Catherine’s Dilemma: Resettlement and Power in Russia, 1500s–1914

Willard Sunderland

Catherine the Great had a problem. Her empire was vast and growing, but the numbers of her countrymen were not, or rather, not enough. Indeed, as she and her advisors saw it, the population of the great Russian state, while on the rise, was both too small for the size of the state and poorly distributed as well, concentrated overwhelmingly in the agricultural middle of the country—the heartland centre of European Russia—yet thin, even dangerously so, most everywhere else. The most glaring proof of the problem at the time lay approximately nine hundred miles to the south of the Winter Palace on the steppes north of the Black Sea where the empire was busily conquering an enormous territory roughly the size of France but with just a fraction of the population. Worse still, as the empress saw it, most of the residents of the region in question were “savage” nomads and “half-savage” Cossacks—that is, exactly the last people she felt she could turn to to build a prosperous colony.

The solution, then, was clear: more people had to be found, foreigners from abroad but also peasants from the heartland where the empress’ officials were already talking of overpopulation. Yet this apparently simple notion of rebalancing the relationship between population and territory raised an inherent problem of its own because the basic structure of the state—and the legitimacy of the monarchy—depended on serfdom, that is, on a system that placed a greater value on rooting people in place than on moving them around. In fact, a number of people whom the state expected to stay rooted to their homes—runaway serfs—were already demonstrating the headaches that could be caused by uncontrolled mobility. The empress thus faced a double problem: of population in the first instance, but also of political order. Maintaining her empire seemed to require fixing people where they were, but improving it clearly depended on making at least some of them move, and not any way they wished either, but rather as the government thought best. In other words, what Catherine needed was a solution that allowed for mobility within immobility, an adjustment of the state’s political economy that would guarantee the orderly movement of the few, while maintaining the rootedness of the many. The question, of course, was how to do this.1

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1 For more on questions of colonization and mobility in Catherinian Russia, see Sunderland 2004: esp. Chapter 2.
I am calling this conundrum Catherine’s dilemma, though one finds the outlines of the predicament in all modern states. Even states that tolerate high levels of geographic mobility attempt to restrict movement in various ways, introducing limits and regulations to serve their interests. And even the most formally immobile societies are, in fact, always moving—or at least this is the case with some if not many of their members. Mobility and immobility are thus unavoidably interrelated. It follows that as states attempt to manage the one, they invariably alter the other, which in turn leads to myriad complexities and contradictions.2

Tsarist Russia presents an interesting example of this phenomenon simply because its paradox of mobility-immobility proved to be so glaring. Casting a view across the long centuries of Russian history, one sees the outlines of a contradiction that never quite went away. On the one hand, people in the vast spaces claimed by the Russian state were almost always relocating in one direction or another, and the state was deeply involved in moving them around. Yet on the other, the tsarist government was arguably more determined than any other European state to do what it could to force its people to stay in place. The long history of serfdom in Russia is the best proof of this, but there were other modes of restriction besides. Indeed, for decades after serfdom was formally abolished in 1861, peasants continued to face legal obstacles in moving away from their homes, and even the decrees of 1904–1906 that established something close to freedom of movement did not do away with restrictions entirely.3

This essay explores the mobility-immobility relationship in Russia through the prism of rural resettlement (Russian: pereselenie), which is surely the oldest and most important of all the forms of long-distance mobility in the Russian past. Rural colonization was a constant in the lives of Eastern Slavs during the times of early Rus’ and the Muscovite centuries. And more of it followed in the imperial era (roughly 1700 to 1917), in particular, during the last two decades of the period, when over five million peasants resettled to Siberia and points east in the so-called Great Siberian Migration. Indeed, the flow of peasant settlers was so continuous over the centuries that Vasilii Kliuchevskii, one of the founders of modern Russian historiography, famously described colonization as the

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2 On the regulation of mobility, in particular, migration, see Böcker et al. 1998; McKeown 2005; and Cresswell 2006.