. Petersburg, and officials selected recruits based on units of 100 to 500 men. Usually, one man per unit would be taken, though in times of intensive warfare, the burden increased.11 Once recruitment orders reached the countryside, local officials, landlords, and peasant communities assumed responsibility for delivering the specified number of individuals. At this point, the communal organization of peasant life played the critical role. Because there was very little legislation pertaining to conscription before the early nineteenth century – only in 1831 did a full codification of the rules for conducting levies appear – peasant practices determined the recruitment process. It is possible, therefore, that these practices provided the basis for the specific mechanisms subsequently prescribed by state law.

Like the distribution of land allotments, feudal dues, labor obligations, and capitation payments, the burden of conscription depended on the number of able-bodied males in a peasant household. Each recruitment unit of 100 to 500 men consisted of peasant families, usually extended families, organized in a rotational order defined by the number and ages of adult male laborers. Peasants, landlords, and the state all sought to distribute the burden of service in an equitable manner that would preserve the ability of each household to sustain its members and meet its fiscal and labor obligations. In other words, the loss of a male laborer to the army was not supposed to undermine the economic viability of the household. For this reason, large households stood first in line to provide recruits, while families with only one laborer remained exempt. The recruitment regulation of 1831 extended this exemption to include families containing a father and only one son. The regulation also specified that bachelors be chosen before mar-

11 In 1812, the year Napoleon invaded Russia and occupied Moscow, there were three levies of 20 recruits per 500 men: Hartley, Russia, 1762-1825, p. 26.
ried men and childless husbands before those with children. Both legislative prescriptions and the egalitarian principles of community justice aimed to minimize the social and economic disruptions caused by military service. Despite efforts to distribute the burden of service in an even-handed manner, peasants viewed conscription as a tragedy. From the peasant perspective, the reality of conscription defied the egalitarian beauty of the “line system”. Hence the proverb “One son is not a son. Two sons are half a son. Three sons are a son.” Indeed, the legal niceties of official regulations were not always observed in real life. Peasant practices varied significantly and, although many landlords and communes insisted that large households be first in line to provide recruits, others preferred to rid the community of economically weak peasants who were landless or had fallen behind in paying dues and taxes. Communities and landlords also used conscription for disciplinary purposes, sending off criminals, troublemakers, drunkards, and men deemed disobedient, unruly, or simply lazy. Nor was there much protection from the administrative arbitrariness of corrupt officials or abusive landlords. Bribery always remained a possibility in the workings of tsarist administration, and wealthier peasants possessed the means to purchase substitutes or exemption receipts. Physical requirements likewise could undercut the equity of the line system. In 1850, for example, only 66,544 out of 139,002 recruits delivered to the military were accepted into service. The rest were rejected because of height, age, physical disabilities, or chronic diseases. Physical inadequacies and the appearance of chronic disease might be staged or self-inflicted but, regardless of the reasons for rejection, unfit recruits had to be replaced by their respective communities.

**Soldiers in society**

The institution of serfdom and the relationship of individuals to local communities created circumstances that gave to Russian conscription and the entire military system distinctive characteristics. As noted above, the Law Code of 1649 bound all Russian subjects, except for nobles and clergy, to their place of residence. Peter I’s government built upon this bondage in defining socioeconomic privileges and service obligations to the state. Once a peasant (of any category) or a townsman was drafted, however – more precisely, once he took the oath of allegiance to the tsar – he became
legally free from the capitation, the mark of lower-class status, and from any obligations to the local community. Given the long term of service – life until 1793, twenty-five years after that, and twenty years with five years in the reserve beginning in 1834 – this legal freedom, which in and of itself constituted upward social mobility, could not be realized in everyday life. Only if a soldier survived the long term of service or became unsuitable for military duties did he have a chance to actuate his legal freedom by moving into a higher social rank or profession.

The ambiguity of the soldier’s social advancement was equally striking in the case of his wife. Because a woman’s social status depended on her father and, after marriage, on her husband, soldiers’ wives also became legally free at the moment of a husband’s induction into military service. Once again, however, the upward mobility represented by legal emancipation contrasted sharply with harsh social reality. No longer a legally bound member of the village community, soldiers’ wives became dependent on the generosity of relatives, communes, and landlords. Many villages provided land and assistance to support soldiers’ wives and their children, especially male children who would grow up to become able-bodied members of the peasant community. But given that soldiers served for life or for twenty-five years, and given that a woman could not remarry without proof of her spouse’s death, soldiers’ wives also produced illegitimate children and gained a reputation for loose morals. Needless to say, illegitimate children and unattached women were not always welcome in patriarchal village communities.

Soldiers’ wives did have options, however. Most remained in the village, but if they chose or were forced to leave home, their legal freedom created a number of possibilities.14 Soldiers’ wives, when practicable, could live among the troops, or with the permission of their husbands, obtain passports that allowed them to settle in towns. Military commanders employed them in “female occupations” such as making tents; sewing, washing, and mending clothes; and working in hospitals. Because soldiers’ wives enjoyed the privileges of free social categories, they also could engage in urban trades, that is, in occupations and commercial endeavors preserved for the legal residents of towns. Women who became town-dwellers remained outside the formal urban community and therefore enjoyed exemption from the capitation and various labor obligations. There is limited information about the occupations pursued by soldiers’ wives, but they are known to have been active participants in prostitution and in the trafficking of unwanted children between the countryside and the Moscow and St.

14 Shcherbinin, Voennyi factor v povsednevnoi zhizni russkoii zhenshchiny.
Petersburg foundling homes. By the mid-nineteenth century, some also found employment in the factories that had begun to dot the landscape of central Russia. Although the loss of membership in an officially recognized community gave soldiers’ wives legal tools for social advancement, it also deprived them of secure socioeconomic moorings. Both literary and official sources give the impression that soldiers’ wives struggled to find a place in society. Most continued to live as peasants, and some managed to achieve independence by establishing themselves in urban occupations, but others suffered endless exploitation and abuse.

The vulnerability of soldiers’ wives also affected their children, both legitimate and illegitimate. Family life could be complicated in the Russian army, especially outside the garrison towns. In general, the presence of retired soldiers and soldiers’ families created legal ambiguities and welfare problems that the government could not ignore. One response was to establish yet another legally defined social category, the “soldiers’ children” (soldatskie deti). This category existed from 1719 to 1856 and included any children born to soldiers after their induction into active military service. The illegitimate children of soldiers’ wives, girlfriends, and daughters also belonged to the “soldiers’ children”. All of these children, regardless of origin, came under the authority of the military domain (voennoe vedomstvo), and the males among them were destined for a life of military service. Soldiers’ sons could live with parents or relatives until age eighteen, when they began active service, or they could enter special military schools at age seven. In 1797, 12,000 soldiers’ sons were enrolled in military schools and, by the time the category was abolished in 1856, the number had reached 378,000. Most became common soldiers or noncommissioned officers, though some learned crafts, worked as copyists, or acquired technical and administrative skills needed by the military.

Unlike conscripted peasants and townsmen who began military service in the lowest unskilled ranks, soldiers’ children possessed a modicum of education that created opportunities for meaningful social mobility. They were especially important as a source of noncommissioned officers. In the years 1836-1856, the schools for soldiers’ sons, which also could include students from other social categories, produced 15,634 noncommissioned officers and 6,771 musicians for the army. Data from 1863 show that among officers promoted from nonnoble social groups, 56 per cent or 365 of 654 came from the soldiers’ children. Despite the chance of real upward mobil-

15 [Wirtschafter], “Soldiers’ Children, 1719-1856”.
16 Wirtschafter, From Serf to Russian Soldier, pp. 38-39, 166n.
ity, the parents of soldiers’ children did everything possible to conceal their offspring from military officials. Just as the fact of legal emancipation did not make military service desirable among peasants, so too the opportunity to receive an education and rise in the social hierarchy did not undermine the natural desire of soldiers’ wives to keep their sons at home. Landlords too proved eager to claim soldiers’ children as peasants in order to augment the population of their estates. No wonder the Decembrist leader P.I. Pestel described the status of soldiers’ children as bondage or slavery (kabal) to the state. Many parents obviously agreed. Separated from home and hearth at a young age, forced to endure harsh discipline and material privation in underfunded and poorly administered military schools, soldiers’ sons still faced twenty-five years of active service beginning at age eighteen.

The story of the serf Makei Aleksandrov, who sought recognition as an illegally enserfed soldier’s son, highlights the challenges faced by military families. Brought before the Bronnitsy district court in Moscow province in 1843, Aleksandrov was accused of striking a peasant official (starosta) and failing to extinguish a fire. Aleksandrov denied the identity ascribed to him and instead claimed to be Makei Filipov, the illegitimate son of a soldier’s wife, a status that carried legal freedom. After several peasants testified to Aleksandrov’s disorderly and negligent conduct, the court sentenced him to fifty blows with birches and returned him to his master. Aleksandrov denounced the judgement, and his case was forwarded to the Moscow criminal chamber, which approved the lower court’s decision. Undeterred, in September 1844, Aleksandrov petitioned the Moscow military governor-general, who immediately took steps to corroborate the serf’s self-proclaimed free status. Perhaps because the tsarist army always needed soldiers, the provincial-level authorities treated Aleksandrov’s assertions seriously. They instructed their subordinates to investigate his origins and ordered his master, Provincial Secretary Isakov, to present appropriate documentation.

In Aleksandrov’s appeal to the governor-general, he claimed that his birth to the soldier’s wife Nastas’ia Nikiforova could be verified in the parish registers of a village in Bronnitsy district. To support this story, Aleksandrov identified his godparents, an older sister (also illegitimate) who lived on another estate, and several additional relatives, including a son from a forced marriage. Aleksandrov admitted to being registered to the nobleman Isakov in the eighth census, and during the judicial proceedings he con-

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17 Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv goroda Moskvy, f. 16 (Kantseliariia Moskovskogo general-gubernatora), op. 13, d. 449.
continued to make quitrent payments. But, the serf proclaimed, he remained a wrongfully condemned free man, prosecuted for his alleged crimes only after he initiated a lawsuit seeking emancipation. Aleksandrov’s boldness notwithstanding, he did not expect to receive fair treatment at the hands of local officials. His master, Aleksandrov declared, was himself an official and friendly with members of the district court. In light of such unjust circumstances, Aleksandrov requested the transfer of his case to another locality and written permission to live independently until authorities reached a final decision. These requests were denied; however, district officials, under direct pressure from superiors, continued to seek additional information from Aleksandrov’s registered owner.

At this point the archival record falls silent, and the final resolution of the case is not known. Perhaps the governor-general’s interest produced documentation that corroborated the convicted serf’s story. If Makei Aleksandrov was in fact the illegitimate son of a soldier’s wife then, earlier in his life, his mother or landlord, or perhaps he himself, had successfully hidden his identity from the military authorities. Maybe by 1843 he was old enough to think that he could avoid front-line duty if he entered military service. Regardless of how the case ended, and it is possible that no decision was reached, the tribulations or machinations of Makei Aleksandrov, self-defined as Filipov, demonstrate how the legal freedom of soldiers and their families could become both a source of vulnerability and a tool for survival among the empire’s lowliest subjects. The telling point is that a serf understood the legal freedom associated with the status of soldier’s son, or a soldier’s son understood the illegality of his enserfment. In either situation, belief in the benefits of legal freedom, including the chance to escape the conditions of serfdom, led an individual to act.

The special condition of soldiers’ children resulted from the legal and socioeconomic realities of serfdom and from Russia’s broader social arrangements based on inherited status. The intersection of serfdom and military service created a class of free individuals situated outside the peasantry and other widely recognized social categories. Soldiers’ children were not the only group that occupied ambiguous terrain in Russian society. Retired soldiers and soldiers’ wives were similarly placed, as were a variety of service, proto-professional, economic, and educated ranks. Built around the institution of serfdom, the Russian social order produced numerous small categories defined, like the larger “estates” (sosloviia or sostoiania), by specific privileges, obligations, and functions. These categories, referred to collectively as the “people of various ranks”, illustrate the uncertainties
of social status that were broadly characteristic of imperial Russia. In addition, their development shows how individuals, communities, and groups in society were able to use official categories and legislative prescriptions, precisely because of the ambiguities they produced, for their own purposes – in order to survive, prosper, resist authority, and negotiate position within the framework of the social order.

Soldiers in service

After a peasant or townsman entered military service, received appointment to a regiment, and underwent basic training, he became a soldier in the service of the tsar, but a soldier whose everyday life remained closely connected to civilian society. The modern standing army created by Tsar Peter I and repeatedly reformed by his successors – the army that established Russian power in the Baltic and Black Seas, secured Russia’s western and southwestern frontiers against Sweden and the Ottoman Empire, eliminated the threat posed by the Crimean Tatars, established a Russian foothold in Transcaucasia at the expense of Persia, and utterly destroyed Napoleon’s Grande Armée – this army was far from regular and only partially standing. Even if one disregards distinctly irregular troops such as the Cossacks, who played such an important role in Russian military history, and looks solely at the regular line forces, the Russian army is best described as semi-standing. Housed primarily in peasant huts and urban homes, Russian troops lived in a variety of conditions and remained economically dependent on local, often civilian, resources. In the spring and summer, military units came together in camps to train and perform state works (for example, building and maintaining roads, bridges, and fortresses), but for six to eight months out of the year, in peacetime of course, soldiers lived dispersed in private homes. As late as 1860, only 28 per cent of the tsar’s troops could be housed in barracks and other state buildings. State works and dispersed quarters limited the attention given to military training and kept soldiers in a civilian environment for extended periods of time.

The interconnectedness of military and civilian society reached deeply into the workings of the regimental economy and hence also into the everyday life of common soldiers. The army’s peacetime system of supply dated

18 Wirtschafter, Structures of Society, Idem, “Legal Identity and the Possession of Serfs in Imperial Russia”.
19 Wirtschafter, From Serf to Russian Soldier, p. 81.
from the reign of Tsar Peter I, when the central government began to assume responsibility for clothing, housing, provisioning, and equipping the troops. That said, in the underinstitutionalized administrative environment of the Russian Empire, the desire to centralize resource allocation could only go so far. The limits to bureaucratic regulation, even in conditions of absolutist monarchy, were readily apparent. Unit commanders retained immediate responsibility for the wellbeing of their subordinates and were often forced to acquire supplies locally. As late as the mid-nineteenth century, state resources remained inadequate, and the troops repeatedly faced shortages of food, clothing, and equipment. The solution to this dilemma was local procurement and economic self-sufficiency within military units. Although the government tried to regulate the norms of pay, provisioning, and supply for the individual soldier and his regiment, official standards were difficult to enforce, especially when the troops were dispersed in peasant huts and economically dependent on civilian hosts. The need to concentrate troops in border regions and garrisons also meant that the burden of supplying the troops could not be evenly or fairly distributed among the civilian population. Conflicts between soldiers and local residents inevitably erupted although, on average, the Russian people accepted the obligation to provide for the troops.

The economic improvisation required of the Russian army produced material uncertainty, administrative arbitrariness, social volatility, and effective solutions. To understand how the army functioned, it is important to look at how individual units coped with the concrete conditions they faced. In September 1822, for example, soldiers from the Second Battalion of the Thirty-Second Jäger Regiment complained of not receiving money for cartage in 1818 or for meat and liquor during eight months of guard duty. In addition, the men of the Second Carabineer Company claimed that in 1818-1819 they had earned 560 rubles, presumably at outside work, but did not know the whereabouts of the money or how it had been spent. They also complained that 800 rubles belonging to their artel’, a collective soldiers’ fund, had been sent to the treasury without their permission. Whereas the soldiers’ complaints revealed detailed knowledge of their economic rights and resources, as well as suspicions about the good intentions of their commanders, the response of the battalion commander highlighted deficiencies in the supply system that repeatedly produced these and similar disorders.

An investigation ordered by the commander-in-chief of the Second Army showed that in 1818 a regimental order had reallocated funds assigned for transport to the repair of equipment. The soldiers had in fact received money for meat and liquor to cover two months of the May trimester. But because
the regiment had not received any funds for the September trimester, com-
manders had withheld allocations for the remaining two months of the
previous trimester. The units in question also had not received provisions for
January because the Kiliia magazine, located in Bessarabia, was empty. As
a result, it had been necessary to insist that hostile local residents feed the
men. Finally, the corps commander had ordered the battalion commander
to put 800 rubles that belonged to the soldiers’ artel’ in a loan bank to earn
interest. In the end, the commander-in-chief accepted the explanations of
the battalion and company commanders, requiring only that they pay the
expenses of the three officials sent to investigate the soldiers’ complaints.20

As conditions in the Second Army illustrate, commanders repeatedly
provided for their subordinates by rearranging allocations and demanding
that civilians supply food. Another response to inadequate state supplies
and monies was to purchase goods from private contractors using regi-
mental funds. Soldiers also sometimes produced items such as uniforms
and footwear for themselves, assuming they had the necessary materials
on hand. In any of these circumstances, unofficial outside work might be
critical source of supplementary income used to fill the gaps in state
supplies. Archival documents from the first half of the nineteenth century
describe four types of outside work. First, soldiers worked directly for su-
periors and theoretically received payment for their labor. Second, parties
of five to ten men worked under contracts concluded between company
commanders and outside parties. Third, soldiers with special skills – for
example, artisans and tailors – used their free time to produce goods for sale;
and fourth, among stationary regiments located in fortresses and garrison
towns, it was sometimes possible to establish economic enterprises such
as gardens and shops that provided supplies and profits for military units.

Private enterprise among the troops could be mutually beneficial for
commanders and soldiers, though such activities did little to promote
military efficiency or effectiveness.21 Conditions in the Kinburn Artillery
Garrison in the reign of Nicholas I (r. 1825-1855) illustrate the point. Ac-

20 Ibid., p. 94.

21 Ibid., pp. 89-90.
troops. The commandant’s report led to an investigation, and in December 1851 three bombardiers testified that soldiers willingly worked for Loman, who paid them 75 paper kopecks a day. Of this, 25 kopecks went into the soldiers’ provisioning artel’ and the rest belonged to the individual men. The result was a mutually satisfying relationship between Loman and his subordinates.

Other officers in the Kinburn Garrison told a different story. Critical of Loman, they complained that he freed soldiers from service obligations and training if they worked for him without pay. When, moreover, the officers ordered the soldiers to work, they responded with disrespect, coarseness, and outright disobedience. The military judicial authorities agreed that Loman’s attitude toward unofficial work had begun to interfere with the fulfillment of service duties, but the archival record does not indicate that he was punished or that his farm was shut down. Military performance aside, Loman’s activities may have been motivated by the need to provide for his men. As long as state supplies remained inadequate, officials could not effectively combat economic corruption and abuse. In many circumstances corruption was born of necessity.

Just a few years before the Kinburn investigation, on 9 March 1846, the commander of the Southern Artillery Region had informed all garrison commanders that, if state monies were not sufficient to produce munitions for their soldiers, they should release three privates from each half-company to engage in outside work. The men sent to labor would receive a quarter of their earnings, and the rest would go to the economic resources used to purchase material for uniforms and other equipment that the state was supposed to fund. Citing the Military Code of 1838 (book 1, part 3, article 438), the regional commander justified the order by noting that the Commissariat continued to issue munitions monies for the artillery based on a table of 1809. Given that the allocated sums were no longer adequate, the garrisons had no choice but to release soldiers for outside work. Military training was important, but physical survival came first. Despite the legal separateness of Russia’s military ranks, soldiers remained dependent on the civilian economy, and many of their routine activities would have been familiar to any peasant.

The flexibility of Russia’s socioeconomic and legal-administrative structures surely helped the army to function; however, the vulnerabilities of the military economy also could be socially explosive. This is illustrated by an 1857 court-martial of twenty-one soldiers from the Åland fortifications, who
were accused of disobedience against their commander. On 28 September 1856, Ensign Shchetinin had informed his men that provisions were low and that supplies would be obtained from Åbo. The men, agreeing to provide for themselves with state funds until provisions arrived, received money for food through 8 October. In addition, for the period 7-14 October, the soldiers reportedly were able to buy beef, which was supposed to last until 21 October. Although the defendants claimed that half the meat was spoiled, they also had received funds for meal and potatoes.

On 14 October, when the expected supplies did not arrive, the situation at Åland began to deteriorate. The soldiers again received money on the 14th, but when they requested additional funds on the 15th, Shchetinin told them they would have to wait. On the 15th and 16th the men carried on with their duties, but then on the 17th a noncommissioned officer informed Shchetinin that the men of Company No. 4 were demanding money. Shchetinin had run out of state funds, so he distributed his own money for the 15th and 16th. He also questioned the men of Company No. 4, who complained that they had nothing to eat and already owed local residents money for the past two days. Shchetinin doubted their story, believing that the soldiers did have adequate provisions. He also insisted that local residents could wait until supplies arrived to be reimbursed. Ensign Shchetinin therefore ordered his men back to work.

At this point, soldiers from other companies also started to complain. A few men from Companies No. 5, 6, and 7 obeyed the order to work, but eighteen men from Company No. 4 refused and returned to their quarters. Shchetinin responded by giving them more of his own money for 17 October. Meanwhile, soldiers from other companies refused to work. Why are we going to work, they asked, when Company No. 4 refuses to go? “Hardly so that they [alone] will be guilty.” In the end, on 17 October, only Company No. 7 and some men from Company No. 6 complied with orders. Supplies arrived soon after this incident, and Shchetinin took steps to restore his authority. A complete breakdown of discipline had been averted. But then on 18 October, when Shchetinin tried to punish three “instigators”, the men of Company No. 4 refused to allow the punishments. “They did not steal anything”, the soldiers proclaimed. Nor, as one gunner put it, did the tsar “order us to starve”. With that the entire company walked off, and Shchetinin initiated a judicial process.

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22 Rossiiskii gosudartsvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv, f. 801 (Auditoriatskii departament voennogo ministerstva), op. 73, d. 32. The case is discussed in Wirtschafter, From Serf to Russian Soldier, pp. 145-147.
In the eyes of the military authorities, the events at Åland represented a clear case of insubordination. Military judicial officials condemned the men of Company No. 4 on two grounds. First, the testimony of some soldiers indicated that the men had sufficient supplies of food. Still, the archival record does not indicate that Shchetinin actually inspected Company No. 4, which was quartered at some distance, so it is possible that this unit did not have enough to eat. One also has to wonder why Shchetinin continued to give out his own money, if he was convinced the men had adequate provisions. The second point raised by officials of the Military Judicial Department was that the men of Company No. 4 could obtain food on credit from local inhabitants. In general, commanders assumed that when state supplies were unavailable, military units would acquire provisions from local residents. Moreover, even when this proved impossible, the lack of food and funds did not justify disobedience. Clearly, the situation at Åland resulted from circumstances beyond Shchetinin’s control.

The soldiers’ testimony tells a different story. In their eyes, the “crime” of Company No. 4 consisted of demanding money allotted to them by law. They knew their commander was responsible for feeding them and thus refused to work when they did not receive their daily allowance. They also refused to allow their comrades to be punished: the soldiers had a right to the money, which meant that no one was guilty and no punishment justified. Repeatedly, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Russian soldiers committed acts of disobedience when their rights were violated – when their commanders abused them, neglected to provide for them, or punished them unjustly. Although in the eyes of the government disobedience could never be justified, if a commander’s negligence or abuse caused the disobedience, he would be punished along with his subordinates. In this case, Ensign Shchetinin faced two weeks of arrest for “inefficiency” in provisioning his unit. Eighteen men from Company No. 4 were found guilty of “overt disobedience” and sentenced to run the gauntlet two to four times through 100 men, followed by three to five years of service in a convicts’ company. Four of the men were judged medically unfit to undergo corporal punishment and so avoided that part of their sentence. Other men from Companies No. 5 and 6 faced milder punishments, and two noncommissioned officers were demoted and transferred for failing to ensure that their subordinates returned to work. As this and many other court cases show, the system of military justice afforded soldiers a measure of protection. In theory and practice, military justice sanctioned expectations of decent treatment and economic security.
The unrest at the Åland Fortress highlights the extent to which local circumstances determined the army’s ability to maintain the troops. Although the details of concrete cases differ, local commanders repeatedly had to improvise in order to provide for their men. Soldiers cooperated in this effort, as did civilians who made “donations” to nearby military units. In addition to seeking donations – the alternative to which might have been food riots by armed soldiers – commanders put their men out to work in the local economy. Improvisation and nonmilitary work represented key tools in the arsenal of physical survival. Of course, local self-sufficiency also produced significant variations and chronic irregularities. Outright corruption likewise played a role, and it is no surprise that economic crimes were among the most common for which officers faced courts-martial. Some officers exploited the labor of their men in the manner of noble serf-owners; others abused or seriously neglected their subordinates. Even when soldiers and their commanders cooperated to achieve economic security, or if, from the state’s perspective, they colluded to rob the treasury, the vagaries of the supply system produced endless conflicts, both between officers and soldiers and between the military and civilian populations. These conflicts created disorders, but they did not undermine the overall effectiveness of Russia’s military system. To understand this effectiveness, it is important to consider how the monarchy sustained its legitimacy, how the government wielded social control, and why soldiers and their commanders remained loyal servicemen.

Political culture and social integration

Given the interdependence of military and civilian life, it is no surprise that the Russian monarchy governed the army in the same way it governed society at large – through direct personalized relationships between subordinates and figures of authority. These relationships reached from the village, town, or military unit to community and local authorities; to landlords, provincial governors, and military commanders; then on to high-level officials and officers, and most importantly to the monarch. “For Faith, Tsar, and Fatherland” may have been an official mantra, but it accurately represented important features of Russia’s enduring political culture. Throughout Russia’s age of serfdom the cement of society remained widespread acceptance of social hierarchy, absolutist monarchy, and church authority. The threat of repression invariably hung in the air, but without reference to the belief in church, monarch, and country, it is impossible to
explain how until the 1860s, the Russian Empire – an empire built upon human bondage – sustained great-power status in Europe and Asia. Only by addressing questions of motivation and morale is it possible to understand how the Russian government consistently mobilized material and human resources for military service.

Across the Russian Empire, ordinary people expressed themselves, and now speak to historians, through judicial proceedings. Although judicial speech acts do not take scholars into the recesses of social consciousness, they do shed light on how individuals negotiated the social order and became integrated into society and polity. To determine whether judicial testimony represented genuine conviction or clever dissimulation designed to achieve a specific goal is frequently impossible. In the military judicial records of the early nineteenth century there are numerous instances of what could have been dissimulation. As the cases already discussed illustrate, disobedient soldiers, deserters, and reluctant recruits knew what they needed to say in order to gain a sympathetic hearing from officials. For this reason, despite concerns about reliability or truthfulness, judicial records reveal much about political culture and the functioning of authority relationships. Time and again, in judicial testimony, Russian subjects described their life experiences and circumstances in terms that they assumed to be not only permissible but also capable of eliciting sympathy and a favorable outcome. Clearly, formal justice offered people a measure of protection against abuse and exploitation. Equally important, it allowed individuals and communities to manipulate legal prescriptions for personal and collective gain.23

In the Russian army of the early nineteenth century, soldiers correctly assumed, and sincerely believed, that they were entitled to food, clothing, and fairness. They also knew that cruelty and negligence on the part of military commanders represented punishable offenses. For this reason, they used accusations of abuse to justify disobedience and desertion. Even if neglect or cruel treatment did not excuse such behavior, it might gain soldiers a sympathetic hearing before higher authorities. There was, however, a problem with the soldiers’ understanding of cruelty. Unlike the economic crimes of commanders, which could be identified with relative ease, the meaning of cruelty remained amorphous and changeable. Official and popular notions of what constituted cruelty did not always coincide.

23 Wirtschafter, Structures of Society, Idem, “Legal Identity and the Possession of Serfs in Imperial Russia”. 
The ambiguity surrounding accusations of cruelty can be seen from an investigation of 1818, during which soldiers from the Astrakhan Grenadier Regiment complained of abusive treatment at the hands of their former commander, Major Kridner.\textsuperscript{24} The investigating officer, General Adjutant Baron I.I. Dibich, commander of Main Headquarters of the First Army, found that some of the soldiers’ claims were indeed justified. Kridner had subjected decorated soldiers to corporal punishments, which, while not excessive, did violate legal prohibitions. In addition, some men also testified that they had received 500 blows with sticks and 100 to 150 blows with broadswords. These punishments may have been illegal, although, according to Dibich, the soldiers’ claims were exaggerated: every time he questioned the men, they reported a higher number of blows. Most of the soldiers’ complaints concerned punishments of twenty-five to fifty blows with sticks for neglect of duty. These punishments rarely occurred more than once a month, and, while they were frequent and severe, in Dibich’s judgment, they did not exceed legal norms. To the contrary, the men of the Astrakhan regiment were lazy and insubordinate, and because the regiment’s performance lagged in comparison to other units, strict measures were in order. Baron Dibich therefore cleared Major Kridner of any wrongdoing.

In other judicial cases officers were found guilty of cruel treatment and punished accordingly, but the definition of cruelty remained imprecise and dependent on circumstances. What might be regarded as cruelty in one situation became justified severity in another. The losers in this arrangement were of course the soldiers, who were left to develop their own understanding of what constituted cruel or unjustified punishment. That soldiers frequently did not have their way in judicial proceedings is no surprise. Russia remained a monarchical polity, hierarchical society, and aggressive empire. Although many high-level officials and commanders did try to uphold the law, the preservation of order always took precedence over legal rights. Still, despite definite, though not necessarily clear, limits to the redress available to regular people, there was just enough justice in the Russian system of government to perpetuate the myth of the tsar. Soldiers, like peasants, continued to believe that individual landowners, state officials, and military commanders were responsible for corruption and abuse, and that, if only the ruler could be informed of the abuses, he or she would intervene to address grievances and make just amends.

Absolutist monarchy persisted in Russia long after the empire became integrated into the European state system, and long after the court, nobility,
and educated classes became culturally Europeanized. One explanation for the strength of the monarchy is that, contrary to present-day misconceptions, absolutism in Russia (and elsewhere in Europe) never meant absolute control of state, society, or economy, and certainly not of local communities or individual lives. It did mean, however, that the monarch represented the highest judicial and legislative authority and that at any moment he or she could overturn the decisions of administrative offices and courts. Divinely anointed and answerable to God alone, the monarch was bound to obey the law, though he or she also could change the law at will. Equally significant, Russia did not possess time-honored institutions or legally constituted corporate bodies that mediated the monarch’s relationship to individuals, communities, and groups in society. The peasant commune can be counted as a collective “institution”, but the commune embodied a set of peasant practices that were not legally or contractually constituted. The self-sufficiency of the commune, and likewise of military units, highlighted the fact that, despite the tsar’s absolutist political power, the empire remained undergoverned and underinstitutionalized. The remoteness of effective state power, and the de facto freedom it allowed, kept authority relationships personalized and abuses individualized. In these conditions, the tsarist myth could be perpetuated, and people could manipulate laws and institutions to meet their own needs.

The monarchy’s relationship to Russia’s service classes, including the nobility, represented another critical element in the calculus of political legitimacy. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, a “place system” or rank ordering of noble families (called mestnichestvo) regulated relations within the Russian elite and between that elite and the tsar. The place system determined precedence in service appointments and at court, ensuring that no individual received an appointment or occupied a position above another whose family held a higher place in the genealogical hierarchy. Mestnichestvo disputes undermined the corporate power of Muscovy’s upper nobility and kept many a family and official busy with time-consuming litigation. But mestnichestvo also encouraged social cohesion based on shared notions of family honor and represented a formal limit on the power of the tsar. This formal limit did not, however, produce contractual or constitutional arrangements. During the seventeenth century, mestnichestvo eroded and, even before its abolition in 1682, the ruler acquired sufficient power to appoint favorites and men of undistinguished lineage to high office, especially in the military. The process of modern state-building meant that not only favorites, but also Russia’s noble ranks as a whole, benefited from the service and educational opportunities created by a growing bureaucracy and army.
Even with the rise of new nobles, there was sufficient room in the service class and sufficient demand in the service hierarchy for established families to preserve their power and privileges. The result was a lack of opposition to abolishing the traditional order of families protected by mestnichestvo and a strengthening of the individual serviceman's dependence on the tsar.

In the early eighteenth century, a new set of institutions began to regulate the noble service classes and their relationship to the monarchy. The new arrangements came to fruition in the Petrine reforms, which agglomerated the noble ranks of Muscovy into an hereditary nobility. This meant in principle that all nobles (lineal and service) enjoyed the same rights, privileges, and obligations, though in practice economic stratification and family ties continued to determine access to education and the rewards of service. The Russian nobility's character as an open "class" also endured, becoming codified in the Table of Ranks, which from 1722 regulated and bureaucratized the relationship between lineage, service, and noble status. The Table of Ranks consisted of fourteen classes or grades, each of which corresponded to specific titles and offices in the service hierarchy. In military service, the attainment of rank fourteen, the lowest commissioned officer rank, granted noble status, and in civil service, the attainment of rank eight brought ennoblement. Well-connected nobles, and increasingly men of education, continued to enjoy advantages in receiving service appointments and promotions, but, along with lineage and the tsar's favor, a measure of merit had been written into the legal mechanism of social advancement.

The Table of Ranks did not transform the Petrine service state into a meritocracy, but it did regularize and institutionalize promotions based on education, talent, and zeal. As in the seventeenth century, the ongoing expansion of the military and bureaucratic establishments, combined with the demand for educated servicemen and technical specialists, increased the opportunities for men of humble birth to rise. Over the long duration, social origin became less important in defining service careers, though elite birth and high position still tended to go hand in hand. Even when opportunity truly depended on education, nobles, and to a lesser degree the sons of nonnoble officials, possessed greater access to education and thus could more readily be identified as men of talent. The goal of Peter and his successors was not to dislodge Russian grandees from positions of social and political dominance, but rather to ensure that nobles acquired the education and skills needed to compete in the modern European world. For nobles, as for peasants and townspeople, the burden of service increased significantly in the Petrine era. Russian nobles accepted this burden, just as they accepted the abolition of mestnichestvo, with surprisingly little resistance. As the
power of the state increased, so too did their own power, privileges, and status, not just in Russia, but also on the larger European stage.25

From the late seventeenth century, it can be said, the Russian nobility, a service nobility from the outset, bought into the Russian state project. Equally important, throughout the eighteenth century, Russian elites continued to lack a political language or set of shared ideas that would have allowed them to conceptualize political arrangements outside the serviceman’s personal relationship to the monarch or to superiors and patrons. At no time during Russia’s age of serfdom did the authority of noble landowners extend beyond the boundaries of their patrimonial estates. Russian nobles held no offices or military commands, and they sat in no corporate bodies – noble assemblies were created by monarchical decree in the reign of Catherine II (r. 1762-1796) – simply because they were born noble or possessed landed estates. All offices and commands in the imperial system represented appointments by the monarch or royal representatives. To be sure, patronage, clientage, and family connections played a role in the political economy, but these factors could always be overridden by the will of the tsar. Although the 1785 Charter to the Nobility guaranteed that the deprivation of noble status would not occur outside court proceedings, when it came to state offices and military commands, the ruler could disgrace or elevate any individual at any time, regardless of his or her family position. Russia’s nobles, including military officers and higher-ranked civil servants, comprised a service class, not an autonomous corporation. Whatever “corporate” rights or privileges they acquired were granted by the monarch and could be taken away by imperial decree.

Of course, this did not happen in practice, except arguably in 1861 when Alexander II (r. 1855-1881) deprived nobles of their human property by emancipating the serfs. In most circumstances, the ruler’s disfavor affected individuals or small groups of conspirators, and not until the Decembrist Rebellion of 1825 did the monarchy face any overt political opposition. In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Russia, social and political ideals stayed within the bounds of the moderate mainstream Enlightenment, which sought to reconcile equality, rationality, and freedom with established political and religious authority. The democratic principles of the radical Enlightenment did not begin to affect Russian thought, much less actual social and political arrangements, before the 1820s. Dissident voices did arise in the eighteenth century, but few called for radical social or political change. Instead, enlightened thinkers focused on the moral
self-reformation and perfectibility of the individual human being, and because of the emphasis on the individualized pursuit of enlightenment, as opposed to the institutional realization of democratic principles, the Russian version of European Enlightenment appeared fully compatible with absolutist monarchy and the teachings of Orthodox Christianity.26

Throughout Russia’s age of serfdom, the strength of the monarchy remained closely intertwined with the strength of the Orthodox religious tradition. The Russian Orthodox Church preached a concept of Christian rulership that based both authority and obedience on morality and love. By the late eighteenth century, state-builders, preachers, and poets had conceptualized the personalized authority relations between the Russian monarch and his or her individual subjects into an explicitly moral relationship in which virtuous rulers deserved to be obeyed. Although the monarchy’s first concern was state power and the church’s the salvation of souls, the means to these ends overlapped. Subjects who lived an enlightened life, a life of civic and Christian virtue, both served the monarch and obeyed God’s commandments. Historians who find it difficult to explain how in the face of inequity, injustice, and abuse, Russian subjects, including educated and enlightened individuals, accepted social and political arrangements based on serfdom should listen carefully to the empire’s religious teachers. Until the 1820s, church, monarchy, and educated service classes alike understood the social order to be natural or God-given, and few imagined that traditional relationships built upon patriarchy and hierarchy might be incompatible with modern progress. As monarchists who believed in the power of Christian love, they combined Enlightenment universalism with belief in the unity of God’s creation. The result was a holistic conception of the relationship between society, polity, and church. All were of a piece, all had a role to play, and all belonged to the harmonious universal order that underlay Enlightenment aspirations and the modern idea of progress – the idea that the condition of humanity could and should be ameliorated.

Russian intellectuals could be highly critical of their society, yet before the 1820s this criticism tended to produce reconciliation rather than revolt. Echoing legislative projects and church teachings, literary works and personal correspondence revealed a desire to live within existing institutions, despite awareness of their costs. Because Russia’s laboring people and common soldiers rarely expressed themselves in writing and almost never revealed their thoughts or feelings about the social relationships that defined their lives, historians cannot know if they subscribed to the ideas

26 Israel, Revolution of the Mind; Wirtschafter, Russia’s Age of Serfdom, pp. 144-165.
and ideals expressed in religious, legislative, and literary sources. Prior to the abolition of serfdom in 1861, peasants and townspeople appeared to accept conscription, taxation, and a host of labor obligations, and soldiers appeared to go obediently into battle. The pages of Russian history may be filled with repressive coercion, but there is considerable evidence that the integration of society and polity, and hence also the obedience of Russian soldiers, hinged on more than fear of punishment.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, large numbers of Russian subjects either accepted absolutist monarchy or remained convinced that it could not be altered. On average, belief in the tsar's goodness and desire for justice held firm. When an individual ruler behaved tyrannically or violated rightful order, he or she could presumably be removed – not because anyone questioned the legitimacy of monarchy, but because the person occupying the throne had turned out to be a false tsar. That peasant conscripts obediently entered service, that peasant soldiers bravely marched into battle, that noble and educated elites did not rebel against the monarchy until the second quarter of the nineteenth century – these circumstances suggest that long after secularism, materialism, deism, and atheism had become firmly established in western and central Europe, most Russians continued to believe in God, tsar, and church.

Conclusion

The outstanding feature of imperial Russia's serf army was its economic, social, and cultural flexibility – a flexibility that emanated directly from the mechanisms connecting the Russian service state to the structures of society. With a social order based on unfree labor and a political system rooted in absolutist monarchy, the Russian Empire competed effectively in military and diplomatic arenas that stretched across Europe and Asia. Sharing borders with Europe, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and China, the empire encompassed multiethnic, multiconfessional territories inhabited by nomadic, peasant, and “modern” European peoples. Precisely because the Russian army depended for its survival on local resources and communities, it proved capable of responding to diverse needs and challenges. The adaptability of Russia's social and political institutions, including military institutions, is often overlooked in discussions of the autocratic monarchy and centralized state apparatus. Political arrangements may have been absolutist and sacred, but social arrangements were amorphous and
changeable. It can therefore be difficult to describe the Russian military system with reference to a specific typology of variables.

As a system of labor, the Russian army combined serfdom with mass conscription, and until 1762 even hereditary nobles, the bulk of the officer class, were bound to serve. Within the regimental economy, monetary payments played a role, but remained inadequate, and so the need to improvise produced free, unfree, commodified, and noncommodified forms of work. The long term of service and the change in legal status that accompanied conscription turned common soldiers and nonnoble specialists into a distinct class of military ranks and families whose labor could be exploited but whose social welfare needs also had to be addressed. During the period under study, despite technological progress and population growth, fundamental socioeconomic and institutional change did not occur. Only after the general emancipation of the serfs in the Great Reforms of the 1860s could universal liability for conscription, a shorter term of service, and effective combat reserves be established. Already in Muscovite times, and with greater precision and comprehensiveness from the reign of Peter I until the emancipation of 1861, the Russian monarchy governed a service state in which every social group performed specific functions. Nobles, clergy, and merchants, not to mention peasants, lesser townspeople, and nonnoble servicemen, occupied legally defined social statuses that at once granted privileges and imposed obligations. Even among the most elite social groups, the acquisition and preservation of privileges depended on service. When privileges became hereditary and independent of service, as occurred with the nobility in 1762, they still represented a grant from the monarch, defined in state law – a grant that he or she could rescind at any time. If military service in the age of serfdom constituted a system of labor, so too did every other social status and occupation.