

IGA-677 / RusNatSecPol / Lecture 2

Land, Labor and Serfdom

Yuri M. Zhukov
Visiting Associate Professor of Public Policy
Harvard Kennedy School

September 7, 2023

Today's objectives

1. *Distinguish*: historical varieties of forced labor in Russia
2. *Deduce*: economic and political causes of serfdom
3. *Discuss*: why this institution lasted so long in Russia, and how it intersected with the state's national security interests

Why This Topic is Important

- serfdom has left indelible imprint on Russian economy, institutions
- economic legacy of serfdom:
 - lower household expenditure
 - less urban agglomeration
 - slower industrial development
- institutional legacy of serfdom:
 - collectivization, famine
 - forced labor camps
 - internal passports
- relevance today:
 - *serfdom was a legacy of war*
 - territorial conquest creates “new realities” on the ground
 - adapting to these “new realities” can profoundly transform state and society



Figure 1: Serf and Lord

Varieties of Forced Labor

1. Slavery (rabstvo)

- rights:
 - ☐ family
 - ☐ property
 - ☐ mobility
- usually war prisoners, civilians from conquered territories
- still exists in some forms today (forced POW labor in WWII)

2. Indentured Service (kholopstvo)

- rights:
 - ☒ family
 - ☒ property
 - ☐ mobility
- service by contract, sometimes by inheritance
- worked in house, not farm
- abolished by Peter I in 1725



Figure 2: Kholopy

Varieties of Forced Labor

3. Serfdom (krepostnoye pravo)

- rights:
 - ☒ family
 - ☐ property
 - ☐ mobility
- peasants tied to land, kept at/below subsistence level through predatory rents
- originated in 15th Century, abolished in 1861
- serfdom also existed in West Europe, but mostly ended there by 16th Century

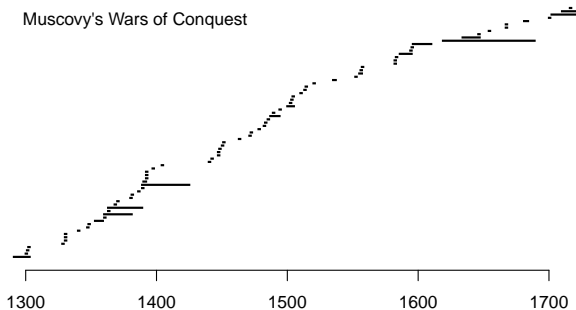


Figure 3: Serfs

Causes of Serfdom

Serfdom as a Legacy of War

Between 1263 (start of Grand Duchy) and 1721 (start of Empire),
Muscovite Russia **expanded its territory** through war 77 times.



These wars created two problems:

1. abundance of newly conquered land
2. demand for a large army to defend, expand this land

War Makes the State

- war demands institutions that are conducive to state formation:
 - standing army
 - tax revenues (to support army)
 - bureaucracy (to raise revenues)
- but Muscovy too underdeveloped to support army through taxes

Solution: create *landed army*

- Muscovite army was led by *servitors* (class of warrior nobles)
- in 1400s, state assigns newly conquered lands to servitors
- servitors would be responsible for taxation, military mobilization on these lands



Figure 4: Battle for Kazan

Warriors Become Feudal Lords

- land assignments initially temporary, then hereditary
- new class of landed nobility born
- initial bargain with peasants: land use in exchange for *rents* (taxes) and/or military service

Problem: not enough peasants

- shortage of tenants due to peasant migration to new lands
- fierce competition between landlords drives rents down

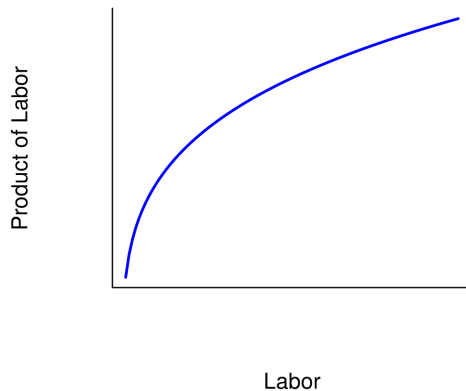
Solution: serfdom

- state restricts freedom of peasants to move
- peasants enserved by mid-1600s

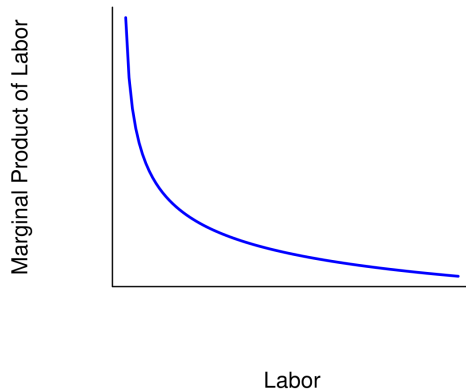


Figure 5: Peasants Moving

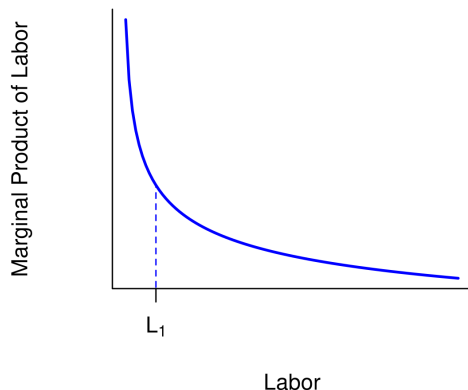
A Simple Economic Model of Serfdom



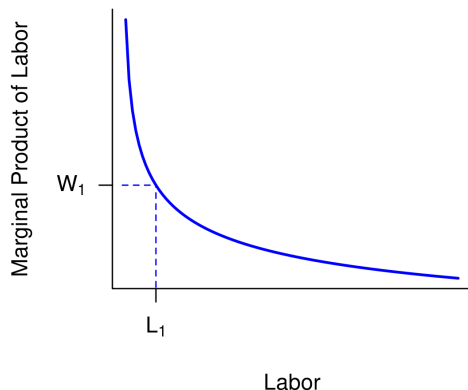
Simple production function, with one factor (**Labor**).
Declining returns to scale.



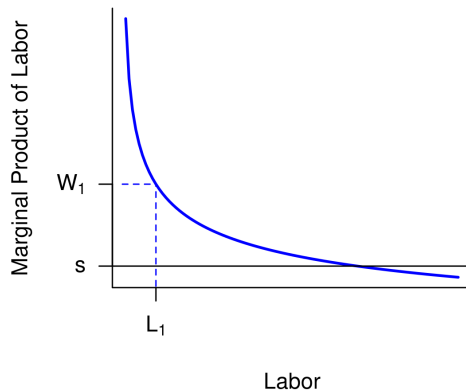
Take the derivative, and we get the **marginal product of labor**.
This represents how much each additional laborer contributes.



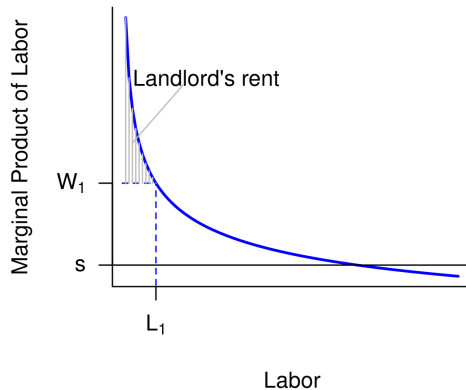
Suppose there are L_1 peasants living on this plot of land. We'll assume that labor is scarce, so L_1 is pretty small.



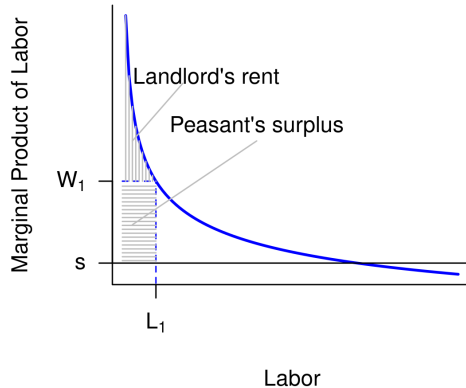
Each of the L_1 peasants receives market wage W_1 .
This wage depends on the peasant's contribution to productivity.



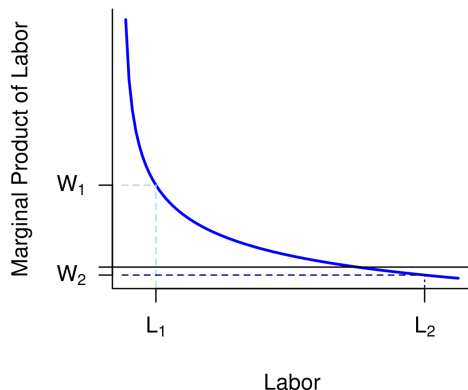
Let s denote level of wages needed for basic subsistence.
Suppose W_1 is above subsistence wage s .



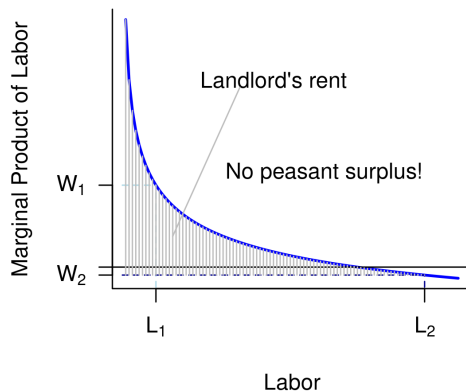
Landlord receives **rent** from the peasants.
Rent is equivalent to what the peasants produce, minus their wages.



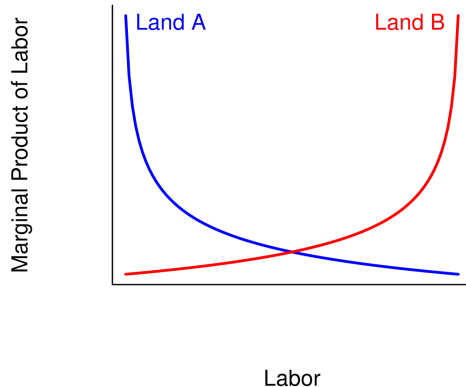
Peasant get to keep the remaining **surplus** (to spend/invest/save).
Surplus is what they earn, minus what they spend on subsistence.



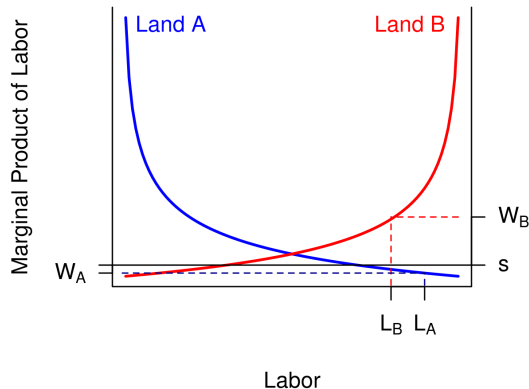
Now suppose there is **population growth**, from L_1 to L_2 .
Peasants' market wages fall from W_1 to W_2 , below subsistence!



Landlord wins (more tenants \rightarrow more rents).
Peasants lose (lower wages \rightarrow less/no surplus).

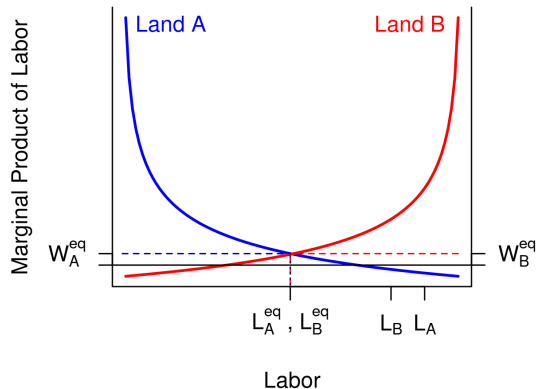


Now suppose a second plot of land opens up (**Land B**).
Let's assume this new land is of equal size and quality as **Land A**.

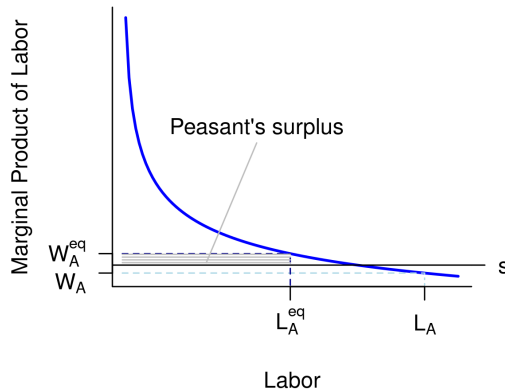


Land A is overpopulated, wages are low.

Land B is underpopulated, wages are high ($L_A > L_B$, $W_A < W_B$).

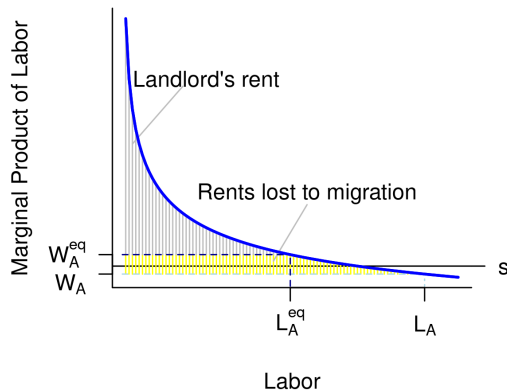


Peasants from **Land A** begin to migrate to **Land B**, until population levels reach equilibrium (L_A^{eq} , L_B^{eq}), wages are same ($W_A^{eq} = W_B^{eq}$).



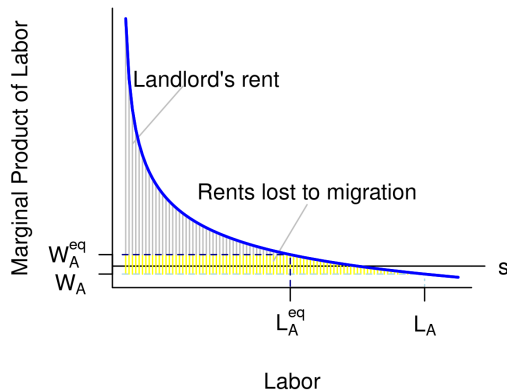
This is good for peasants from **Land A**.

Migration raises their rents above subsistence. Surplus is back!



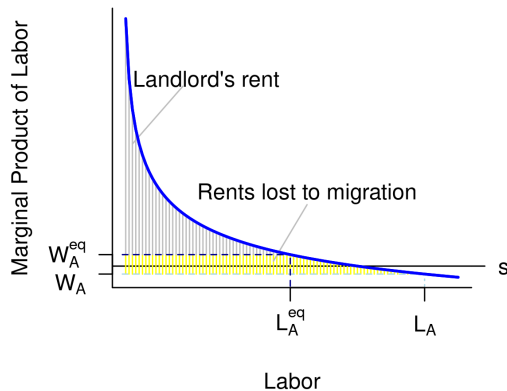
But this is bad for landlord A.

Out-migration results in fewer tenants and fewer rents.



What are landlord A's options?

(a) do nothing, lose money; (b) lobby government to allow **serfdom**.



Serfdom =
migration restriction + surplus extraction

Serfdom and Territorial Expansion

Land/labor ratio and serfdom

- serfdom is a political intervention in the market
- *high* land/labor ratio
(lots of land, few tenants)
 - market favors tenants
 - wages go up, rents go down
 - serfdom more likely
- *low* land/labor ratio
(little land, lots of tenants)
 - market favors landlords
 - wages go down, rents go up
 - serfdom less likely



Figure 6: Serfs

Why does territorial expansion make serfdom more appealing?

Why not just stop expanding?

Russia's External Threat Environment (1450-1800)

Belligerent	Conflicts	Start	End
Kazan	3	1467	1487
Novgorod	3	1471	1570
Livonia	1	1477	1478
Lithuania	2	1487	1503
Sweden	21	1495	1742
Crimean Khanate	2	1571	1572
Poland	23	1579	1794
Cossacks	26	1649	1774
Streltsy	2	1682	1698
Ottoman Empire	21	1711	1791
Finland	1	1714	1714
Bashkirs	1	1755	1755
Prussia	10	1757	1760
Polish Confederates	1	1768	1768
France	9	1799	1799

End of Serfdom

Why Did Serfdom Decline?

- Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom in 1861
- at the time, 45% of peasants (38% of total pop) were serfs
- but the state had created pathways out of serfdom before:
 - permissions to move on case-by-case basis
 - emancipation after 20 years of military service
 - less enforcement in frontier, newly conquered areas



Figure 7: Emancipation

Why did the state end serfdom?

Were the interests of state and landlords always aligned?

Comparative Perspective

Meanwhile, in Europe...

- serfdom ended much earlier (after Black Death)
- landlords didn't "squeeze peasants" through surplus extraction, mobility restriction
- peasants given property rights
- agricultural revolution in England in 16th Century
- rise of industrialized agriculture
- widespread serfdom/slavery in colonies, but not at home



Figure 8: England

Why was Russia different? Was it?

Would Muscovy have kept expanding if it never allowed serfdom?

NEXT MEETING

Colonial Expansion and an Unstable Frontier (Tu, Sep. 12)

- why Russia got so big
- things to consider:
 - at what point did Russia become a “colonial empire”?
 - what strategies did Russia use to incorporate non-Slavic, non-Christian peoples into its growing empire?