

INSTITUTIONS AND THE RUSSIAN SERF ECONOMY: A TALE OF TWO LANDLORDS
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In his book *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia*, about the Gagarin family's Petrovskoe estate, Steven Hoch describes the huts occupied by serf families on the estate, commenting in particular on how cramped and squalid they were, black with soot from the stove, since very few actually had chimneys, and very crowded. Inventories of estate dwellings described them as ranging from 200 to 600 sq feet in area. Most huts on the estate were under 500 sq feet in area (roughly 60-80 per cent of them depending on the date of the inventory).¹ And Hoch points out that 10 to 20 per cent of this was taken up by the stove – a crucial feature for a place where winter lasted for nine months. Mean household size on this estate was between 7 and 9 persons.²

Officials on the Sheremetyev family's Voshchazhnikovo estate also carried out frequent inventories of serf dwellings. In one of these, from the year 1843, we learn that Vasily Slasnikov, a serf in the village Voshchazhnikovo, had a two-storey stone house, with a shingled roof, and 16 windows. Dmitri Dolodanov, another serf from this village, also had a two-storey stone house, furnished 'in the merchant style', with 18 windows facing the front. The 'middling' serf Grigory Zhukov was described as having a more modest house: only the foundation was stone, the upper storey was made of wood, it had 6 windows, and no extravagant furnishings.³ Only 25-30 per cent of the serf population in this village lived in 'traditional peasant dwellings'.⁴ Mean household size on this estate was between 4 and 6 persons.⁵

Hoch describes Petrovskoe serfs as reasonably well off: well-fed and in possession of a substantial livestock inventory. The better-off serfs, as one might predict, had more horses

¹ Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control*, pp. 58-9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 1598.

⁴ Dennison, *Institutional Framework*, chapter 8.

⁵ Dennison, 'Household structure', p. 405.

and cows than the less well-off. But even they were not immune to the mortality crises experienced in this region in the nineteenth century – most of which were due to a combination of crop failure and epidemic disease.

At Voshchazhnikovo, serfs could also be described as reasonably well off. There are no references to mortality crises in the nineteenth-century documents – neither in the qualitative sources nor in the censuses or inventories. The wealthier households did tend to have more horses, as at Petrovskoe. They also had, according to a few surviving inventories, headscarves of French silk, silver tea services, substantial wardrobes, and impressive jewelry collections, including, for instance, emerald rings, and, in one case, a strand of pearls, used to secure a large loan.

A number of historians has observed that Sheremetyev family serfs appear to have been significantly better off than others. Anecdotal evidence is often adduced in the historical literature: there are stories about Sheremetyev serfs who became factory owners, those who owned serfs, those who paid fantastic sums for their freedom, and so on. To help put the wealth of Sheremetyev serfs in perspective, we might consider the information in the following tables. Table 1 reports prices of basic provisions in rural Yaroslavl' Province in the nineteenth century, including the annual quitrent payment levied on serfs at Voshchazhnikovo.

Table 1: Some prices for items sold in 19C rural Yaroslavl

Item	Avg Price in Roubles
Beef, per <i>pood</i>	5.50
Salt, per <i>pood</i>	2.30
Eggs, per 100	1.80
Rye, per <i>chetvert</i>	13.00
Oats, per <i>chetvert</i>	6.50
Candles, per <i>pood</i>	12.50
<i>(pood = xxx chetvert =)</i>	

Annual Poll Tax, c. 1800	2.50
Annual Quitrent Levy @ Voshchazhnikovo	15.00/ <i>tiaglo</i>

Table 2 shows the number of “capitalist” (*kapitalisty*) serfs on the Sheremetyevs’ Iukhotskaia estate (Yaroslavl Province) and the value of their assets. These numbers are impressive, especially when we consider the earnings of serfs in this region. It is mentioned in documents for Voshchazhnikovo, for instance, that a woman could earn 25-35 rubles per year spinning cloth. Day laborers in agriculture could earn, according to the Soviet historian V. A. Fyodorov, 40 to 60 rubles per agricultural season.⁶ Estate officials at Voshchazhnikovo, who were, by comparison, fairly well paid, earned between 100-300 rubles per year.⁷ That so many Iukhot households (62) claimed assets valued at over 10,000 rubles is remarkable. These very wealthy serfs were richer than the small landlords of the sort one encounters in Chekhov or Turgenev stories – the ones who possessed 20 or 30 serfs and a heavily mortgaged estate in the deep provinces. And – it must be noted – this was not the richest of the Sheremetyevs’ holdings. Their proto-industrial estates, for instance Ivanovo and Pavlovo, were home to such renowned entrepreneurs as Ivan Grachev, the serf who made a fortune in textiles and whose name appears in just about every account of serfdom on the Sheremetyev estates.

⁶ Fyodorov, *Pomeshchich’e krest’iane*, p. 79.

⁷ RGADA, f. 1287

Table 2: Number of “capitalist” serf households on the Sheremetyevs’ Iukhotskaia estate c. 1803⁸

(Yaroslavl province. Roughly 900-1000 total households)

“Capital” in Roubles	Number of Serf Households
100,000+	5
> 50,000 < 100,000	10
> 10,000 < 50,000	47
> 1,000 < 10,000	192

So why were Sheremetyev serfs so rich? A number of answers – all quite similar to one another – has been given to this question. It is said, for instance, that the Sheremetyevs were very “progressive” landlords. But it is not entirely clear how this progress is supposed to have manifested itself. The view seems to be derived mainly from Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetyev’s marriage to one of his serfs – a marriage which was viewed as scandalous in the eyes of many of his aristocratic contemporaries. The assumption might be that any aristocrat willing to risk the social and political ostracization and disapprobation that marrying a serf implied must have been fairly progressive. The problem is that there is no clear evidence that Nikolai Petrovich took an especially progressive approach to estate management. In fact, he is viewed by some historians as one of the more profligate members of the Sheremetyev clan, running up enormous debts to finance his artistic endeavors.⁹ Certainly there is nothing in the archival record which suggests that Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetyev had radically different ideas about estate management than did other landlords at the time. Without a clearer definition of the term “progressive,” this remains an unsatisfactory explanation.

⁸ Prokofeva, *Krest’ianskaia obshchina*, p. 167.

⁹ Smith, *The Pearl*.

Another view sees Sheremetyev serfs as rich because the Sheremetyevs were themselves rich. The Sheremetyev family was one of the wealthiest landholding families in imperial Russia, with over 50 estates in 17 different provinces, on which lived hundreds of thousands of serfs. (These extremely wealthy Russian landlords, of which there were maybe 20 or 30, were more like sovereign princes of the Holy Roman Empire than like an English gentry. They had numerous estates and tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of serfs.) Serfs of these landlords are thought to have benefitted from the resources available on their expansive holdings: their vast forests, for example, provided fuel for rural industries (this is thought to have been very useful on the Sheremetyevs' large proto-industrial estates). Also, wealthy landlords could provide credit and capital for serf enterprises. Most importantly, it is argued that landlords like the Sheremetyevs were able to use their power "to secure commercial privileges and advantages for their serf entrepreneurs."¹⁰

But it is not clear from the sources just how important these particular things were. On the Sheremetyevs' Voshchazhnikovo estate well off serfs were integrated into extensive credit networks, mainly involving other serfs or members of merchant groups. There is nothing to indicate that loans were regularly made – or at all made – to serfs by the landlord. Nor were commercial privileges a given for Sheremetyev serfs. It's true, they occasionally did petition the Sheremetyevs for help in banishing a competitor, but that help was not always forthcoming. In one telling response to such a petition, Sheremetyev claimed that intervening in the case would mean he would have the church, the merchantry, and local officials would all be up in arms. He writes that this would be extremely unpleasant for them all, and for this reason the petitioner would simply have to put up with his local competitor. This is telling because it not only indicates that Sheremetyev would not automatically promote the causes of his subjects, but that interference had non-negligible costs for him, despite his enormous wealth and power. But the bigger problem with this view of "wealthy landlord equals wealthy serf" is that it cannot adequately account for variation in wealth among the serfs of wealthy landlords. While it is probably true that serfs of wealthy landlords were richer than serfs of poor

¹⁰ Melton, "Two estates", p. 78.

landlords, it does not explain why the Sheremetyevs' serfs should be, on the whole, richer than those of the Gagarins.

A third, not dissimilar view, sees the Sheremetyevs as leading examples of “enlightened seigneurialism,” a movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whereby a handful of wealthy landlords attempted to “define their relations to their peasants... according to written laws ... designed primarily to eliminate the arbitrary exercise of authority...”¹¹ This emphasis on written laws and concerns about arbitrariness bring us closer to an actual explanation; at least it gestures toward a more concrete way of thinking about “progressivism” among landlords. However, this approach is also problematic in that it 1) cannot account for variation within the group of so-called “enlightened seigneurs” and 2) assumes an exogeneity for which, it will be argued later, we have no empirical evidence.

It will be argued here that, in thinking about the wealth of Sheremetyev serfs, it is most fruitful to think in terms of institutions and institutional differences. This paper will focus on property rights and contract enforcement, as key institutional variables, but special attention will be given to the more qualitative aspects of these variables, and the institutional environment in which they were embedded. In comparing the estate management approaches of two families, we might be able to pinpoint some of the differences across space (and even time) which could account for different outcomes. Property rights and contract enforcement mechanisms were not the same on every estate. But how did they differ and what effects did this have?

This paper draws on evidence for one particular Sheremetyev estate – Voshchazhnikovo, in Yaroslavl Province in the Central Industrial Region. Serfs in this part of Russia are thought to have been more integrated into markets than in other parts of Russia, due to the proximity to major towns and cities and the fact that few estates here specialized in agricultural production, since the soil was less fertile and the growing season shorter than to the south. (The role of geography will be discussed toward the end of the paper.)

¹¹ Melton, “Enlightened seignorialism”, pp. 679-80.

This estate was fairly typical for the Sheremetyevs. It was home to about 3500 serfs – large but nowhere near their largest estate) and it had no particular economic specialism. Serfs engaged in a variety of occupations from agriculture to trade to rural industry. In this way it was not unrepresentative of estates in this general area.

After outlining the Sheremetyev case, we will look at some of the ways in which the Gagarin family estates appear to have differed. This part of the paper relies mainly on evidence reported in the secondary literature on these estates, which means it is in certain ways not quite as detailed or rich as the archival accounts for the Sheremetyevs. But the comparison is nonetheless very suggestive.

The Sheremetyevs' Estate Administration

The Sheremetyevs, like all the noble elites, were absentee landlords. They did not live year-round on any of their estates, instead spending most of their time at court in St Petersburg. To administer their far-flung holdings, they developed an administrative system of the “enlightened seigneurial” sort, using written instructions, or rules and regulations, to govern their holdings.

This quasi-formal administrative framework set out the rules by which estates should be governed. It also established a central authority, located in St Petersburg, to which all estate stewards and other officials were accountable. The instructions, as these written documents were called, were quite detailed, usually having somewhere around 100 specific points. They addressed, of course, taxation – assessment and collection – and administrative procedures, but also very specific aspects of day-to-day estate life, including management of communal resources, the regulation of local markets, marriage, inheritance, and dispute resolution. The fines and punishments for violating these rules were also set out explicitly so that all serfs would know the costs. All evidence indicates that these instructions were used; that they were referred to by estate officials (and by resident serfs) and that attempts were made to apply similar standards – to the extent possible – across all Sheremetyev holdings.

This administrative framework incorporated many – pretty much *every* – aspect of economic and social life on the estate. We will focus on a few specific aspects here, namely the ones that enabled factor markets to function on this estate. And the most important of these concerned property rights and contract enforcement (we will touch on labour markets and household formation as well, but property and contracts were at the heart of this system.) This quasi-formal administrative framework was critical in this regard, because, until the mid-nineteenth century Russian serfs had very limited formal rights before the law. Serfs were considered the property of their landlords; their mobility was constrained, as they were technically “tied to the land”. They could not hold immovable property in their own names until the eve of reform (1848), and they were not entitled to bring disputes to civil courts. The administrative frameworks devised by landlords like the Sheremetyevs (and to some extent the Gagarins) substituted for these formal rights to a certain degree. It was not by any means a perfect substitution – these frameworks were still only “quasi formal” – but in the Sheremetyev case it seems to have worked remarkably well.

Property rights

One important aspect of the Sheremetyevs’ administrative framework is that it enabled serfs to purchase land and other immovable property and hold it in their own names – a possibility not allowed them by imperial law until the 1848. To circumvent the legal barriers to land purchase by serfs, the Count Sheremetyev, like some of the larger landholders, allowed his serfs to purchase land under *his* name. When a serf wished to make a land purchase he petitioned for a formal document, in which the landlord gave his serf the power to negotiate a transaction and sign a contract in his name. In this document, the landlord also renounced all subsequent rights to the land and swore not to ‘challenge or interfere with’ the transaction in the future.¹² The landlord’s signature was witnessed by a third party, notarized, and then the document was registered with the provincial courts.

¹² ‘sporit’ i prikosnovat’ ne budu’ in RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 1336, l. 7 (‘Petition from Grigory Bulygin, 1837’).

Once the transaction had taken place, the serf had six months to register his purchase with the estate administration.¹³ Upon registration, the landlord's central administration issued a formal certificate (usually a copy of the contract) to the serf as a certificate of title. Copies of this certificate were kept by the local estate administration and the landlord's officials in St. Petersburg, in case a dispute should arise at a later date.¹⁴ A serf would also be required to produce this certificate should he desire to sell his land.¹⁵ The Sheremetyevs benefited, it seems, by charging a fee for every step of this process, including a one-time levy of ten percent of the purchase price of the land, plus a 5 per cent tax on the sale of land purchased in the lord's name. In addition there was the annual asset tax, a levy of one-half percent of the value of a serf household's assets.

The practice of purchasing land in the landlord's name is often acknowledged in the historical literature on the serf economy (and, as we will see shortly, a similar practice existed on the Gagarin family estates). What does *not* receive mention in the existing literature is the extent to which serfs' rights of ownership to this land were protected by estate "law". It is more often assumed that because landlords could legally confiscate the privately-held lands of their serfs, most of them did; in fact, the literature is full of anecdotal accounts of such expropriation.¹⁶ On this view, the threat of arbitrary confiscation made investment in land far too risky for most serfs.

While the risk was certainly real – Russian serfs had no legal recourse against their landlords – Sheremetyev serfs seem to have regarded it as minimal. According to documents in the Voshchazhnikovo archive, on the eve of emancipation (1858), over 15,000 acres of land was held privately, in individual tenure, by Voshchazhnikovo serfs.

¹³ In the instructions for Voshchazhnikovo, it is stated that the landlord had the right to confiscate all privately purchased lands that were not formally registered within the six-month period. RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 555, l. 23 ('Instructions, 1796/1800').

¹⁴ This description of the land-purchase process is derived from the petitions and contracts in the Voshchazhnikovo estate archive. Some examples include: RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 1492 ('Petition from Grigory Pavlov, 1840'); ed. khr. 1336 ('Petition from Grigory Bulygin, 1837'); ed. khr. 652, l. 23 (Land transaction discussed in 'Communal resolutions, 1804').

¹⁵ The sale of land was carried out according to the same procedure.

¹⁶ Blum, *Lord and peasant*, pp. 434-5; Fedorov, 'Zemlevladienie', pp. 55-6.; Kashin, *Krest'iane-zemlevladel'tsy*, pp. 172-5.

The estate arable – the land belonging to the lord for which serfs paid feudal dues – was just under 25,000 acres in area. Unfortunately we do not have data about private holdings per household. We can only piece together the scant information left behind in surviving contracts, petitions, wills, and other qualitative accounts. What this information tells us is that a broad cross-section of society participated in land markets. It was not only the very wealthiest, the “*kapitalisty*”.

There were serfs like, for instance, Grigory Kovin, who was employed as a live-in labourer, and purchased 900 roubles’ worth of land in 1832. Egor Dolodanov, who had several private holdings, worked as a servant/apprentice in St. Petersburg. Sisters Natal’ia and Anna Zhukova, who made their living by working for others on the estate, purchased land worth 6000 roubles in Uglich’ district.¹⁷ Ivan Trykin, whose household was described in estate inventories as ‘poor’, was reported to have ‘a privately-held land holding, the income from which provides for his family and enables him to pay feudal dues.’¹⁸ One should not exaggerate the participation of the poor, because there are reasons to think that the fees described earlier excluded the very poorest on the estate. Nevertheless, holders of private land were clearly a diverse group.

It is interesting that much of the land purchased by Voshchazhnikovo serfs was located far from the estate. According to the 1858 report, more than 11 thousand of the 15 thousand privately held acres were located over 50 kilometers from the estate, much of it in Uglich’ district of Yaroslavl province. This suggests that private landholdings may have been used by serfs as a form of savings or investment. One particular use of this land, which can be observed in the archival record, is loan collateral, as specified in formal credit contracts. And this is where the Sheremetyevs’ system of contract enforcement seems to have played a crucial role.

¹⁷ This information was obtained by linking the contract records (RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 1108 and 1155) with data from the inventories of households for the village of Voshchazhnikovo (RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 1143).

¹⁸ ‘imeia pokupnyi na imia Ego Siatel’svta pustoshi s koikh dokhody poluchaemy na prodovol’stvie semeistva i platit’ podatei’ in RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 1143, l. 53 (‘Inventories of Households, 1832/8’).

Contract Enforcement

As mentioned earlier, Russian serfs, with very few exceptions, could not bring suits in civil courts. As a result, many economic transactions occurred entirely in the informal sector at great risk to the parties involved. The Sheremetyevs attempted to fill this void by offering their serfs contract enforcement services (for a fee). Procedures for resolving disputes were issued from the central administrative offices, and implemented locally by bailiffs or stewards (*prikazchiki*) and elected officials. When a dispute occurred, a petition was usually filed at the estate level. The local officials would initiate an investigation, with the help of several serfs in good standing, who were chosen from among the local population. Their findings, along with copies of any relevant documents, such as contracts or titles to land, would then be sent to the central office in St Petersburg for review. There was often a long exchange between the central office and local officials; clerks in the Petersburg office often requested additional information or suggested further lines of enquiry. It was the officials in the central office who in the end handed down a judgment. This added some degree of impartiality to the process, as the bailiff and estate officials were often too well integrated into local society to be free of local interests and alliances.

It was this extra-local dimension of dispute resolution which seems to have been crucial to the Sheremetyev “legal” system. This was very much an explicit feature of the system. Count Nikolai Sheremetyev wrote, in a decree from 1789, that “all [his] serfs should be at liberty to bring their concerns directly to [him]”.¹⁹ That so many serfs did – there are thousands of such direct petitions in the estate – suggests that they, too, thought they had a better chance at a fair hearing by those outside the local community. Serfs petitioned the landlord over all kinds of disputes – land allocation, taxes, intrafamilial conflict and so on. We will focus on credit, since it is most relevant to our discussion this evening.

The first thing to note is that serfs on this estate engaged in credit transactions, and drew up formal contracts specifying their terms. These, like the land purchase contracts, were

¹⁹ “... chtob vse iz krest’ian moikh komu nadobnost’ nastoiat’ budent imeli svobodu prikhodit priamo ko mne so svoimi nuzhdami kak o tom v povelenii moem ot 20-go aprel’ia 1789 goda pripisano bylo ...” in RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed. khr. 555, l. 2 (Instructions 1796/1800).

notarized and kept on file with the estate administration. These contracts came in all different kinds. There were, for instance, straightforward money loans. In September 1793, Nikolai Yablokov borrowed 300 rubles from Kozma Smirnov to be repaid with 10 per cent interest by 20 February 1794.²⁰ In April 1826 Nikolai and Dmitri Yablokov borrowed 100 rubles from Pelageia Listvennikova, 50 of which were to be repaid by the end of the year 1826, with the remaining 50 rubles due in 1827.²¹ There were also contracts detailing purchases on credit. In June of 1832 Vasilisa Dmitrieva sold her holding in the village of Voshchazhnikovo – her garden plot and all buildings – to Mikhail Kalmykov for 200 rubles, 100 of which were received immediately with the remaining 100 to be paid in July.²² In March of 1826 Mikhail Shetov agreed to purchase a horse from Ivan Briukhov for 60 rubles, 20 of which would be paid on the 1st of May, and the remaining 40 on the 1st of October (of the same calendar year).²³ And there were contracts with more unusual terms. In one case from 1826, Aleksei Egorov allowed his son Vladimir to leave the family's household and move to St Petersburg in exchange for a payment of 150 rubles per year, plus payment of all feudal dues and taxes.²⁴

The second point to be made is that it is in these credit contracts where the importance of title to land becomes evident. Many of the credit transactions recorded in the archive were secured with land. Mikhail Stulov, for instance, offered a piece of land as collateral for the 600 rubles he borrowed in 1832.²⁵ Mikhail Shetov also offered land as collateral for the money borrowed from Vasily Slasnikov that same year, as did Mikhail Stepanov for the 435 rubles he borrowed from the serf Kriuchkov.²⁶ Land was even used as collateral in contracts drawn up between siblings, such as for the loan of 350 rubles, made in 1832, by Mikhail Ivanov to his brother Ivan Ivanov, for which Ivan offered one of his several land allotments as collateral.²⁷ It is not only that the Sheremetyevs enabled serfs to

²⁰ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 612, l. 11 (contract number 37). (Contracts for 1793)

²¹ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 977, l. 3 (contract number 6). (Contracts for 1826)

²² RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 612, l. 10 (contract number 36). (Contracts for 1793)

²³ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 977, l. 3 (contract number 5). (Contracts for 1826)

²⁴ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 977, l. 4 (contract number 10). (Contracts for 1826)

²⁵ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 1155, l. 2 (contract number 3). (Contracts for 1832)

²⁶ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 1155, l. 11 (contract number 18) (Contracts for 1832); RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 1523, l. 2 (contract number 4) (Contracts for 1840).

²⁷ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 1155, ll. 2-3 (contract number 4). (Contracts for 1832)

purchase land of their own, in the landlord's name, but that they had a system for providing legal title to that land, which made it possible for serfs to use it as enforceable loan collateral.

And finally, there were procedures established for dealing with the breakdown of these agreements, thus shedding light on the role of enforcement in the functioning of local credit markets. The documents in the archive indicate that officials – at the local level as well as in the central offices – were prepared to uphold the terms of written contracts. When, for instance, in 1822 serfs Dmitri Kalmykov and Stepan Sedel'nikov brought a petition against Dmitri Malyshev, who had failed to repay the 1100 rubles they had lent him the previous year, officials ruled in their favor, ordering an inventory of Malyshev's personal belongings and demanding he sell them to meet his obligations.²⁸ Similarly, in 1830 Voshchazhnikovo serf Andrei Sytinskii was made to give up the land he had pledged as collateral to Vasily Kriuchkov when he failed to repay the 1200 rubles Kriuchkov had lent him several years previously.²⁹ In 1832 Ivan Pugin, owner of one of the estate paper manufactories, defaulted on a loan made to him by Aleskei Shalkov, and was thus ordered by Sheremetyev officials to deliver 50 *pud* (nearly two tons) of paper to Shalkov within two months to satisfy the terms of the agreement.

That serfs who drew up formal credit contracts had some recourse should their agreements break down reduced the risk of engaging in these kinds of transactions, and made it possible for serfs to borrow from a broad range of individuals – serfs, merchants, clergymen – across a wide geographical area.

That enforcement was critical is further supported by the finding that non-serf parties to these contracts were all lenders. They were willing to extend credit to Voshchazhnikovo serfs because they knew they could use the Sheremetyevs' enforcement system to recover unpaid loans. Serfs, on the other hand, lent to other Sheremetyev serfs,³⁰ but not, it

²⁸ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 843 (Petition, 1822).

²⁹ RGADA, f. 1287, op. 3, ed.khr. 1108, l. 2 (contract number 2). (Contracts for 1831).

³⁰ They might even have lent to other landlords' serfs, if those landlords had arrangements similar to those of the Sheremetyevs. In this case, disputes would have been heard by officials representing the borrower's

seems, to free persons. There is no indication in the complex web of contractual relationships of Voshchazhnikovo serfs (many were borrowers *and* lenders) that credit was extended by serfs to free persons. A serf would have been unable to bring a case to a civil court against a free person who had defaulted on a loan. The enforcement services provided by the Sheremetyevs applied only to their own serfs; a private landlord could force his own serf to adhere to a contract, but not a free person. Voshchazhnikovo serfs were willing to lend, but only when the loan could be enforced; i.e., only when the borrower could be brought before the Sheremetyevs' "court".

The Gagarin Family Estates

It was noted earlier that a number of wealthy landlords used this system of written instructions to manage their estates. There do, however, appear to have been qualitative differences in the instructions and their enforcement, which may have had implications for economic outcomes. In what follows, some of these will be highlighted using evidence for the Gagarin family estates. The Gagarins have been chosen for several reasons. First, they, too, were among the handful of wealthy "enlightened" seignors. Second, and more practically, there are several micro-level studies of Gagarin estates, similar to the one undertaken for the Sheremetyevs' Voshchazhnikovo. Finally, the archival catalogues for many of these Gagarin estates are in the same Moscow archive as those for Voshchazhnikovo so it was possible to survey the holdings at the same time.

At first glance, the administration of the Gagarin family holdings seems to have been broadly similar to that at Voshchazhnikovo. The Gagarins issued written instructions, which informed the management of their estates. The estates were governed locally by appointed officials, such as bailiffs or stewards, and by elected peasant officials. Local officials were in touch constantly with those in the Gagarins' central office. Like the Sheremetyevs, the Gagarins also allowed their serfs to purchase land in the landlord's

landlords, and those cases would not necessarily have appeared in the Sheremetyev archive. However, if this happened frequently, it would be reasonable to expect some references to the practice in the archive, given how many aspects of serfs' economic lives *are* covered in the Voshchazhnikovo documents. There are no such references. There are also no references to contracts in the archive catalogues for the estates of other major landholders, making one wonder how common contract enforcement practices were among Russian landlords.

name. According to R. Bohac, serfs at Manuilosvkoe estate, in Tver Province (bordering Yaroslavl' in the Central Industrial Region), took advantage of this, purchasing in total over 4,000 acres of privately held land.³¹

But on closer examination, some significant differences emerge. First, the land purchased by the Gagarins' serfs at Manuilovskoe was purchased collectively. Either a group of peasant households pooled their resources and purchased private land, which was then distributed in accordance with the contribution of each, or an entire village purchased land to supplement communal holdings. According to Bohac, the land was purchased to increase the area available for cultivation, or to use as meadowland, implying that the privately purchased holdings were near – if not adjacent to – other estate lands.³² This in contrast to Voshchazhnikovo, and other Sheremetyev holdings, where land transactions were carried out by individual serfs, and the land involved was often far away from the estate itself.

Moreover, the entire system of contract enforcement services (and dispute resolution, more broadly) provided by the Sheremetyevs appears to have been absent on the Gagarin holdings. No references to such a system are made in the work of Bohac for Manuilovskoe or in Steven Hoch's work on the Petrovskoe estate in Tambov Province. Nor are there references to the kinds of activities that this system generated on Sheremetyev estates: credit markets, and the drawing up of formal contracts (in which private landholdings are mentioned as collateral); the purchase, sale, or leasing of privately-held lands and the documents associated with these; the resolution of disputes resulting from the breakdown of transactions of this kind. Not only are such things not mentioned by the historians who have worked with microlevel documents for Gagarin estates, but no records related to such transactions appear in the Gagarin archive. In fact, the renowned Soviet historians L. Prokof'eva and K. Shchepetov, who have worked extensively with the Sheremetyev documents, referred to the written contracts as a

³¹ Bohac, "Family, Property, and Socioeconomic Mobility", p. 30.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

“source unique to the Sheremetyev estates.”³³ It is difficult to say for sure at this point (without additional research on Gagarin estates), but it does seem likely that similar documents do not exist for the Gagarin estates because the system that generated them was not in place there. However, since absence of evidence is not the firmest basis on which to build an argument, it is maintained that the observations described here are *suggestive* rather than conclusive.

But we do have some more concrete evidence related to the management styles of the two families, which might shed additional light on variations in outcomes. Evidence related to labor markets and to household formation patterns highlight the differences in approach.

It was mentioned already that few serfs on the Sheremetyevs’ Voshchazhnikovo estate – as well as on their other Central Industrial estates – engaged primarily in agriculture. Most worked for wages: in crafts, rural industry, and migrant labor. The Sheremetyevs do not appear to have objected to having their serfs sell their labor so long as they were fulfilling their feudal obligations. In some cases they charged serfs a fee for labour market participation such as the one rouble per year levied on craftsmen and laborers in rural industry. Migrant laborers – any serfs working beyond a few miles of the estate’s borders – paid additional levies. A fee was paid for permission from the landlord to leave the estate, and then to provincial officials for travel documents (serfs needed official passports to move around beyond estate borders). Permission and travel documents were issued for a set period of time and could be withdrawn or simply not renewed if a serf failed to pay quitrent; thus the landlord retained a certain amount of leverage over more mobile serfs. But the evidence suggests that, if you were male (for women it was a different story) and willing to pay, you could go where the work was. And, sure enough, serfs from Voshchazhnikovo left not only for the local cities, such as Rostov and Yaroslavl, but for Moscow, St Petersburg, and even cities so far away as Riga and Helsinki.

³³ Prokof'eva, *Sel'skaia obshchina*, chap 1.

The Sheremetyevs also allowed their serfs to hire laborers, either from among the local population (Voshchazhnikovo serfs, for instance, worked for other Voshchazhnikovo serfs) or from outside the estate. It was not unusual to find Sheremetyev serfs hiring laborers to work their allotments (which was obligatory), while they themselves engaged in migrant labour elsewhere. They even hired laborers to perform the few corvée obligations they had, mainly involving the maintaining of estate infrastructure. We know about this because the Sheremetyevs asked that outside laborers be registered with the estate administration. As for serfs who worked for their neighbors, this is noted in the inventories of households.

Serfs at the Gagarins' Manuilovskoe estate also engaged in non-agricultural occupations, and, like at Voshchazhnikov, migrant labor. But one significant difference was that the majority of Manuilovskoe migrants participated in involuntary "assigned migrations," whereby male serfs were conscripted to work for the Gagarins in some designated off-estate location, often on another of the Gagarin holdings. A wage was paid for this labor, but it went directly to the estate manager, who credited the households of participants against their quitrent obligations.³⁴ According to Bohac, there are few indications in the records that serfs themselves hired laborers.³⁵ At the Gagarins' Petrovkoe estate, in Tambov province, studied by Steven Hoch, the bailiff, in a report to the landlord, indicated that serfs did hire laborers but that this was not necessarily approved of by the administration. In the report, the bailiff expressed concern about serfs' "giv[ing] their own lands over to strangers to sow".³⁶ There is no indication of a registration or taxation system in place on these estates to allow for the hiring of labor among serfs. This is not to say that laborers were not engaged by serfs – the Petrovskoe bailiff's report indicates they were – but that, when they were, as with credit transactions, it was in an informal capacity. (Of course, given serfs' lack of rights, all of this is technically happening in the informal sector anyway, but clearly some sectors were more informal than others. In

³⁴ Bohac, "Family, etc", esp. pp. 48-60.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 267.

³⁶ Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control*, p. 55.

other words, on estates like the Gagarins, there was not even a “quasi-formal” system which put these transactions above board, at least in the eyes of the local ruler, ie, the landlord.)

Even more illuminating differences emerge in relation to demographic behavior. (These data also provide some support for the idea that institutions were even more important than geographical characteristics.)

Table 3: Serf Households, Gagarin and Sheremetyev Estates

	Mishino	Petrovskoe	Voshchazh
MHS	8.8	8.4	5.2
% Complex	72.7	74.0	57.0
% Solitaries	1.2	7.0	15.0
Age at marriage	18.0	19.5	22.0
% Never Married	< 5.0	< 2.0	14.0

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for two Gagarin estates in the Central Black Earth (agricultural) region: Mishino, studied by Peter Czap, and Petrovskoe, studied by Steven Hoch. These two look much more like one another than like the Sheremetyevs’ Voshchazhnikovo estate. Such differences in mean household size, proportion of extended-family households, and age at first marriage are usually attributed to geography. Because agriculture was more widespread in the Central Black Earth region, it is argued, households tended to be larger and more complex (more household labor was required to work the land), with people marrying at a younger age and with very few “solitaries” or unmarried people living on their own, in their own separate households. Where wage labor was more widespread, we find more nuclear family households, more solitaries, and a later age at marriage (because it is thought to have been easier to survive as a small unit in a wage labor environment than it was in an agricultural environment).

Table 4: Serf Households, Gagarin and Sheremetyev estates

	Mishino CBE	Petrov CBE	Voshch CIR	Manuil CIR
MHS	8.8	8.4	5.2	7.9
% Complex	72.7	74.0	57.0	86.9
% Solitaries	1.2	7.0	15.0	0.8
Marriage age	18.0	19.5	22.0	19.5
% Never	< 5.0	< 2.0	14.0	<6.0

But Table 4 complicates this view. Because at Manuilovskoe estate, a Gagarin estate in the Central Industrial Region, in Tver Province, which neighbored Yaroslavl to the west, household patterns look more like those on the Mishino and Petrovskoe estates in the Black Earth region than like those at neighboring Voshchazhnikovo.

Once again, some suggestive differences are revealed. Both landlords were concerned about household size and economic viability, especially the ability of households to spare a laborer for the army should they be chosen for the draft. The Sheremetyevs seem to have allowed smaller simpler units so long as households could afford: 1) a fee; 2) a non-trivial sum for the purchase of a substitute recruit for the army. They also seem to have taken a relatively relaxed approach to solitary female households – widows or spinsters living on their own – provided these women paid their quitrent dues. The Sheremetyevs preferred that their serfs married, and as early as possible, but they didn't force them to; instead they levied an annual fine on all unmarried serfs between ages 20 and 40. As we saw earlier, a substantial proportion nonetheless remained unmarried.

The Gagarins, again, took a somewhat more coercive approach. They forbade serf households from dividing into smaller units, and used corporal punishment when serfs disobeyed, flogging them and forcing them back into the larger units. There are very few solitary householders on the Gagarin estates, even where wage labor was widespread; this

is consistent with the enforcement of this prohibition of household division. The Gagarins similarly desired early and universal marriage. But instead of using taxation to encourage this, they used more coercive tactics. For instance, it was announced one autumn at Mishino, that all young women over 19 years old who were not married by the following spring, would be sent to distant locations to work in textile mills. By the following May the women at Mishino were all either married or betrothed.³⁷

What these examples suggest is that the Gagarins took a more coercive, short-run, take what you can now approach, while the Sheremetyevs allowed their serfs to engage in activities that enabled some wealth accumulation over time. The Sheremetyevs benefitted by charging them to engage in these activities and then taxing the accumulated wealth.

Why Didn't All Landlords Behave Like the Sheremetyevs?

One obvious question that arises here is “why didn't other landlords (like the Gagarins) set up their estates like the Sheremetyevs, so that they, too, could have rich serfs and thus additional rents?” There are two points to consider here. First, there is no reason to assume that all landlords shared the same constraints or were maximizing the same things. A landlord who was especially indebted or who required money to maintain a lavish court lifestyle in the short run would be concerned to squeeze every kopeck out of his serfs each year. A system like the one the Sheremetyevs ran would not only be costly to implement in terms of personnel and procedure, but also in that it – hypothetically – required a much longer time horizon. The second point is perhaps the more relevant one. Built into the question of why others did not behave like the Sheremetyevs is the assumption that these administrative systems, particularly that of the Sheremetyev family, were exogenous; that they were designed to enable factor markets to function or to increase serfs' wealth or even to increase the landlord's wealth. It was mentioned earlier, with regard to enlightened seigneurialism, that this view is problematic. This is mainly because we do not have any evidence as of yet that this *was* intentional. It seems far more likely that this was an endogenous development, where a system was devised for, say,

³⁷ Czap, “A large family”, in Wall, Robin, and Laslett (eds).

allowing serfs to purchase land in the lord's name, and to deal with sales of or disputes over this land. It then turned out, quite by accident, that this system was useful in other contexts, and it began to be used for, say, formalizing credit transactions and other agreements, and resolving disputes over a wide range of issues. Similarly, the systems used by other landlords evolved in different directions, based on their particular priorities. We can see, with hindsight, that the Sheremetyevs hit on something lucrative, but it is not clear that it would make sense, without better evidence, to attribute intention to them in this regard.

Additional Questions to Consider

The information we have suggests that the differences in the way the Sheremetyevs and Gagarins ran their estates had a greater effect on outcomes than where their estates were located. One could push this further by expanding the study to other landlords' estates, and especially by systematically testing estates across the regional divide. One might, for instance, look at a Sheremetyev estate in the Central Black Earth region to see whether the institutional framework itself varied with changing geographical constraints.

In addition, these suggestive findings raise several questions related to the 1861 Emancipation Act. The most obvious concerns the effects of the Act on the rural economy. The 1861 legislation was based on the assumption that serfs were not integrated into markets and that they should be only very gradually introduced to them. Could this legislation have put a brake on rural development in areas where Sheremetyev serfs – all 300,000 of them – and those of other wealthy landlords were active participants in land and credit markets?

And why were landlords like the Sheremetyevs willing to go along with the Act as formulated? They knew their serfs owned land, worked as laborers, ran rural manufactories, and had not insignificant trading enterprises. What did they and the other wealthy landholders contribute to the reform process? What did they say about it amongst themselves? They were benefiting enormously from serfdom – what was in the Emancipation Act for them?