

Why was the decision to reform the serf system nevertheless so controversial?

The cartoon to the right ("Landowners gambling with the lives of their serfs") captures the brutal inhumanity of the serf system. The *landowners* were falling into massive debt by using their serfs as security against loans from the state bank to fund extravagant lifestyles (66% were mortgaged by 1859). The *peasantry* were being worked into the ground by landowners eager to pay off their debts and the number of peasant disturbances rose rapidly in the 1840's. The Pugachev Revolt (1773-75) and the Decembrist Revolt (1825) had shown how dangerous such peasant disaffection could be for the stability of the state.



Nevertheless, despite all of the very good reasons for reforming the serf system which we investigated in the last worksheet, there were also some very good reasons why the Tsars had failed to reform the system before Alexander II came to the throne.

What problems existed in carrying out the reforms?

Too complicated?

- The **Orlov Committee** was set up in 1857 to look into the issues surrounding emancipation, and quickly got bogged down in debate on a number of central issues (listed in the table below).
- Alexander had to suspend the committee and set up a smaller commission led by **Milyutin** to push the process through.

Task: Discuss in pairs what answer you would give to each of these four questions if you were the Tsar. Jot down ideas in the table, When you have finished, produce your own Emancipation Statute which you can compare to the real thing later on.

	Your answer	Your justification of this choice
Should the serfs be freed from their feudal obligations ?		
Should the serfs be given land ?		
How (if at all) should the nobility be compensated for their losses given the poverty of the country?		
How was society to be kept under control once the peasants were set free of their obligations?		
How long should the nobility be given to carry out the terms of Emancipation?		

Too dangerous? – The Slavophiles

- Many **Slavophiles** (who felt that Russia should not seek to copy the West) feared that the process of Emancipation would raise unrealistic expectations among the peasantry – one reformer in the Orlov Committee said that “if we deprive the peasants of the land we will set Russia alight”. Some landowners argued that serfdom had already shown itself capable of allowing serfs to engage in paid work (see previous notes) and so Emancipation was not necessary anyway.

Source A:

“Freed from the surveillance of the masters...the peasants will take to drinking and villainy – what a gold mine for taverns and corrupt police officials, but what a blow to morals and the security of the States. In short, at the present time, the hereditary nobility, dispersed throughout the State, assists the sovereign in preserving peace and order; divesting them of this supervisory authority, he would, like Atlas, take all of Russia upon his shoulders. Could he bear it? The collapse would be frightful”

Karamzin, Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia, 1811

What view does Karamzin have of the peasants?

Why does he think serfdom should be preserved?