

# Declaration of Alexander II Emancipating the Serfs

(March 3, 1861)

[*Readings in Modern European History*, James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard, eds., vol. 2 Boston:Ginn and Company, 1908, 348-252. Downloaded from [http://www.shsu.edu/~his\\_ncp/Eman.html](http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Eman.html), edited by Mark R. Hatlie]

We, Alexander II, by the grace of God Tsar and Autocrat of all the Russias, King of Poland, Grand Duke of Finland, etc., make known to all our faithful subjects :

Summoned to the throne of our ancestors by Divine Providence and the sacred law of heredity, we have promised ourselves with heartfelt sincerity to extend our affection and imperial solicitude to all our faithful subjects, whatever their rank or condition, from the soldier who nobly bears arms in the defence of his country to the humble artisan who faithfully carries on his industry ; from the functionary who occupies a high office in the State to the labourer whose plow furrows the fields.

As we consider the various classes of which the State is composed, we are convinced that the laws of our empire which have wisely provided for the upper and middle classes, and have fixed with precision their rights and obligations, have not reached the same degree of success in relation to the peasants bound to the soil, who, either through ancient laws or custom, have been hereditarily subjected to the authority of the landlords. Indeed, the rights of landowners over their serfs have hitherto been very extensive and very imperfectly defined by the laws, which have been supplemented by tradition, custom, and the good will of the landlords.

This system has at best established patriarchal relations based upon the fairness and benevolence of the landowners and an affectionate docility on the part of the peasants ' but as manners have lost their simplicity, the paternal ties between the landlords and the peasants have been weakened. Furthermore, as the seigniorial authority falls into the hands of those exclusively intent on their own selfish advantage, those relations of mutual good will have tended to give way and open the door to arbitrariness, burdensome to the peasants and hostile to their prosperity. This has served to develop in them an indifference to all progress.

These facts did not fail to impress our predecessors of glorious memory, and they took measures to improve the lot of the peasants ; but these measures have had little effect, since they were either dependent for their execution on the individual initiative of such landlords as might be animated by a liberal spirit or were merely local in their scope, or adopted as an experiment.

We became convinced, therefore, that the work of fundamentally ameliorating the condition of the peasant was for us a sacred heritage from our ancestors, a mission which in the course of events Divine Providence had called us to fulfill. We have commenced this work by demonstrating our imperial confidence in the nobles of Russia, who have given us so many proofs of their devotion and their constant disposition to make sacrifices for the well-being of the country. [...] Our confidence has not been deceived. [...]

The peasants now bound to the soil shall, within the term fixed by the law, be vested with the full rights of freemen. The landed proprietors, while they shall retain all the rights of ownership over all the lands now belonging to them, shall transfer to the peasants, in return for a rent fixed by law, the full enjoyment of their cottages, farm buildings, and gardens.

Furthermore, in order to assure to the peasants their subsistence and enable them to meet their obligations toward the State, the landlords shall turn over to the peasants a quantity of arable and other land provided for in the regulations above mentioned. In return for these allotments the peasant families shall be required to pay rent to the landlords, as fixed by the provisions of the law. Under these conditions, which are temporary, the peasants shall be designated as "temporarily bound."

At the same time the peasants are granted the right of purchasing their cottages and gardens, and, with the consent of the landlords, they may acquire in complete ownership the arable lands and other lands allotted to them as a permanent holding. By the acquisition of a complete title to the land assigned them, the peasants [1] shall be freed from their obligations toward the landlords for land thus purchased, and thus enter definitively into the class of free peasants and landowners.

Since the new organization, owing to the unavoidable complexity of the changes which it involves, cannot immediately be put into execution, a lapse of time is necessary, which cannot be less than two years or thereabouts -- to avoid all misunderstanding and to protect public and private interests during this interval, the system actually existing on the estates of landowners will be maintained up to the moment when the new system shall have been instituted by the completion of the required preparatory measures.

Aware of all the difficulties of the reform we have undertaken, we place our trust in the goodness of Divine providence, who watches over the destinies of Russia. We also count upon the generous devotion of our faithful noblemen, and we are happy to testify to that body the gratitude it has deserved from us, as well as from the country, for the disinterested support it has given to the accomplishment of our designs. [...]

In order to render the transactions between the landlords and the peasants easier, so that the latter may acquire in full proprietorship their houses and the adjacent lands and buildings, the government will grant them assistance, according to a special regulation, through loans of money or a transfer of mortgages encumbering an estate.[...]

And now we confidently hope that the freed serfs, in the presence of the new future which is opened before them, will appreciate and recognize the considerable sacrifices which the nobility has made on their behalf. They will understand that the blessing of an existence based upon full ownership of their property, as well as the greater liberty in the administration of their possessions, entails upon them, with new duties towards society and themselves, the obligation of justifying the new laws by a loyal and judicious use of the rights which are now accorded them. For if men do not themselves endeavour to insure their own well-being under the aegis of the laws, the best of those laws cannot guarantee it to them. Only by assiduous labour, a rational expenditure of their strength and resources, a strict economy, and, above all, by an upright life, -- a life constantly inspired by the fear of the Lord, -can they hope for prosperity and progress.

And now, my orthodox and faithful people, make the holy sign of the cross and join thy prayers to ours, invoking the blessing of the Most High upon thy first free labors, for this alone is a sure pledge of private well-being and the public weal.

Given at St. Petersburg, the nineteenth day of February [March 3<sup>rd</sup> by the later calendar], of the year of grace 1861 and the seventh of our reign. ALEXANDER