

Up With People: A Critical Russian Memoir Analysis

Zack Kryworuchka

Up from Serfdom is a memoir which was authored during the mid-nineteenth century by Aleksandr Nikitenko. Although written approximately one hundred and fifty years ago, it was only first published in the West in 2002. Aleksandr Nikitenko's hometown of Alekseyevka was settled by Ukrainian Cossacks who were forced into serfdom between 1547 and 1584 by the policies and practices of Ivan IV.¹ Nikitenko was born early in the 19th century; the exact year is unknown but is generally accepted to be either 1804 or 1805. He was born to parents belonging to the peasant class. His father's profession was that of a teacher and it was derived out of practicality since he was one of the very few of his caste that possessed the ability to read and write. These rather rare skills for the time were passed on to his son Aleksandr at a young age. Nikitenko wrote his memoir while in middle age and based his writings upon diary entries he kept as a boy. *Up from Serfdom* is one of the only Russian memoirs known to have been penned by a person who had actually lived life as a Russian serf. There are scholars, including Laura Phillips, whom assert that the author's memoir is too vague and myopic to give modern scholars and historians a clear insight into the everyday life of those living a life of Russian serfdom.² By using Nikitenko's memoir as the root source of information, this paper will scrutinize and dissect the significance of family, community, education, and social standing as it pertained to the peasantry of the time at large. By doing so, it will refute Laura Phillips' claim that Nikitenko's writings are too atypical for the reader to draw concrete conclusions and insights into the realities of those who toiled within the peasant class of mid-nineteenth century Russia.

¹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia, 8th edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 139-141.

² Laura L. Phillips, "Review of *Up from Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824*," *Labor History*, Vol. 43, Nos 1-2 (2002), 237-38.

Aleksandr Nikitenko frequently recounts his family's experiences throughout the course of his memoir. In the first half of his narrative he often depicts his father as a fairly young peasant who was chosen to become a member of the local Russian Orthodox Church boy's choir. His father's sudden and fortunate ascension from farm hand to church employee afforded him the opportunity and environment to teach himself how to read and write. The ability to self-teach reading and writing skills is significant because it shows that he had leisure time away from working the land or working with the church. This extra leisure time suggests that the Nikitenko family may have obtained some degree of privilege before the birth of Aleksandr. Proof of this 'privileged serfdom' is demonstrated when Aleksandr describes his paternal grandmother, whom he calls Grandmother Stepanovna.³ He recounts that grandmother Stepanovna "considered herself a member of the village aristocracy" and that she often associated with merchants, craftsmen, and noble landowners.⁴ Modern historians see the Nikitenkos as a *raznochinstsy* family because they were portrayed as transitioning 'in between' traditional social groups.⁵ In the latter half of the memoir, Aleksandr describes his broken family's financial struggles which were precipitated by the sudden death of his father – Vasily. He recounts in detail how his mother had to work to keep the family from going hungry. His recollections of his mother's labours are particularly significant because they exemplify the 'place of women' within the societal ranks of nineteenth century Russia. His mother only worked when it was absolutely necessary; she otherwise tended to the house and the family. While modern historian Laura

³ Aleksandr Nikitenko, *Up From Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824*, 3.

⁴ Aleksandr Nikitenko, *Up From Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824*, 3-4.

⁵ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia, 8th edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 342.

Phillips argues that “readers should not expect to find much insight into the life of the Russian serf here”, it is correct to argue that Aleksandr’s account of his family, their day to day life, and their association with people of higher social status is something that may have often occurred throughout towns and villages of Russia at that the time.⁶

One of the major underlying themes in the memoir is that of community. Community played a large role not just in Nikitenko’s life but in the lives of many Russian serfs of the time. Throughout the course of Aleksandr Nikitenko’s and his father’s lives, the population of Russia rose from forty-five million in 1796 to sixty-seven million in 1851.⁷ This dramatic increase in population was the result of imperial expansion. During this time, Russia experienced accelerated diversification in the fields of language, ethnicity, and religion.⁸ These new diversities within the Russian empire may have led to an increase in community involvement, especially within recently annexed states such as Georgia. Village communes played a crucial role in the everyday lives of serfs and landowners alike due to the concentrated population density of the land on which they worked. Readers may conclude that this communal living dynamic played a crucial role in the population spike as well as contributing to the maintenance of millions of serfs who were working the land for members of the gentry. The peasant commune, commonly referred to as the mir, grew in importance and was responsible for peasant

⁶ Laura L. Phillips, “Review of Up from Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824,” *Labor History*, Vol. 43, Nos 1-2 (2002), 237-38.

⁷ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia, 8th edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 342.

⁸ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia, 8th edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 343.

relations with landlords and establishing rules for community welfare.⁹ Although not explicitly mentioned throughout the course of the memoir, the mir played an underlying role in Aleksandr's life. An example of a positive contribution on behalf of the mir can be found in the fifth chapter – soon after being exiled, the Nikitenko's humble refuge caught fire and all of their possessions were lost in the blaze. “For several days after the fire, folk from that poor, tiny hamlet kept coming to [the village of] Andronovo, hauling supplies for us on wretched-looking horses. Soon our new home was overflowing with pieces of canvas, sacks of flour, spools of thread; with everything these people had earned by the sweat of their brow.”¹⁰ This example of the mir working as a single charitable unit for the good of a family in need is one reason Laura Phillips claim that Nikitenko's memoir is too vague and short-sighted to give contemporary historians a clear insight into the everyday life of those living a life of Russian serfdom can be refuted. The cooperative and caring nature of the commune was of utmost importance to a Russian serf at that time and it is because of the Nikitenko memoir that modern historians have gained a valuable insight into the community dynamics that were Russian peasant life in the 1800s.

The early policies of Tsar Alexander I's reign deeply affected Aleksandr Nikitenko's life. Alexander I created the Ministry of Education in 1802. He began an educational expansion by dividing the Russian empire into six educational regions, each of which was headed by a curator. His plan then called for a university in every region, a secondary school in every provincial

⁹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia, 8th edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 339.

¹⁰ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia, 8th edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 37.

center, and an improved primary school in every district.¹¹ These educational improvements leave no doubt that the Tsar's educational reforms fostered Aleksandr in his becoming a professor later in life. As was noted earlier, Aleksandr was mentored by his literate father and therefore began to read and write at a young age. Once enrolled in primary school he found that he could read and write at a pace greater than that of the schoolmaster.¹² Due to his prodigious intellectual aptitude, Aleksandr became the auditor of his class. It was at this point that his teachers and people of higher social status began to take notice of him. It was because of his abilities in the classroom and his father's savviness as a teacher that many Russian intellectuals living alongside Aleksandr allowed him to borrow literature from their private libraries. Aleksandr displayed his thirst for knowledge and higher education by reading voraciously. Aleksandr was indeed advantaged by his ability to read and write, which were skills passed down from his father but it can be argued that it is not only possible but probable that other peasants also developed these academic skills. This is illustrated by the fact that Aleksandr had a large number of classmates. If all of these children attended primary school, they would have gained some of the same basic academic advantages as Aleksandr. It is not clear if Aleksandr's classmates were peasant children because it is not mentioned in the account but one could deduce that they were indeed peasant students due to the fact that Aleksandr himself was a peasant and was present in the classroom. As Laura Phillips stated in her article, Aleksandr cultivated relationships with people such as priests, merchants, school inspectors, and

¹¹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia, 8th edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 345.

¹² Aleksandr Nikitenko, *Up From Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824*, 42.

nobleman.¹³ However, this does not suggest he is living a life far from ordinary. With other students his age and of higher social standing receiving an equal or superior education to him, Aleksandr did an admirable job of creating a promising future for himself by utilizing his extraordinary personal and intellectual skills. Aleksandr received an education of a different sort outside of the classroom. He was frequently subjected to floggings for misbehaving and was strongly discouraged from engaging in childish antics. This Spartan upbringing may have contributed to his early maturation. Aleksandr was also a self-taught shoe weaver. This technical skill may have played a vital role in keeping his young mind nimble while not at school and would have potentially provided a second source of income for his family during lean times when they were having difficulty providing for themselves. His father was a frequent traveller and attempted to teach Aleksandr how to drive a horse-drawn carriage. Aleksandr quickly abandoned any notion of taking up a career as a driver when, on his first stint at the reins, he was thrown from the cart and nearly trampled by the horses. This ephemeral attempt at 'physical labour' may have taught Aleksandr the importance of formal education and to avoid careers such as a coach driver.

Thoughts of Russia's flawed hierarchical social system nagged incessantly at the peasants and the tsar alike. Social standing varied greatly between members of the gentry and the peasants; however, the tsar was the most important person in any civilian's life at this time. There was an unequal distribution of wealth between the peasants and the noble class in the 1800's. Within the peasant class, there were differing stratifications of wealth. These strata

¹³ Laura L. Phillips, "Review of Up from Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824," *Labor History*, Vol. 43, Nos 1-2 (2002), 237-38.

could be seen by observing the payments peasants made to their respective landlord. There were two differing payment types afforded to peasants in the nineteenth century. One was known as Obrok. Obrok was the payment type used by wealthier peasants and was “payment to the landlord in kind or in money.”¹⁴ Peasants enjoyed their personal freedoms and paying their landlords in Obrok provided them with these much loved freedoms. Often wools, meats, or animals were given as payment. The alternative to Obrok was Barshchina. Barshchina was the payment type used by destitute peasants. This involved paying the landlord in work.¹⁵ This work could have been anything that the landlord demanded; however, it was common for the peasants to labour in the landlord’s fields producing grain. Some members of the peasant community also achieved an elevated social status above their peers by becoming heads of their mir. These privileged peasants often relayed information to and from the landlord and in doing so, garnered more respect from other peasants in the commune. Although he eventually went on to become a professor and a free man, Aleksandr was born into a typical Russian peasant family. Aleksandr’s father never received the benefit of an elevated social standing within the peasant community and was persecuted by the mir leaders because of their jealousy of his father’s rising personal status within the community. Due to this persecution the Nikitenkos had to move into the Russian state from their native state of Ukraine. There were other important members of Russia’s hierarchical social class system which included members of the Orthodox Church. Priests were regarded as individuals deserving of respect and were not often subjected to persecution. While many priests assumed their role within the church and went on to be

¹⁴ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 8th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111.

¹⁵ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 8th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111.

respected religious leaders within their communities, others committed a type of ‘social suicide’. Nikitenko illustrates this when he describes the replacement of his town’s priest. The replacement priest was under qualified and was regarded by many as an alcoholic. His alcoholism and crude behaviour eventually led to his dismissal from the church and the town.¹⁶ Although Aleksandr’s great grandfather was a priest, it evidently did not benefit his family’s social standing. Like the vast majority of typical Russian peasant families of the time, a modest birth and the lack of a noble family lineage prevented the Nikitenko family from elevating itself above the lower rung of the peasant class.

Laura Phillips’ claim that Aleksandr’s Nikitenko’s life was too advantaged and therefore too atypical to be deemed a true representation of the life of a Russian serf and of Russian serfdom in general during the mid 19th century has been cast into serious doubt. To the contrary, Aleksandr Nikitenko’s recounting of his life story provides a clear example of the lives led by the peasant population of the time.

¹⁶ Aleksandr Nikitenko, *Up From Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824*.

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