Emancipation Manifesto (1861)


In response to the defeat in the Crimean War, Alexander II, Emperor of Russia, sought to reform and modernize Russia. The Emancipation Manifesto, written in 1861, ended Russian serfdom and provided freedom to tens of millions of serfs.

By the Grace of God WE, Alexander II, Emperor and Autocrat of All Russia, King of Poland, Grand Duke of Finland, etc., make known to all OUR faithful subjects:

Examining the condition of classes and professions comprising the state, WE became convinced that the present state legislation favors the upper and middle classes, defines their obligations, rights, and privileges, but does not equally favor the serfs, so designated because in part from old laws and in part from custom they have been hereditarily subjected to the authority of landowners, who in turn were obligated to provide for their well being. Rights of nobles have been hitherto very broad and legally ill defined, because they stem from tradition, custom, and the good will of the noblemen. In most cases this has led to the establishment of good patriarchal relations based on the sincere, just concern and benevolence on the part of the nobles, and on affectionate submission on the part of the peasants. Because of the decline of the simplicity of morals, because of an increase in the diversity of relations, because of the weakening of the direct paternal relationship of nobles toward the peasants, and because noble rights fell sometimes into the hands of people exclusively concerned with their personal interests, good relations weakened. The way was opened for an arbitrariness burdensome for the peasants and detrimental to their welfare, causing them to be indifferent to the improvement of their own existence.

WE thus became convinced that the problem of improving the condition of serfs was a sacred inheritance bequeathed to Us by OUR predecessors, a mission which, in the course of events, Divine Providence has called upon Us to fulfill.

WE have left to the nobles themselves, in accordance with their own wishes, the task of preparing proposals for the new organization of peasant life—proposals that would limit their rights over the peasants, and the realization of which would inflict on them [the nobles] some material losses. OUR confidence was justified. Through members of the provincial committees, who were entrusted [with the task] by the corporate organizations of the nobility in each province, after collecting the necessary data, have formulated proposals on a new arrangement for serfs and their relationship with the nobles.
Having invoked Divine assistance, WE have resolved to execute this task.

On the basis of the above-mentioned new arrangements, the serfs will receive in time the full rights of free rural inhabitants.

The nobles, while retaining their property rights to all the lands belonging to them, grant the peasants perpetual use of their household plots in return for a specified obligation; and, to assure their livelihood as well as to guarantee fulfillment of their obligations toward time government, [the nobles] grant them a portion of arable land fixed by the said arrangements as well as other property.

While enjoying these land allotments, the peasants are obliged, in return, to fulfill obligations to the noblemen fixed by the same arrangements. In this status, which is temporary, the peasants are temporarily bound.

At the same time, they are granted the right to purchase their household plots, and, with the consent of the nobles, they may acquire in full ownership the arable lands and other properties which are allotted them for permanent use. Following such acquisition of full ownership of land, the peasants will be freed from their obligations to the nobles for the land thus purchased and will become free peasant landowners.

A special decree dealing with household serfs will establish a temporary status for them, adapted to their occupations and their needs. At the end of two years from the day of the promulgation of this decree, they shall receive full freedom and some temporary benefits.

In accordance with the fundamental principles of these arrangements, the future organization of peasants and household serfs will be determined, the order of general peasant administration will be established, and the rights given to the peasants and to the household serfs will be spelled out in detail, as will the obligations imposed on them toward the government and the nobles.

Although these arrangements, general as well as local, and the special supplementary rules affecting some particular localities, estates of petty nobles, and peasants working in factories and enterprises of the nobles, have been as far as possible adapted to economic necessities and local customs; nevertheless, to preserve the existing order where it presents reciprocal advantages, WE leave it to the nobles to reach a voluntary understanding with the peasants and to reach agreements on the extent of the land allotment and the obligations stemming from it, observing, at the same time, the established rules to guarantee the inviolability of such agreements.

This new arrangement, because of its complexity, cannot be put into effect immediately, an interval of not less than two years is necessary. During this period, to avoid all
misunderstanding and to protect public and private interests, the order actually existing on the estates of nobles should be maintained until the new order shall become effective.

Towards that end, WE have deemed it advisable:

To establish in each province a special Office of Peasant Affairs, which will be entrusted with the affairs of the peasant communes established on the estates of the nobility.

To appoint in every district arbiters of the peace to solve all misunderstandings and disputes which may arise from time new arrangements and to organize from these justices district assemblies.

To organize Peace Offices on the estates of the nobles, leaving the village communes as they are, and to open cantonal offices in the large villages and unite small village communes under one cantonal office.

To formulate, verify, and confirm in each village commune or estate a charter which will specify, on the basis of local conditions, the amount of land allotted to the peasants for permanent use, and the scope of their obligations to the nobleman for the land as well as for other advantages which are granted.

To put these charters into practice as they are gradually approved on each estate, and to put them into effect everywhere within two years from the date of publication of this manifesto.

Until that time, peasants and household serfs must be obedient towards their nobles, and scrupulously fulfill their former obligations.

The nobles will continue to keep order on their estates, with the right of jurisdiction and of police, until the organization of cantons and of cantonal courts.

Aware of the unavoidable difficulties of this reform, WE place OUR confidence above all in the graciousness of Divine Providence, which watches over Russia.

WE also rely upon the zealous devotion of OUR nobility, to whom WE express OUR gratitude and that of the entire country as well, for the unselfish support it has given to the realization of OUR designs. Russia will not forget that the nobility, motivated by its respect for the dignity of man and its Christian love of its neighbor, has voluntarily renounced serfdom, and has laid the foundation of a new economic future for the peasants. WE also expect that it will continue to express further concern for the realization of the new arrangement in a spirit of peace and benevolence, and that each nobleman will bring to fruition on his estate the great civic act of time entire group by organizing the lives of his peasants and his household serfs on mutually advantageous
terms, thereby setting for the rural population a good example of a punctual and conscientious execution of the state’s requirements.

The examples of the generous concern of the nobles for the welfare of peasants, amid the gratitude of the latter for that concern, give Us the hope that a mutual understanding will solve most of the difficulties, which in some cases will be inevitable during the application of general rules to the diverse conditions on some estates, and that thereby the transition from the old order to time new will be facilitated, and that in the future mutual confidence will be strengthened, and a good understanding and a unanimous tendency towards the general good will evolve.

WE rely upon the common sense of OUR people. When the government advanced the idea of abolishing serfdom, there developed a partial misunderstanding among the unprepared peasants. Some were concerned about freedom and not concerned about obligations. But, generally, the common sense of the nation has not wavered, because it has realized that every individual who enjoys freely the benefits of society owes it in return certain positive obligations; according to Christian law every individual is subject to higher authority (Romans, chap. xiii., 1); everyone must fulfill his obligations, and, above all, render tribute, dues, respect, and honor (Ibid., chap. xiii., 7). What legally belongs to nobles cannot be taken away from them without adequate compensation, or through their voluntary concession; it would be contrary to all justice to use the land of the nobles without assuming corresponding obligations.

And now WE confidently expect that the freed serfs, on the eve of a new future which is opening to them, will appreciate and recognize the considerable sacrifices which the nobility has made on their behalf.

They should understand that by acquiring property and greater freedom to dispose of their possessions, they have an obligation to society and to themselves to live up to the letter of the new law by a loyal and judicious use of the rights which are now granted to them. However beneficial a law may be, it cannot make people happy if they do not themselves organize their happiness under protection of the law. Abundance is acquired only through hard work, wise use of strength and resources, strict economy, and above all, through an honest God-fearing life.

And now, Orthodox people, make the sign of the cross, and join with Us to invoke God's blessing upon your free labor, the sure pledge of your personal well being and the public prosperity.

Given at St. Petersburg, March 3, the year of Grace 1861, and the seventh of OUR reign.