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Peasants on the Move: State Peasant Resettlement in Imperial Russia, 1805–1830s

WILLARD SUNDERLAND

The renewed interest in Russian peasant studies in recent years has done much to explore the complex dynamics of the peasant family and commune and the equally complex relations between peasants and rural agents of power such as landlords, bailiffs and state officials.¹ One dimension of rural life that has not received much recent attention, however, is peasant colonization. Although it has been over a century since V. O. Kliuchevskii identified the relentless process of “internal colonization” as the “basic fact” of Russian history, we still, in many respects, know very little about how rural colonization occurred, how it affected peasant demographic and social structures, and how it influenced peasant mentalité and culture. This holds particularly true for colonization in the preemancipation period, which remains considerably understudied in comparison to the larger and better-documented peasant migrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²

State peasant resettlement in the early nineteenth century is one of the least studied and potentially most interesting episodes in the history of peasant colonization. The Russian state prior to this period had supported peasant colonization in a number of ways, either offering incentives to serfowners to relocate their serfs to

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¹ For recent overviews of this literature see B. Eklof, “Ways of Seeing: Recent Anglo-American Studies of the Russian Peasant, 1861–1914,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1988): 57–79; and D. L. Ransel, “Rural Russia Redux,” *Peasant Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1991): 117–29.

² In contrast to the voluminous scholarship on the postemancipation period, there have been few general studies on peasant colonization under serfdom. See Fr.-X. Coquin, *La Sibérie: Peuplement et immigration paysanne au dixième siècle* (Paris, 1969); J. Pallot and D. J. B. Shaw, *Landscape and Settlement in Romanov Russia 1613–1917* (Oxford, 1990); and M. M. Shulgin, “Zemleustroistva i pereseleniia v Rossii v XVIII i pervoi polovine XIX vv.,” in *Trudy Moskovskogo mezhevoogo instituta po fakul'tetu zemleustroistva i pereseleniia*, vol. 2, vyp. 1 (Moscow, 1928). Kliuchevskii's remark can be found in his *Sochineniia v deviaty tomakh* (Moscow, 1987), 1:50.

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the borderlands, encouraging the resettlement of religious dissenters and *odnodvortsy* along the state's frontiers, or taking a practical view toward runaway serfs whose presence in frontier areas could be turned to the state's advantage. It was only in the early 1800s, however, in response to growing land shortages in central Russia and the Ukraine, that the Russian state took its first steps toward establishing a systematic colonization policy that would allow for routine and legal peasant movement to the borderlands. This policy specifically targeted the state peasant population. Living on treasury lands and under the direct control of the state administration, state peasants, the government believed, could easily be moved from their diminishing holdings in the center to more abundant lands in the empire's boundary provinces.

From 1805, when official resettlement began in earnest, to the Kiselev reform in the 1830s, the Russian government embarked on a wide-ranging relocation of tens of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian state-peasant families. Fortunately for historians, a rich store of archival material, which includes peasant petitions, ministerial and gubernatorial correspondence and official reports from the countryside, allows us to begin analyzing how this peasant migration and settlement took place. My article, after briefly outlining the background and nature of the state's resettlement policy, will attempt to examine the social milieu of rural colonization, exploring such questions as how the peasant community functioned in the resettlement process, how peasants organized their movement in relation to authorities in the countryside, and what problems the peasants faced in doing so.³

The first instances of organized state peasant resettlement date from the late eighteenth century, when the idea of organizing peasant movement arose in response to the need for reinforcing the state's military position in the imperial periphery, especially in the newly conquered and sparsely settled regions of New Russia and the North Caucasus. Beginning with decrees in the 1760s, the state encouraged individual state peasant communities, including groups of *odnodvortsy*, retired soldiers, cosacks and Old Believers, to relocate to borderland provinces, where they would receive land and tax privileges in return for military service.⁴ Most of these early resettlements were random, extremely limited in scale and usually tied to some sort of military function.

State-sponsored resettlement soon acquired a new dimension, however, as the

³ The principal sources for this paper were drawn from two ministerial fondy (f. 1285, Departament gosudarstvennogo khoziaistva MVD 1778–1835, op. 3, Po raznym prichinam; and f. 379, Departament gosudarstvennykh imushchestv Ministerstva finansov, op. 1, Pervoe otdelenie po upravleniiu gosudarstvennami krest'ianami i imushchestvami), both located in the Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (TsGIA, now RGIA) in St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, due to an accident at the archive in July 1991, a large and important body of materials (f. 1285, op. 1, O pereseleniakh gosudarstvennykh krest'ian) was unavailable for use. As of March 1992 these documents were still inaccessible.

⁴ V. M. Kabuzan notes that military servitors and peasants with military obligations constituted over half of the population in most areas of New Russia in the late eighteenth century. See his *Zaselenie Novorossii v XVIII-pervoi polovine XIX veka* (Moscow, 1976), 108 passim. On the southern borderlands see also E. I. Druzhinina, *Severnoe prichernomor'e v 1775–1800 gg.* (Moscow, 1959), 58–70; A. V. Fadeev, *Rossia i kavkaz v pervoi tret'i XIX v.* (Moscow, 1960), 32–39; and J. P. LeDonne, *Ruling Russia: Politics and Administration in the Age of Absolutism 1762–1796* (Princeton, 1984), 291–306.

central government began to react to a noticeable decline in the economic condition of the state peasantry, a situation largely attributable to provincial land shortages. These shortages were especially severe in areas of central Russia and southwestern Ukraine where sizable population growth in the late eighteenth century had reduced many state peasant holdings to four *desiatina* or less per male peasant, far below the norm of fifteen *desiatina* per male soul envisioned in the Land Survey instructions of 1766.⁵ By 1810, conditions such as those in the central Russian provinces of Tambov, Riazan' and Orel, where "many villages knew no more than two or three *desiatina* per male soul," had become increasingly widespread.⁶ Realizing that holdings of this size made it nearly impossible for peasants to support themselves or meet their obligations, the government looked to organized peasant resettlement as a possible solution. In 1781 the government ordered governors in provinces affected by land shortages to assess the number of state peasants in their provinces wishing to resettle. Those peasants who agreed to relocate were to be relieved from state taxes for a period of one-and-a-half years.⁷ Further *ukazy* followed over the next two decades as the government continued to encourage resettlement from overpopulated areas.⁸ The state's policy, clearly expanding in the late eighteenth century, took on greater significance in the early 1800s, when peasant resettlement became a working element in the plans for peasant reform that appeared during the first years of Alexander I's reign.

Government action in the particular area of state peasant reform can be traced to the creation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, the two institutions most closely involved in overseeing the state peasantry in the early nineteenth century.⁹ V. P. Kochubei, the first minister of internal affairs, strongly favored a more active government role in improving the plight of the state peasants. Resettlement, in his view, was an important means to this end. If carried out efficiently, state-sponsored resettlement held out the double prospect of resolving the land shortages in the interior and populating the borderlands.¹⁰ Furthermore, it was clear to Kochubei and others that some kind of action was necessary in order to stem the tide of independent resettlement that often brought great hardship to peasant settlers and, of course, affected the collection of state taxes.¹¹ With this intention in mind, the government issued the *ukaz* of 3 June 1805, establishing the guidelines for

⁵ N. M. Druzhinin, *Gosudarstvennye krest'iane i reforma P. D. Kiseleva*, vol. 1 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1946), 89–90; S. P. Kavelin, "Istoricheskii ocherk pozemel'nogo ustroistva gosudarstvennykh krest'ian," *Trudy obshchestva mezhevykh inzhenerov*, vyp. 2 (Moscow, 1912), 18.

⁶ F.-X. Coquin, "Faim et migrations paysannes au dixième siècle," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol. 2 (1964): 129.

⁷ *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii (PSZ)*, ser. 1, vol. 21, no. 15177, pp. 186–87.

⁸ N. Petrovich, "K istorii krest'ianskogo pereselencheskogo dvizheniia," *Arkhiv istorii truda v Rossii*, book 10 (1923): 150.

⁹ Control over state peasant affairs at this time officially rested with the Department of State Properties (Departament gosudarstvennykh imushchestv), a division of the Ministry of Finance. See E. Amburger, *Geschichte der Behördenorganisation Russlands von Peter dem Grossen bis 1917* (Leiden, 1966), 244, 281; and N. P. Eroshkin, *Ocherki istorii gosudarstvennykh uchrezhdenii dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii* (Moscow, 1960), 205–6.

¹⁰ TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 4, l. 122.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 25–25(b).

a systematic resettlement policy that—at least on paper—were to govern the process for the following twenty years.

The 1805 decree concerned the resettlement of over three thousand “land-starved” (*malozemel'nye*) state peasants from Smolensk province to New Russia. These peasants, who lived on meager holdings of three-and-a-half *desiatina* and had suffered through repeated harvest failures, were in such desperate straights that they could “neither pay their taxes nor even feed themselves.”¹² Faced with such grim circumstances, the peasants had appealed for permission to resettle. The government approved the peasants’ request and devised a list of procedures for them to follow. The procedures were necessary, the *ukaz* noted, because of the long record of peasant relocations that had failed due to a lack of “necessary supervision . . . and provisioning.” Out of a total of fifty thousand peasants previously dispatched for resettlement to the North Caucasus, no more than fifteen thousand had arrived at their destination, although the decree does not indicate what happened to these settlers.¹³

According to the decree, state peasants were required to send a party of scouts (*khodoki*) to the area of resettlement once their request for relocation was approved. These scouts would choose the new lands and village sites in conjunction with the local authorities. In cases of long-distance resettlement, an advance party was to build lodgings and prepare the fields for the main party of settlers. These preparations would take place over the winter, with the rest of the settlers following in the spring and traveling in groups of no more than thirty families so as to avoid problems of quartering and provisioning during the journey. As a further measure against problems or disturbances, local officials or soldiers were to escort the peasants as they moved “from city to city” and “from one *uezd* to another.” These local officials were also required to provide the settlers with money for food and other necessities en route. On arrival, the peasants were to receive allotments of fifteen *desiatina* per male soul, five years’ relief from payment of taxes, and fifteen additional years of eligibility for government loans. In order to ensure an unbroken flow of state revenue, the settlers’ tax obligations during the exemption period were to be passed on to those peasants staying behind (that is, to the communes), an arrangement that the government viewed as appropriate payment for the lands vacated by the departing settlers.¹⁴

The level of state assistance offered to potential settlers in the 1805 decree marked a considerable improvement over previous legislation. The five-year release from dues was especially important. Settlers prior to 1805 had been granted merely a one-and-a-half year exemption. During this short period, they were barely able to construct their homes, set up their farms and adjust to their new climate and surroundings. Kochubei, who argued strongly for the five-year exemption, noted that one-and-a-half years was simply not enough time for the peasants to provide adequately for themselves, let alone meet their obligations to the state.¹⁵ The minister,

¹² *PSZ*, ser. 1, vol. 40, no. 21779(a), p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

¹⁵ *TsGIA*, f. 379, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 117–18(b).

however, stopped short of saying that the generous five-year privilege should be extended to all settlers. Although the 1805 decree eventually became the precedent for all state-sponsored resettlement, it is clear that the government did not originally intend for the *ukaz* to apply across the board. Fearing that “simple people” (*prostye liudi*) might misinterpret the decree as official endorsement for independent resettlement, the government decided not to publish it.¹⁶

Instead of making the decree public, the government devised an administrative system intended to ensure complete control over the resettlement process. In early 1806 the Ministry of Internal Affairs requested governors in twenty-two central and southwestern provinces to inform it of all petitions for resettlement involving groups of five or more families. The ministry would then approve or reject these requests. In reserving the right of final approval, the government hoped to retain enough control over resettlement “to restrict it or abolish it altogether” if it no longer seemed to serve the state’s best interests.¹⁷ Centralized control was one of the guiding principles of the government’s design. Even though provincial governors and treasuries were expected to communicate with each other on matters concerning the departure and arrival of peasant settlers, the central ministries in St. Petersburg were to be kept abreast of all developments.

With its long enumeration of detailed procedures, the 1805 decree certainly reflects the spirit of tutelage and martial regimentation that permeated most Russian government projects in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As one historian has noted, the state approached the management of peasant resettlement with the same concern for minutiae and exactness that it might have shown in organizing an army regiment.¹⁸ There were, of course, practical reasons for trying to exert this control. One of the state’s most important concerns was to ensure that resettlement did not interfere with the fulfillment of the peasantry’s financial and military obligations. We have already seen how responsibility for peasant taxes during the exemption period was conveniently passed on to the settlers’ former communes. What is more, the peasants received no reprieve from military obligations as the government insisted that settlers continue to render their required share of military recruits, even during the difficult initial period of their resettlement. The government’s steadfastness on this point appears to have developed in response to fears that an energetic resettlement policy might lead to a reduction in recruitment levels. In a letter to Minister of Finance A. I. Vasiliev in 1807, Kochubei made it clear that local authorities were not to allow peasants to depart for resettlement if their recruitment quotas had not been met.¹⁹

Despite such attempts at control, the government nonetheless encountered considerable problems in organizing the resettlement process. In 1806 it had to extend special powers to governors in provinces that were overwhelmed with incoming peasant settlers, and six years later it was actually forced to halt resettlement temporarily to all provinces except New Russia due to outstanding problems with the imperial

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 119, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 26, 123(b).

¹⁸ Coquin, *La Sibérie*, 50.

¹⁹ TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 122(b)-123.

land survey.²⁰ Furthermore, despite the growing scope of the government's policy, resettlements from any one area often remained too small to significantly reduce local land shortages.²¹ Overall, the situation in the countryside proved hard for the government to handle, for it had neither the power to control peasant movement nor the means to provide for it in adequate fashion. At the heart of the government's dilemma lay the simple fact that in organizing resettlement it was attempting to bring order and routine to a process that operated largely according to its own dynamic, one related most of all to the difficult social and economic conditions of life in the countryside.

Although precise figures are not available, a variety of sources show clearly that the government's resettlement policy affected thousands of state peasant settlers in the early nineteenth century. Most of the movement at this time was directed from central and southwestern provinces to areas in the south and southeast. For example, during the short period from 1805 to 1810 over twelve thousand state peasants ("revision souls," that is, adult males) were resettled in New Russia from Poltava, Chernigov, Kursk and other Ukrainian provinces. These resettlements led to the establishment of at least twenty-five new state peasant villages.²² In addition, state peasants moved in considerable numbers to the North Caucasus and, on a somewhat lesser scale, to the Volga region, the Urals and Siberia.²³

In most cases, the obvious factor leading state peasants to resettle was simple economic misery. Judging from files in the Ministry of Finance, peasants nearly always cited land shortages, poor harvests and their own generally impoverished condition as reasons for seeking resettlement. The case of the state peasants from three villages in Suratskii *povet*, Chernigov province, is typical. In their petition for resettlement, 402 revision souls complained of "insufficient and poor-quality land" and "failed harvests over the course of eight consecutive years" that left them "with no hope of providing for their families . . . or paying their arrears in the foreseeable future."²⁴ Other peasants from Gzhatskii *uezd*, Smolensk province, pleaded for resettlement due to "devastations" experienced during the war of 1812.²⁵ Judging from available documents, it seems that it was generally the poorest peasants in the village

²⁰ PSZ, ser. 1, vol. 29, no. 22367, pp. 878–80, and ser. 1, vol. 32, no. 25150, p. 364.

²¹ Petrovich, "K istorii," 154.

²² This information was drawn from annual gubernatorial reports for the New Russian provinces. The total figure of 12,218 revision souls comprises state peasants from a number of subcategories including *odnodvortsy* and cossacks. TsGIA, f. 1281, op. 11, d. 165 (Khersonskaia guberniia 1805–1810 gg.), d. 184 (Ekaterinoslavskaia guberniia 1805–1810 gg.), d. 131 (Tavricheskaia guberniia 1805–1810 gg). Information on the village settlements is provided in A. Skal'kovskii, *Khronologicheskoe obozrenie istorii novorossiiskogo kraia*, part 2, 1796–1823 (Odessa, 1838), 121.

²³ On resettlement in these areas see L. N. Iurovskii, *Saratovskie votchiny. Statistiko-ekonomicheskie ocherki i materialy iz istorii krupnogo zemlevladieniia i krepostnogo khoziaistva v kontse XVIII i v nachale XIX stoletiiia* (Saratov, 1923), 20–26; *Istoriia Sibiri*, vol. 2, *Sibir v sostave feodal'noi Rossii* (Leningrad, 1968), 167–71; V. M. Kabuzan, "Zaselenie i osvonenie Severnogo Kavkaza (Stavropol'ia i Chernomorii) v I-i polovine XIX v. (1815–1858 gg.);" *Istoriia geograficheskikh znaniia i istoricheskaiia geografiia. Etnografiia*, vyp. 4 (Moscow, 1970), 14–16; and Iu. M. Tarasov, *Russkaia krest'ianskaia kolonizatsiia iuzhnogo Urala: vtoraiia polovina XVIII-pervaia polovina XIX v.* (Moscow, 1984), 81–125.

²⁴ TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 479, ll. 2–2(b), 14–15, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, d. 150, l. 1.

who petitioned for resettlement. As one historian has noted, these peasants often opted to resettle because they had the least to lose.²⁶ The actual profile of peasant settlers, however, must have included some wealthier peasants who were prepared to take advantage of the state's incentives for resettlement and still others who, for one reason or another, were forced to relocate by their communes. Though peasant petitions overwhelmingly emphasized the economic "push" factors in their requests to resettle, other "pull" factors such as utopian expectations of a land of freedom and abundance on the frontier also motivated peasants to relocate. One tsarist official noted that rumors about the good life in "faraway lands," in combination with poor economic conditions, often created a mood for resettlement among state-peasant communities.²⁷

In choosing their place of destination, peasants demonstrated that they were well aware of the dangers and uncertainties of the resettlement process. In most instances they preferred resettlement over a limited distance, often within their native province if possible. Such resettlements held obvious advantages from the peasants' perspective: by relocating close to home, settlers avoided the risks of a long journey, established themselves in a familiar environment and climate, and retained the option of easily returning to their original villages if and when the need arose. Other peasants, such as those from Khar'kov *uezd*, Slobodskaia-Ukraina province, resettled over long distances but were able to reduce the difficulties of the process by moving to areas already settled by their former villagers and relatives.²⁸ Most peasant settlers, however, did not have this option. In taking their families and possessions on the road, all that they could hope for was assistance from their communes and from the state's local officials.

As the basic instrument of authority in the peasant community, the commune understandably played an important role in the resettlement process. It granted permission for its members to petition the government for resettlement and, in some cases, actually oversaw the selection of families.²⁹ But perhaps the commune's most important function lay in providing departing settlers with some form of material assistance. The decree of 1805 stipulated that the commune provide this support, but it did not establish a set amount, requiring instead that local officials determine

²⁶ Coquin, "Faim," 135.

²⁷ The official is cited in N. Petrovich, "Pereselenie gosudarstvennykh krest'ian v Sibir' v nachale 19 veka," *Arkhiv istorii truda v Rossii*, book 12 (1924): 116. For state peasants (much like runaway serfs), there appears to have been some truth to expectations of a better life in the empire's outlying provinces. See D. Moon, *Russian Peasants and Tsarist Legislation on the Eve of Reform: Interaction between Peasants and Officialdom, 1825–1855* (London, 1992), 23–33. On the power of utopian legends and their effect on the Russian peasantry see K. V. Chistov, *Russkie narodnye sotsial'no-utopicheskie legendy XVII–XIX vv.* (Moscow, 1967).

²⁸ TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 459, l. 17 passim. Between 1821 and 1828, several hundred peasants and *voennye obyvateli* from these Ukrainian villages followed their relatives to Saratov province, taking up residence in the original settlements or establishing new ones nearby. Links of kinship and *zemlia* in this instance appear to have been important mechanisms for supporting resettlement.

²⁹ Family selection, usually by means of casting lots, occurred in cases when resettlement was required by the state (TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 187, ll. 55, 68[b]). On instances of forced resettlement, such as those that occurred during the establishment of military colonies in the 1810s and 1820s, see N. Petrovich, "Prinuditel'noe pereselenie bobyletskikh krest'ian," *Arkhiv istorii truda v Rossii*, book 11–12 (1924): 149–63.

the appropriate level of assistance on a case-by-case basis.³⁰ Unfortunately, official documentation in most instances does not reveal the extent of communal support offered to peasant settlers, except to say that it was generally sufficient. One can assume that the assistance came in money or in kind, or that it sometimes involved more elaborate arrangements, such as in the case of the state peasants from Kletino village, Meshchovskii *uezd*, Kaluga province. Upon leaving for settlement in the Saratov area, these 224 peasants agreed with their commune that they would receive ten rubles for each settler as well as rights to usage or rental over their former personal plots for three years following their departure.³¹ Regardless of the arrangements that settlers made with their communes, however, the basic unit in the resettlement process remained the individual peasant family, a fact that corresponded both to the dictates of peasant life as well as to the stipulations of the state's resettlement policy. The act of permanent resettlement, unlike temporary migrant work, revolved around married couples, and sometimes whole households, who would move together to the borderland regions.

The role of local administration in the resettlement of state peasants was absolutely essential. In addition to ensuring that settlers received appropriate support from their communes, local officials were also expected to arrange for travel assistance (*posobie, kormovye den'gi*), escort teams and quartering for peasants on the road. Given the dismal reputation of Russia's provincial administration, it is not surprising to learn that local officials often failed to carry out these responsibilities.³² Support for travel expenses varied from case to case: in some instances it was generous; in many others it came in small amounts and only on request.³³ Sometimes provincial treasuries, instead of providing outright support, issued loans to cover the costs of travel.³⁴ As for escorting and monitoring duties, little information exists in the state archives. One can only wonder whether state escorts abided by gubernatorial instructions not to control the peasants or "restrict in any way their freedom."³⁵

In addition to providing or serving as escorts, local officials had another important police function: to prevent state peasants from undertaking resettlement without official permission. As noted above, independent resettlement was a persistent problem, one that contributed to the government's decision to draft the 1805 legislation. The creation of an official resettlement policy, however, did not really affect this phenomenon. Given the long delays inherent in the petitioning process as well as the ever-present possibility that resettlement could be denied, the lure of independent

³⁰ *PSZ*, ser. 1, vol. 40, no. 21779(a), p. 44.

³¹ *TsGIA*, f. 379, op. 1, d. 77, l. 15(b).

³² The venal, inefficient and often brutal character of Russian local officialdom in the nineteenth century is well known. For an overview of local officials and their work with the state peasantry see G. Bolotenko, "Administration of the State Peasants in Russia before the Reforms of 1838" (Ph.D. diss. University of Toronto, 1979), 121–92.

³³ In a directive from 1806, Kochubei instructed the vice-governor of Kursk province to provide peasants with travel assistance "only if one of them, out of extreme poverty, chooses to request it" (*TsGIA*, f. 379, op. 1, d. 4, l. 70).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, d. 479, ll. 28–31.

³⁵ These instructions, from the governor of Tobolsk, are quoted in Petrovich, "Pereselenie gosudarstvennykh krest'ian," 112.

resettlement remained strong.³⁶ The case of state-peasant settlers from the village of Baturovka, Suratskii *povet*, Chernigov province, provides a typical example. These peasants (four families in all) were found “traveling on thirteen oxen, with their wives, young children, stock animals . . . in a word, with all of their belongings in tow.” When asked what they were doing, the peasants responded that they had left their homes because of harvest failure and were heading for resettlement to “lands on the Black Sea.” Having no papers, they were promptly carted off to the police, forced to return to their village, and presumably punished for what the local *zemskii komissar* called “vagabondage in the guise of resettlement.”³⁷ On this occasion at least, state officials were successful in turning back illegal peasant settlers.

In contrast to the Baturovka peasants who attempted to relocate without official permission, many other peasants actually secured the right to resettle by making it impossible for the government to refuse, ignore or delay the approval of their petitions. In 1806, for example, peasants from several villages in Penza province, expecting to resettle to the Caucasus in the summer, “sold their homes and all other property, and refrained from sowing their fields.” As a result, they had no means of supporting themselves and thus had to be released for resettlement at the earliest possible juncture.³⁸ In another case, 1,987 state peasants from Orel province received permission to leave their communes and immediately began preparing for departure by selling all of their belongings. Given the possibility of disturbances if their resettlement were postponed, the Orel governor found himself “obliged” to let them go.³⁹ By disposing of their property and surrendering their land to their communes, the peasants basically forced the government to respond, thereby accelerating the resettlement process and throwing a wrench into the state’s deliberate, slow-moving and overly centralized system. Though provincial authorities sometimes succeeded in keeping peasants from leaving too quickly, one gets the sense from official documents that peasant action—not state policy—generally set the schedule for relocations in the countryside.

Considering the difficulties inherent in the resettlement process, arranging for departure was probably the least of the settlers’ worries. Much more worrisome was the prospect of moving to new lands and establishing a new life in an unfamiliar and potentially inhospitable environment. The journey itself was the first challenge. Judging from available accounts, long-distance resettlement in the early nineteenth century brought considerable hardships. Most state-peasant settlers in this period traveled by cart or by foot for weeks and even months at a time, moving in small groups of five, ten or fifteen families, and quartering when possible in villages along the way. In cases of resettlement over extremely long distances, death and desertion on the road were common.⁴⁰ And even when settlers reached their destination, dif-

³⁶ State peasants who left for resettlement without official permission received none of the privileges or even the tentative assistance accorded to legal settlers. Despite this fact, independent resettlement was widespread. Many state peasants reacted to the state’s resettlement policy by simply setting out on their own. See Druzhinin, *Gosudarstvennye krest’iane* 1:92–93.

³⁷ TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 479, ll. 19–20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, d. 4, ll. 30–31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ll. 34–37.

⁴⁰ Coquin, *La Sibérie*, 51.

difficulties in adjusting to the rigors of a new environment as well as in dealing with significant shortcomings in the state's resettlement policy often meant that their situation did not noticeably improve.

Land was a constant source of concern. Despite a seeming abundance of land in the outlying provinces of the empire, the distribution of state land to peasant settlers proceeded slowly and, periodically, stopped altogether. Due to inadequate surveys, provincial authorities simply did not know the quantity of land available for distribution to peasant settlers. This explains why the government temporarily halted resettlement in 1812 in all provinces except the New Russian territory. Yet even New Russia came to experience problems in this regard. The enormous influx of settlers to the territory led to the establishment in 1818 of provincial committees designed to oversee the distribution of new allotments. Just one year later, however, the committees cited enormous difficulties in their work due to the fact that "the exact quantity of state lands" in the territory remained unknown.⁴¹ The incomplete count of state lands caused confusion and delays in the resettlement process all across the empire.⁴² It was not unheard of for peasant settlers to be denied the land chosen for them by their scouts or agents (*poverennye*). One group of settlers in Tavrida province, for example, complained that they had been given "lands without access to water" in lieu of the better-quality sites that they had originally selected. Despite the peasants' petitions, local authorities refused to allow the settlers to relocate to the lands they desired.⁴³

Peasants often lived in poor conditions in their new settlements. Settlers from Suratskii *povet*, Chernigov province, found conditions in Tavrida so disastrous that some of them petitioned for permission to return to their original villages. A provincial clerk or "fixer" (*striapchii*), sent to investigate the situation, found the settlers' homes permeated with "a foul humid smell," wells that were "caving in" for "lack of wood supports," and grossly inadequate supplies, including "a mere five days' supply of fuel" and "no cattle feed or grain." Although the settlers requested loans for timber, oxen, cows, plows and harnesses, only a fraction of the funding, as well as some grain, was provided. The state thus alleviated the settlers' dire situation but hardly provided the means necessary for a successful start to resettlement.⁴⁴ This case typifies the situation that often prevailed in the countryside. Despite isolated efforts to intercede on behalf of peasant settlers, provincial treasuries simply did not have the means to assist the peasants. Lack of coordination between provincial organs further complicated matters. Governors and treasuries in the provinces were supposed to cooperate in handling resettlement issues, yet this cooperation often broke down, as can be seen in the cases of numerous settlers who, due to miscommunication between the provinces, were registered for taxes both in their original villages as well as in their new settlements.⁴⁵

In addition to a general lack of official support, sicknesses resulting from life in

⁴¹ TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 187, ll. 96–98.

⁴² *Istoriia Sibiri*, 170.

⁴³ TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 479, l. 140.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, ll. 79(b)–83(b).

⁴⁵ Druzhinin, *Gosudarstvennye krest'iane* 1:94.

an unfamiliar environment also contributed to settlers' misfortunes. In the first eight years following their resettlement to Tavrida, a community of 428 peasants originally from Melitopol'skii *uezd*, Malorossiiia province, lost 126 members due to "differences in climate," a common euphemism for unknown diseases.⁴⁶ Settlers also sometimes experienced problems with their new neighbors. In the Crimea, for example, lands given to state peasants were not clearly separated from nearby pastures used by Tatar herders. As a result, Tatar sheep and cattle often grazed on peasant fields and trampled their plots, giving rise to frequent land disputes.⁴⁷ Other settlers found themselves at the mercy of neighboring noble landowners. In the case of the peasants from Suratskii *povet*, a local landowner owned the only well close to the peasants' settlement and frequently charged them for its use, forcing them to perform labor services without pay.⁴⁸

Given the hardships involved in resettlement, it is not surprising that peasants sometimes abandoned their new homes and returned to their former villages. This phenomenon, unanticipated by the state's resettlement policy, caused considerable problems for both the peasants and the provincial authorities. Take, for example, the three hundred-plus *odnodvortsy* from Orel province who had resettled to new lands in the Caucasus in the early 1810s. In 1815 these peasants petitioned to return to their old villages in Orel, complaining that officials in the Caucasus did not furnish them with "suitable land" or provide them with the lumber needed to build their new homes. The peasants received permission to leave, but on returning home discovered that their former villages would not take them back. The peasants who had stayed behind insisted that they could not afford to reintegrate the returning peasants into their villages, citing "a lack of land and, moreover, protesting that they had paid [the settlers'] taxes, rendered their obligations . . . and provided them with twenty-five rubles assistance per soul in resettling to the Caucasus." In resolving the issue, the Orel treasury allowed the returning settlers to repossess their former allotments except those that had been built upon.⁴⁹

Peasants returning to their former homes were often in such a poor state that they required immediate assistance from local officials. In 1815 the governor of Smolensk province requested compensation from the Ministry of Finance for assistance rendered to 205 state peasants who had just returned from attempted resettlement in New Russia. These peasants had exhausted their resources on the return trip and "possessed neither homes, stock animals, tools, nor even seeds for sowing their winter fields." The governor asked for over twenty-five thousand rubles in assistance for the peasants, absolution from debts incurred during the year of their failed resettlement, and release from taxes for the coming two years.⁵⁰ This benevolent concern, however, did not apply to state peasant settlers who attempted to return home with-

⁴⁶ TsGIA, f. 1285, op. 3, d. 132, l. 2(b).

⁴⁷ S. A. Sekirinskii, "K voprosu o zaselenii Kryma v kontse XVIII veka," *Izvestiia krymskogo pedagogicheskogo instituta im. M. V. Frunze*, vol. 23 (1956): 81.

⁴⁸ TsGIA, f. 379, op. 1, d. 479, l. 143.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ll. 13–15(b).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, d. 151, ll. 2–3(b), 5.

out official permission. In such cases, peasants were forced to go back to their settlements, compounding the hardships that had led them to leave in the first place.⁵¹

Although resettlement in the early nineteenth century was fraught with difficulty for peasants, from the government's perspective organized resettlement was serving a clear purpose. Despite shortcomings, the state's policy provided a legal framework for controlling peasant mobility and directing it to the borderland areas for colonization and development. While the policy did not prevent independent movement or flight, it did provide some incentive for peasants to resettle according to the law. Despite instances of failed resettlement, the great majority of legal peasant settlers, judging from the lack of complaints in the state archives, must have overcome the dangers of the resettlement process and adjusted, at least somewhat successfully, to life on their new lands.

Throughout the early nineteenth century, the Russian government remained strongly committed to its resettlement policy, a fact that reflected a growing attachment to resettlement as part of a larger design for reforming the state peasantry. Action in this domain was intense, especially in the 1820s, when committees created by Tsar Nicholas I discussed several reform proposals. Two projects in particular, those of Prince A. Kurakin and M. M. Speranskii, gave prominent place to the resettlement idea.

In 1828, Kurakin, a wealthy landowner and old court protégé, submitted a project to the powerful 6th of December Committee in which he proposed, among other things, the forced resettlement of hundreds of thousands of peasants from overpopulated to underpopulated provinces. Although the committee rejected most aspects of the proposal, it endorsed the idea of resettlement as a means of resolving the land crisis and laying the basis for a new system of individual land tenure on state domains.⁵² This theme was also energetically pursued by Speranskii, a member of the committee who had worked closely with the resettlement system in his capacity as governor-general of Siberia. According to Speranskii's plan, Russian agriculture was gradually to reform itself along the lines of the English model. At the same time that the repartitional commune was slowly abolished in core agricultural areas, a program of massive resettlement would transfer peasants to outlying provinces, where they would receive "surveyed and apportioned lands . . . on the basis of single-family—not communal—tenure."⁵³

In addition to entertaining these vast designs, the government in the 1820s and early 1830s also introduced a number of smaller and more manageable correctives to its existing resettlement policy. Responding to the problems of long-distance resettlement, an 1824 decree required that provincial authorities first attempt to resettle needy peasants on available lands within their home provinces before permitting them to depart for more distant areas. In this way, the government moved to reduce its own expenses as well as ward off some of the hardships faced by peasant

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, d. 479, ll. 139–139(b).

⁵² Druzhinin, *Gosudarstvennye krest'iane* 1:179.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 183. For details on Speranskii's views on resettlement during his work in Siberia see M. Raeff, *Siberia and the Reforms of 1822* (Seattle, 1956), 58–59; and Coquin, *La Sibérie*, 69–73.

settlers. In addition to listing a number of new procedures, the decree reduced the tax-exemption period for settlers from five to three years and—for the first time in such universal terms—absolved settlers from their military obligations for a three-year period.⁵⁴ The addenda to the 1824 *ukaz*, which appeared in 1831, reiterated the steps to be taken in providing settlers with monetary assistance and good-quality land, specifying the amount of aid in different instances and stressing the need for greater intercession by local authorities, particularly in the Caucasus and in the provinces of Saratov and Orenburg, where resettlement was occurring on the greatest scale.⁵⁵

Judging from the *ukazy*, it is clear that the government continued to see great advantages to organized state peasant resettlement in the 1820s and 1830s. Despite small changes, the government essentially retained the system of land disbursement, material incentives and centralized control that the decree of 1805 had codified. Under the Ministry of State Domains, founded in 1837, this system was further entrenched, serving as the working basis for a massive resettlement program that touched over 160,000 revision souls between 1838 and 1856.⁵⁶ Though the Kiselev era lies beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that the problems plaguing state peasant resettlement in the first decades of the nineteenth century persisted in the 1840s and 1850s. The physical hardships of geography and climate, as well as the negligence and inefficiency of state officialdom, continued to make resettlement a potentially disastrous venture for peasant settlers. Furthermore, the great difficulty that the state experienced in controlling the migration process was a constant feature of resettlement policy both before and after the emancipation.⁵⁷

Most historians who have written on state peasant resettlement in the early nineteenth century have been understandably critical of the government's policy, pointing out that the official resettlement system was cumbersome, overly centralized and insensitive to the needs of peasant settlers. Yet the government's policy represents only one side of the issue. To understand the full workings of the resettlement enterprise we must look beyond this official dimension. Once we do, we discover a different, much more dynamic world in which state policy interacted with timetables, arrangements and initiatives established by the peasant settlers themselves. Peasant settlers often took the initiative in organizing their own departure, forcing state officials to respond. Following resettlement, the settlers generally had less control over their situation. They were dependent on the cooperation of local officials in receiving

⁵⁴ *PSZ*, ser. 1, vol. 39, no. 29848, pp. 227–32. In a special instance, a five-year release from draft obligations (1809–1813) was extended to a group of Smolensk settlers in New Russia. See A. V. Florovskii, "Neskol'ko faktov iz istorii russkoi kolonizatsii Novorossii v nachale XIX v.," *Zapiski odesskogo obshchestva istorii i drevnostei*, vol. 33 (1919): 39.

⁵⁵ *PSZ*, ser. 2, vol. 6, no. 4311, pp. 113–15.

⁵⁶ Most resettlement at this time proceeded, as before, from overpopulated provinces in the center and southwest to areas on the periphery. Relocations within a given province, however, were also intensified. See N. M. Druzhinin, *Gosudarstvennye krest'iane i reforma P. D. Kiseleva*, vol. 2 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1958), 189–95.

⁵⁷ D. W. Treadgold, *The Great Siberian Migration: Government and Peasant in Resettlement from Emancipation to the First World War* (Princeton, 1957), 80–81.

the lands and material assistance they needed for establishing their new settlements. Nonetheless, peasant initiative can still be seen, especially in instances of failed resettlement, when conditions became so unbearable that settlers chose to return to their former homes, with or without official permission. Throughout the resettlement process, the family and the commune played crucial roles. Much as in other spheres of peasant life, these two institutions provided the basic framework and support for the acts of departure and relocation.

As for the policy itself, it seems reasonable to conclude that state-sponsored resettlement failed as an attempt to further state-peasant reform. The resettlement program in the early nineteenth century enjoyed neither the scale nor the resources to broadly improve the economic conditions of the empire's state-peasant population. The policy did succeed, however, in opening a limited space for legal mobility, which the state consistently attempted to direct to the borderland provinces. While there was no coherent plan for imperial development in the early nineteenth century, Russian statesmen were certainly aware of the vast and underexploited potential of the empire's boundary regions, and they viewed resettlement as a mechanism for developing this potential. As such, it was part of a larger imperial tendency in the borderlands best described by the Russian term *osvoenie*, the process of incorporating and literally making a territory into one's own.⁵⁸ The pawns in the empire-building process, in this case, were legal peasant settlers, counted, registered and locked within a system of state taxes and obligations that would make them, and the borderlands that they moved to, productive.

It is difficult to judge the success of state-directed resettlement as an imperialist policy in the early nineteenth century. The scale of organized resettlement during this period was certainly not large enough to produce the impact that it later had under Kiselev or in the postemancipation era, when massive Russian settlement took place in Siberia and newly conquered Turkestan. Nonetheless, the early nineteenth century saw considerable legal peasant movement. Tens of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian peasants successfully overcame the rigors of resettlement, adapted to their new surroundings, and established a coexistence with neighboring non-Russian peoples, thus furthering the process of *osvoenie* in the empire's boundary provinces.

⁵⁸ Colonization and other imperial strategies are discussed in A. Kappeler, "Historische Voraussetzungen des Nationalitätenproblems im russischen Vielvölkerreich," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 8 (1982): 159–83.