

Lord and Peasant in Eastern Europe

While constitutionalism emerged in England and the Dutch Republics established a fiercely independent republic, Eastern Europe developed an intensely absolutist stature. Absolute monarchies appeared in Austria, Prussia, and Russia. These monarchies exercised enormous influence through 1918 (the Russian Revolution and the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I) and created an authoritarian tradition that still remains strong in Eastern Europe. It is no coincidence that the totalitarian rulers of Europe in the mid twentieth century were in Eastern Europe. Unlike their western counterparts, Eastern monarchies were often built upon a powerful nobility, a weak middle class, and an oppressed peasantry. Whereas serfdom had disappeared in the West, it reappeared and was reinforced in the East. Princes and nobles rolled back the gains made by the peasants during the High Middle Ages, and peasants were often tied to the land. These monarchies also exercised enormous influence on culture, the result of which is represented by the flowering of the baroque style of architecture and art. The sharp contrast between East and West was another aspect of the schism of Medieval Christendom.

The Medieval Background: Between 1400 and 1650, nobles and rulers reestablished serfdom in Bohemia, Silesia, Hungary, eastern Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. This area, east of the Elbe River in Germany, is often called "East Elbe" by historians. This was a sad reversal of the progress Western Europe had experienced. In the late High Middle Ages, Eastern Rulers, anxious to attract German settlers to lands cleared from the great forests, offered many economic and legal incentives. They were granted land on excellent terms and granted much greater personal freedom. As a result, by 1300, the plight of peasants had improved. Serfdom had all but disappeared, and peasants bargained freely with landlords, and moved about as they pleased.

This came to a halt c. 1300, as Europe's population and economy suffered as a result of the Black Death. The precipitous drop in population caused severe labor shortages and hard times for the nobles. In the east and west, landlords attempted to solve their economic difficulties by clamping down on the peasants. In the West, the peasants won, and serfdom disappeared; in the East, the landlords won. Rather than offer better terms to the peasants, the landlords used political and police power to further exploit the peasants. They did this by:

§ Securing laws from their kings and princes which eliminated the right of free movement. The peasants could no longer leave to seek better opportunities elsewhere without permission from the landlord, which was seldom forthcoming. In Prussia, The law provided for a runaway peasant to be hunted down, one ear nailed to a post and the poor devil was given a knife to cut himself free. By 1497, Russian peasants could only move during a two week period after the fall harvest, when they were not needed.

§ Landlords took more and more of their peasant's land and imposed heavier and heavier labor obligations upon them. The peasants soon became forced laborers on the landlord's estate. Some commanded their peasants to work without pay as many as six days per week. A German writer described Prussian peasants as those who "do not possess the heritage of their holdings and have to serve their master whenever he wants them.

The local legal system augmented the landlord's domination of the peasantry. He was the prosecutor, judge and jailor in legal matters. Needless to say, he ruled in his own favor as a matter of course. There were no independent judicial officials to provide justice, or to uphold anything closely resembling the common law.

Serfdom Reimposed: Between 1500 and 1600, peasants in Eastern Europe became serfs. In Poland, after 1574, landlords could legally inflict the death penalty on serfs at their pleasure. In Prussia, peasants were assumed to be in "hereditary subjugation" to the lord unless they could prove differently in the lord's courts.

Since he was judge and jury, this was practically impossible. In Russia, the right of peasants to move from one estate to another was "temporarily" suspended in the 1590's, and permanently abolished in 1602. In 1649, a new law code passed at the insistence of the nobility lifted the nine year statute of limitations on recovery or runaway serfs. Runaway serfs could be caught and returned at any time during their lives. The law set no limits on the landlord's authority over his peasants.

This reversion to serfdom coincided with, and was partly the result of an increase in estate agriculture, particularly in eastern Germany and Poland. European population began to grow again in the sixteenth century, and prices for agricultural commodities rose sharply. This increase was in part the result of the huge amounts of gold and silver from the New World which entered Europe. This created a powerful incentive for landlords to increase the production of their estates, which they did. They seized more and more peasant land for their own estates, and demanded more and more unpaid labor on their estates. Even though their operations were technically backward and inefficient, they managed to squeeze a sizeable profit from the peasants. Surpluses of wheat and timber sold quickly to foreign merchants who exported them to the west; thus serf labor in the east helped to feed those who prospered in the west.

The generally accepted explanation is that political, rather than economic factors led to the rise of serfdom in the east at a time when it disappeared in the west. Eastern nobles enjoyed more power than their western counterparts. During the wars of the Middle Ages in which monarchs depended upon nobles for troops, they were able to exact greater political power at the expense of the monarch. Additionally, a number of royal successions were disputed, and weak kings were forced to grant concessions to nobles in exchange for their support. So, while Spain, France, and England saw strong monarchs and effective central governments, the east saw kings gradually losing power. They could not resist the power of the landlords.

In fact, the monarchs had no desire to resist the landlords, even if they could. A typical eastern monarch was *primus inter pares* with the other nobility. He thought in private, rather than public terms. He wanted to squeeze as much as he could out of his peasants and enlarge his own estates. He did not consider himself the servant of the people, as did his counterpart in the west.

On occasion, peasants revolted, but the revolts never succeeded. They were often put down brutally and bloodily. More often than not, they did not resist continued infringement by the landlord because to do so was futile. The landlord ran the courts, not the kings. There was no effective common law as had existed in England.

With the approval of weak monarchs, landlords gradually undermined the privileges of towns and the power of the urban classes. Instead of selling products to local town merchants as they had in the Middle Ages, the lords sold their surplus to foreign capitalists. Dutch ships often called at ports in Poland and eastern Germany, and loaded at the docks of the estates, completely bypassing the towns. An old medieval saying had been "the air of the city makes a man free." This was no longer the case: cities were required to surrender runaway serfs to the landlords. The populations of towns and cities declined as did their importance. These developments promoted the supremacy of the landlords.