

## SOCIAL STATUS AND LEGAL STANDING OF RUSSIAN SOLDIER IN THE XVIII-XIX CENTURIES

L.E. Vakulova, Yu.V. Shcherbinina

*Department of History and Philosophy, TSTU*

*Represented by Professor A.A. Slezin and  
a Member of the Editorial Board Professor V.I. Kononov*

**Key words and phrases:** recruitment system; retirement; Russian army; social maintenance; social status and legal standing.

**Abstract:** The article reconstructs Russian soldier's social status and legal standing during the period of conscription, as well as soldier's life after retirement, their social adaptation.

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Soldiers of the Russian army in the XVIII – XIX centuries had a special socio-legal status. They were a part of the military estate and formed a separate population group in the Russian empire. The forming of this estate is believed to date from the first quarter of the XVIII century. After the conscription's introduction it was established that recruits received emancipation and entered the so-called "soldier estate" that consisted of soldier's wives and children too. Until 1874 lower ranks of the regular troops were recruited from the poll-tax population. Standards of the conscription often changed, but at average every year 1 male per 200 souls was recruited. For this group military service was a hereditary duty which emancipated it from the payment of all state obligations and fiscal taxes.

On the whole in Russia according to the law in force "military estate" included Army in the Field, all soldiers who were granted indefinite leaves and retired lower ranks with families, as well as all population of the Cossacks troops. "Military estate's" strength changed several times and depended upon extraordinary levies, the scale of military operations and army's strength.

It is necessarily to notice that traditionally "war factor" (mobilizations, quartering arrangements, requisitions, military purchases, war-sanitary activity, etc.) influenced greatly the everyday life of Russian society. According to the opinion of the American historian E.K. Wirtschafter the Russian army before the Great Reforms was both a society in itself and a reflection of Russian society as a whole. As the *Polizeistaat* of imperial Russia could regulate military society, with its relatively finite boundaries, more effectively than the larger, more amorphous civilian society, the army provides a rich arena for understanding the relationship between the state and society [5].

The army and foreign claims of Russia in XVIII – XIX centuries demanded constant sacrifices. They haven't taken into consideration condition, problems and public sentiments. No doubt that the army and the military dominated different spheres of Russian society's life influenced greatly both modernist processes in the country and the life of the individual people.

Obviously, the historiography of the war factor's influence in Russian history is better represented in the works of foreign authors. For example, Dietrich Beyrau has analyzed the relationship between the army and society in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries [3]. Although his book includes valuable chapters on training and the regimental economy, it is primarily an institutional history that examines the dysfunctioning of the military system (both before and after the military reforms of the 1870s) in the broader context of civilian society and economy. John Keep places significant emphasis on the common soldier, but the absence of a broad archival base has limited the analytic scope to essentially a descriptive account [4]. The Soviet literature touches on some aspects of the army's social life (conscription, rebellion, and folklore), but there is no work that examines soldiers as a social class. The major Soviet studies generally address questions of military theory, organization and tactics [1].

This paper presents an attempt to study the social history of a common soldier and the importance of military service for individual recruits, for the society as a whole and for the state in particular.

It is clear that the specific national context, important features of administration, culture, and social organization were common to all the major European armies. In Russia the presence of serfdom and the obligatory nature of conscription created social issues that were much different from those found in England, France, Austria, or Germany. It is precisely the effects of serfdom that make Russia so suitable for a study of military society: the service was obligatory, it lasted for twenty or twenty-five years, and brought with it a fundamental change in juridical status. Conscription implied a very sharp and complete break with one's native environment. That's why the length term of service and the change in social status provided the foundation for a separate "military society" [5, p. 17]. In fact, the government tried to create a special caste of subjects who were not connected with the interests of civilian population.

Of all the obligations imposed on the poll-tax population, none was more terrible or feared than military service. Nowhere was coercion in the relationship between the state and society more visible. Conscription meant a sudden and final break from home and family with little chance of return. Depriving peasant society of able-bodied men, it could bring economic ruin to individual families. According to the data presented by P.P. Shcherbinin the departure of a husband from a family suffered great losses to the family's welfare [6]. For pre-reform society, military service was an obligation imposed upon the servile population by the state, and it reflected the coercive nature of service in the Petrine system.

Popular hostility toward conscription remained a major problem, but it is wrong to assume that the majority of eligible men fled at the prospect of military service. Most people accepted conscription obediently, if only because they had little opportunity to escape. It was in the interest of landlords and local communities to enforce the obligation; otherwise they had to deliver replacements or bear the cost of finding the runaway. In border regions where it was easier to flee abroad and where ethnic peculiarities made enforcement more complicated, the danger of flight was greater. Consequently, some border areas enjoyed special exemption from conscription. While Russia's military might provided positive proof of the absolutist state's ability to impose service upon society, officials identified popular flight as a basic reason for the inefficiencies and shortcomings of the recruitment system, attributing this flight to the long term of service and the harshness of military life [5, p. 6].

Most soldiers came from the poll-tax population of manorial serfs, state peasants, and townspeople. Since the reign of Peter the Great, the obligation to provide recruits and pay the poll tax signified the inferior status of these groups. Nobles, merchants, and clergy were exempt from service on a social basis. One can understand that recruitment obligations clearly separated privileged Russia from the masses.

Popular evasion was another important factor preventing the equal distribution of service obligations. The extreme act of self-mutilation and the notorious corruption of Russia's local officials were the methods effectively employed. Bribery was an endemic

feature of imperial administration, and its role in conscription is no surprise. Often townspeople joined with relatives to form a common capital that allowed them to register as merchants. They avoided conscription and paid lower taxes, while continuing to work and live separately. To fight these practices, an ukase of 1809 permitted only parents and children to register together. Moreover, a townsman could enroll in a guild only if the community freed him from his service obligation. Another popular form of evasion was division of a large household into smaller units. These inventive methods of evasion show how the people took advantage of every possible loophole to avoid military service [5, p. 19].

Clearly, rich peasants managed to escape service while poor and middle peasants were called up for military service. Rich man could bribe an official, hire substitutes or buy an exemption receipt. There was a practice of purchasing of substitutes too. Economic inequality, administrative corruption, and the prevailing popular attitude toward service combined to make an equitable distribution of the burden impossible. In the diverse conditions of the Russian empire, the application of uniform procedures and rules always proved elusive.

Due to administrative corruption and popular evasion, those families most capable of providing recruits often avoided the sacrifice. Considerable manipulation accompanied conscription, and peasants would do anything within their power to evade service. Thus the poor and the weak tended to answer the call to arms. Peasant complaints and official reports repeatedly exposed administrative irregularities. In placing unreasonable demands on some segments of society, the system of conscription lacked the moral authority to counteract evasion or attract the best-qualified personnel.

The most important military reforms in pre-reform period applied to levies. It should be noted that even during the introduction of military colonies the government claimed its desire to “to avert the burden attended by the present recruitment system and as a result recruits must live far from their motherland and live apart from their families...” [2, p. 37]. The lottery system (zhereb'evaia sistema) aimed to reduce evasion by promoting regularity and fairness in the selection of recruits. The division of the empire into two spheres for purposes of conscription also sought to equalize distribution of the burden. Finally, the introduction of indefinite leaves after twenty years of service was designed to reduce costs, lighten the burden of service, and create a trained reserve ready for call up in wartime. Some high-level officials regarded a shorter term of service as the best way to reduce the social and economic dislocations caused by the long tour of duty. But the juridical definitions of serfdom precluded this solution. Service brought emancipation. Hence only with the end of serfdom could the government introduce universal conscription, which would ensure a more equitable distribution of the service burden. The government was disturbed by inequities, but not sufficiently disturbed to attempt fundamental reform. There was no pressing need for change, since the army undoubtedly served well the military and foreign policy goals of the state.

By 1834 a new category of soldiers appeared. It was a group of lower ranks who were granted indefinite leaves for the rest 5 years after 20 years of service. Retired soldiers formed a “homeless class”. It means they have lost their previous social and family ties. They hadn't any job and permanent place of living. Only some of them could get a job and hired to manufactories, mills and factories as workers. Many retired soldiers had to live in a condition of vagrancy and poverty till the end of their lives.

During 30-40 years of the XIX century a system of social maintenance to soldiers on indefinite leaves was formed including legal aspects of servicemen's social adaptation. Since 1839 lower ranks holding indefinite leaves were granted benefits for settlement in the state village. Besides they got free timber for building houses and its heating.

In the XIX century soldiers granted indefinite leaves didn't lose connection with the army and were subject to military call-up. During the whole month they were at the assembly and for the same time came back home. So during 3 months they were not with their families and often lost their permanent work. Only 26 August 1856 Alexander II abolished annual assemblies of soldiers granted indefinite leaves. In the 70s of the XIX century six-weeks assemblies were introduced which should be carried out not more than 2 times during the soldier's reserve. Since the 80-s of the XIX century lower ranks who were in the reserve gathered for some days for the strength's control.

Nevertheless, we should notice that every year for about one thousand soldiers went to service with the colors from indefinite leave voluntarily. We can suggest that it was caused by the poor financial position and difficulties with social adaptation among civilian population.

Obviously, recruits and soldiers on indefinite leave played an important role in the social history of Russia. They represented a distinctive population's group of Russian society that had certain legal immunity and sociocultural character. It should be observed that complex researches of these categories of population in pre-revolutionary Russia will help to understand the peculiarities of social processes in the country and relationship between the authority and society in modernist Russia.

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## **Социальный статус и правовое положение русского солдата в XVIII – XIX вв.**

**Л.Е. Вакулова, Ю.В. Щербинина**

*Кафедра истории и философии, ТГТУ*

**Ключевые слова и фразы:** отставка; рекрутчина; русская армия; социальное обеспечение; социальный статус и правовое положение.

**Аннотация:** Рассматриваются аспекты реконструкции социального статуса и правового положения русского солдата в период действия рекрутской повинности, а также жизнь солдата после отставки и его социальная адаптация.

## **Sozialer Status und Rechtsbestimmung des russischen Soldaten in den Jahrhunderten XVIII – XIX**

**Zusammenfassung:** Es werden die Aspekte der Rekonstruktion des sozialen Status und der Rechtsbestimmung des russischen Soldaten im Laufe der Wirkung der Rekrutverpflichtung, und auch das Leben des Soldaten nach dem Rücktritt und seine soziale Anpassung betrachtet.

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## **Statut social et état civil légal du soldat russe aux XVIII-ème – XIX-ème siècles**

**Résumé:** Sont examinés les aspects de la reconstruction du statut social et de l'état légal du soldat russe dans la période du fonctionnement de la conscription ainsi que la vie du soldat après la démission et son adaptation sociale.

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