Patterns of Peasant Migration
to Late Nineteenth-Century Moscow:
How Much Should We Read into Literacy Rates? *

Russia's rapidly growing cities at the end of the nineteenth century were populated chiefly by first- and second-generation peasant laborers. The unprecedented population explosion, the gradual easing of fiscal and legal fetters to the commune, the rapid growth of the economy and the penetration of the railroads deep into rural Russia all smoothed and widened traditional migration paths. At the end of the nineteenth century, the paths of peasant migration to Russia's two largest cities—Petersburg and Moscow—became veritable highways. Petersburg grew from a population of 668,000 in 1869 to 1,265,000 in 1897; of the latter, 59 percent were peasants and 68 percent were immigrants of all estates. Moscow grew even faster from 601,969 in 1871 to 1,038,591 in 1897 and 1,174,673 in 1902; of the latter, 66 percent were peasants and almost 75 percent were born elsewhere.¹

In view of the economic and political importance of Moscow and Petersburg and of the unprecedented numbers of peasants seeking a livelihood there, the degree of integration of the new arrivals into the milieu of a booming metropolis had profound implications for the social stability of the old regime. The degree of integration in part depended on the nature of the human currents involved in the general flow of people into the cities. Were the urban centers attracting a certain type of peasant migrant? Or was there some process of selection in the village according to which certain types of peasants cast their fate with the city while other types stayed behind? More specifically, were the villages selecting (or were the cities attracting) the more educated, literate and enterprising peasants? This article will examine some of the factors involved in the migration decision through a case study of late nineteenth-century Moscow. In particular, I will analyze literacy as a factor

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distinguishing those who migrated to the cities from those who stayed behind.

An examination of literacy as a factor in migration will have historical significance beyond the clarification of migration patterns to Moscow. First, it will give us a better idea of the composition of the newest residents of Russia's largest cities. The concept of an occupational movement of the rural labor force from "field to factory," which has received more attention from both Soviet and Western historians\(^2\) that has the geographical (or spatial) movement of the peasant from village to city,\(^3\) is not altogether accurate. First, the peasant, particularly in the northern and central provinces, was not a full-time farmer and engaged in a variety of manufacturing and retailing trades in or outside his native village. Second, many factories were located in the villages themselves, often far from large population centers. Third, most peasants who either abandoned farming or left the village ended up in non-factory jobs. Accordingly, the movement from field to factory may have entailed small occupational or geographical changes and may have concerned

