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Layers of property in the tsar's settlement colony: projects of land privatization in Siberia in the late nineteenth century

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In the 1890s the authorities in St Petersburg attributed enormous value to the introduction (*nasazhdenie*) of private land property in the eastern peripheral regions. It was considered an urgent task and a fundamental aspect in the overall scheme of building an empire. The article examines the preparatory materials of the 1901 law on land privatization in Siberia – in itself a failure with little practical significance – in the context of other forms of landholding and the peasant resettlement policy, within the social and spatial hierarchy of the imperial periphery. The journals of the Siberian Railroad Committee and other unpublished materials are used to highlight conceptions of individual ownership, the motivations and ideologies of the officials who endeavoured to draft the law. The debate as to who had the right to own land, and why, constantly intersected and mirrored the visions of the desired future of the eastern territories. Private property was treated as an addition to the existing social landscape and as an instrument of transformation. The search for a 'suitable' or 'enlightened' landowner represented an adaptation of the traditional social hierarchy to new conditions and new colonial duties to a large extent.

Keywords: Siberia; landownership; Tsarist Empire; colonization; peasants

Introduction

The law *On the Assignment of State Land in Siberia to Private Individuals*, enacted on 8 June 1901, introduced a new category of possession of real property in the way state lands east of the Urals could be allotted to immigrants coming from European Russia. It envisaged that part of the territory earmarked for colonization would be set aside as 'private land property' (*chastnaia pozemel'naia sobstvennost'*), in addition to those lands conferred in 'use' (*zemplepol'zovanie*) to peasants coming from European Russia.¹ This provision was one aspect of a large-scale project the authorities in St Petersburg saw as a strategic priority, officially motivated by the need to 'bring the Asiatic periphery closer to the central regions' of the Empire in order to expedite demographic, economic, political-administrative and cultural assimilation. It was the last in a series of laws that codified procedures for the assignment of land to peasant immigrants (1889, 1893), initiated a survey of existing land use to define its boundaries (1896, 1898), and set in place administrative structures for organizing the flow of migration beyond the Urals (the Resettlement Administration or *Pereselencheskoe upravlenie*, 1897).

The development of Asiatic Russia was forcefully promoted by Alexander III and symbolically sanctioned in 1891 with the ceremonial journey made by the heir to the throne, the future Nicholas II, from Vladivostok to St Petersburg. The trip marked the beginning of the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad and demonstrated the reigning dynasty's repossession of a vast, previously neglected territory (Vysochaishie 1891, Wortman 2000, pp. 323–331). This ambitious project was accompanied by on-going debate, both among the general public and

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This essay is dedicated to the inhabitants of Novaia Maslianka, Omsk Region.

in official circles, on the means and goals of a specifically Russian or imperial model of internal colonization and coincided with the emergence of a new version of the myth of Siberia as a nascent society (Sunderland 2003, Remnev 2003, Breyfogle *et al.* 2008, Masoero 2009).

Of all these measures, the 1901 law proved one of the least successful. The approximately 110,000 hectares set aside for future private ownership between 1902 and 1903 went unsold and were subsequently merged into a larger ‘colonization fund’, used to meet the emergency created by the massive arrival of peasants after 1906. The practical importance of the law is therefore negligible. What is interesting are instead the reasons it was passed and the debate that accompanied its drafting. These are well documented in the collections of internal papers² of the Committee for the Great Siberian Railroad and especially its Preparatory Commission, chaired by A.N. Kulomzin. The Committee was one of the bodies typically created by the tsarist administration to deal with priorities or urgent issues (Remnev 1988, 1994, Lieven 1989 pp. 231–255, Marks 1995). Since it was directly presided over by the emperor, its decisions had immediate legal validity. The discussions were attended not only by delegates from several government ministries and the governors of the regions involved, but also by young officials in the newly created colonization agencies who would later go on to play important roles in central politics. These included A.A. Kaufman, subsequently a prominent figure in the Constitutional Democratic Party, or A.V. Krivoshein, who later played a key role in the implementation of Stolypin’s agrarian policy. The Siberian Committee can be seen as a decision-making body and a small forum for prevailing views on colonization as this was conceived and implemented in the centre.

While these materials are insufficient for understanding the evolution of property relations in the different regions of the Empire and do not provide a reliable picture of on-the-ground dynamics, which depended on multiple local factors and their interaction with the legal traditions and practices of non-Russian peoples, they do reveal the motives, the mentality, and reasoning of those in St Petersburg who were planning the future of Asiatic Russia. Private property was treated as an addition to the existing social landscape and as an instrument of transformation. Its significance can be better understood if seen in the context of other forms of landholding and the entire colonization policy, within the social and spatial hierarchy of the imperial periphery. The debate as to who had the right to own land, and why, constantly intersected and mirrored the visions of the desired future of the Eastern territories. Therefore, understanding the motives of this ‘failed’ law can also shed some light, albeit indirectly, on the nature of imperial rule at this particular stage of Tsarist history.

The authorities attributed enormous value to the ‘introduction’ of private property (the Russian *nasazhdenie* is etymologically also ‘plantation’ or cultivation, and the reference to the metaphor of the gardener was not fortuitous) in the eastern peripheral regions. It was considered an unavoidable need that had to be met without delay, a fundamental aspect in the overall scheme of building an empire. Why at a certain point did this need appear to be so crucial? What exactly was meant by land ownership and what vision of the territory underpinned its legitimacy?

The paradox of Siberian individualism

The spontaneity of Siberian land use had already created a form of holdings that in practice were relatively solid individual- or family-run farms. On paper the territories that were then being opened to large-scale colonization – especially the governorates of Tobol’sk and Tomsk, the northern part of the Steppe Region as far as Akmolinsk, but also much of the Altai and some border zones in faraway Amur – constituted a gigantic reserve of state-owned land. The Altai, whose cultivable areas were then one of the destinations most coveted by migrating

peasant families, was legally defined as land of His Imperial Majesty's Cabinet, i.e. the personal property of the reigning dynasty. Except for a few monasteries and a handful of landholdings which belonged to wealthy merchants, the bulk of these territories had been designated for special purposes, such as the vast tracts of woodland (*lesnye dachi*) that in theory had been entrusted to the forestry administration or the lands called 'obrochnye staty' that could be used by local people who paid the state an annuity.

State territory was officially subdivided into different categories of legitimate possession, a right of use that was not particularly well defined and was generally respected by the authorities, but was ultimately seen as provisional and subject to the possibility that it would be needed by the State. In addition to land that from time immemorial had been granted to the Cossacks, large tracts of land had been granted to more or less nomadic clan groups of *inorodtsy* ('aliens') – the indigenous peoples that nineteenth-century legislation had progressively transformed into a clearly defined, differentiated legal category (Slocum 1998).

In the cracks of this system of extremely wide-ranging and ill-defined land usage, which corresponded to a demographic distribution that often had little to do with the official geography of the territory, centuries of slow spontaneous migration had created a relatively prosperous peasant agriculture. The term *zaimki*, used for typical Siberian farms, reflected their origin, i.e. the right of first occupancy (*zaimochnoe pravo*), founded on 'work and length of possession', a right recognized in legal treatises at the time as a legitimate, albeit provisional, form of land ownership in use in the peripheral regions of the Empire (Pobedonostsev 2002, chapter 51). There were many of these farms and their existence had for some years been noted in the literature on Siberia. Whether they were living in a seasonal dwelling on a family holding far from their original village, or in one of the permanent residences scattered through the steppe and the taiga, these peasants had developed methods which combined the traditional grain cultivation of the Great Russian agriculture with various types of animal husbandry, or with beekeeping, hunting and fishing. Their farmsteads were rudimentary and somewhat autarchic, yet overall were decidedly solid and on the average more prosperous than European-Russian ones. Some of these 'old settlers', or *starozhily*, were descendents of fugitive serfs, some of common criminals who had been deported to Siberia and had then become peasants, while others were Old Believers who had fled to Siberia to escape religious persecution. In general they felt they were superior to new immigrants and saw them as a bunch of lazy vagabonds and troublemakers (with little respect for 'property') and referred to them by the derogatory term '*Rassia*'.

The members of the Siberian Committee were fully aware of the existence of this spontaneous agrarian individualism. The material they used included a study of land usage in Siberia carried out in the 1880s (*Ocherk bytovykh uslovii* 1893, pp. 5–6). It explained how local custom attributed particular value to the work of clearing land of stones and trees so that it could be tilled, a task which in Siberia was more demanding than elsewhere. People in Siberia saw this original 'exertion' as constituting a right of individual possession, one that was respected in farming communities. In the view of Siberian peasants, the spread of isolated farmsteads in the territory did not exclude the legitimacy of community regulation and recourse to partial forms of collective organization of haymaking and pasturage rights. Yet even when higher population density and the arrival of new colonists caused villages to adopt the principle of egalitarian periodic partitioning of arable land that was typical of the Great Russian rural commune, Siberian peasant communes normally only modified the most peripheral, exterior part of a 'first-clearer's' farm holding and continued to recognize that the individual maintained a core right to land use. 'In Russia,' one government official explained, 'peasants are not accustomed to being autonomous' because 'they have always been supervised. In Siberia things are different. The settler there is a landlord (*barin*). It does not occur to him that his land can be taken from him' (Korneeva 1982, p. 23).

It was also known that the individual land holdings of the old Siberians were economically more valuable than the land cultivated by more recent immigrants arriving from European Russia. Minister of Agriculture A.S. Ermolov (1896, pp. 7–8) gave an enthusiastic description of the many *zaimki* he had seen ‘transformed by hard work . . . into magnificent examples of model farms with vegetables gardens, apiaries and dairies.’ He therefore proposed that plans then under consideration for reorganizing land use in Siberia should be amended so that the integrity of the farms with the highest crop yields would be safeguarded, based on a case-by-case qualitative evaluation that was to be carried out by local officials. A.V. Krivoshein (1899, p. 51) also argued along similar lines in his report about the region. He noted Siberians’ attachment to the fields they had cleared, and questioned whether it was advisable to mechanically superimpose on this existing situation a communal framework based on ‘egalitarian regulations that contribute nothing to stimulating the colonists’ energy’. Later, under Stolypin, the implicitly private-property nature of the *zaimki* would be retrospectively recognized and even amplified, further bending it to the new priorities of colonization policies. G. Chirkin (cited Kogut 1982, p. 35), who would subsequently go on to become the last director of the Resettlement Administration before the Revolution, stated in 1911 that ‘the so-called first-occupancy system’ (*zaimochnyi poriadok*) was nothing more than the most customary manifestation of the right to private property, albeit lacking in official formalization . . . It is evident that the [Siberian] old settlers were firmly convinced they were residing on their own private property, which they could use freely as they best saw fit.’

Why, therefore, did the legislators not start there, from local forms of spontaneous entrepreneurial vitality on the part of peasants, if they truly wanted to promote a modern concept of ‘private ownership’ of land in Siberia?

Land ownership or land tenure?

The answer to this question has largely to do with the legacy of legal customs and views that were the basis of the very concept of land ownership and its meaning in the construction of the Empire’s territories. The centre tended to export its fundamental concepts to its ‘agrarian colony’. It could not have been otherwise. Despite the aura of a new, experimental society that began to be associated with Siberia, new legislation reflected the tried and true traditions of bureaucratic know-how. The effort that went into planning utilized concepts and procedures influenced by a praxis that went back to the era of the serfs’ emancipation and even further – to policies of internal migration conceived by the Ministry of State Domains in the first half of the nineteenth century. Legislators were aware of the long series of failures that had marked attempts to transfer ownership of state land, for example the ones summarized in the report *On the measures adopted by the government for developing private land ownership in Siberia (O merakh 1893)*. The memory of the scandal surrounding the sale of Bashkir lands in Ufa around 1880, when high-ranking ministry staff had illicitly profited by putting state property up for sale at public auction was still vivid.³ Even the concept of resettlement (*pereselenie*) as an agrarian social policy formulated by Kiselev in the 1830s had started from the awareness that the various experiments in transferring property into private hands, either through direct sale or concession, had had disappointing results (Gins 1914, p. 38, Vitte 1914, pp. 106–112).

Overriding preferences for an individual, communitarian, or even clan form of property, there was strong resistance to the legitimization of *any* land use that could constitute an exclusive right and as such be difficult to revoke. To some extent this diffidence was based on concrete reasons. In the case of the indigenous population, possession of land was generally the outcome of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treaties that, in exchange for submission to the tsar, had ratified a series of privileges, including the legitimate attribution of a certain

territorial area. In many cases, land occupancy had been justified by unwritten customary traditions that had been part of the basis of extremely stable and long-lasting arrangements, and as such accorded respect (Kivelson 2007). The *Statute on Alien Administration (Ustav ob upravlenii inorodtsev)* prepared by Speranskii in 1822 tended to adopt and codify some of these legal customs and usage rights in imperial legislation, thereby reinforcing their juridical value as a special category of ownership. However, the subsequent debate in the upper ranks of the tsarist bureaucracy led to a different orientation, opposed to legal consolidation of clan or 'tribal' customs held to be archaic, 'backward', and therefore susceptible at some future date to further adjustments. By the mid-nineteenth century the principle that lands occupied by the indigenous populations in Siberia should in any case remain subordinate to a 'supreme right of ownership' (*verkhovnoe pravo sobstvennosti*) – land which ultimately belonged to the Treasury, or in the Altai region, to His Majesty's Cabinet – had been definitively affirmed (Dameshek 1984, Dameshek *et al.* 2007, pp. 234–235). Later official sources emphasized that *inorodtsy* held land as possessors 'of treasury land assigned to them' (*otvedennye im kazennykh zemel*) only 'insofar as to guarantee their subsistence' (*po mere obespecheniia ikh byta*). The word *vladel'tsy* (owners) was applied to them within quotation marks to underline its subordinate character (*Zemel'nye poriadki* 1914, p. 533).

When at the end of the century the pressure of immigration from European Russia began to threaten available resources, the local non-Russian populations, like the Buriats in Eastern Siberia and the Kazakhs in the Region of the Steppe, fell back on the old agreements. They sent off a flurry of petitions, addressed to the State Council and other high-echelon government bodies, in which they stressed the legal value of their claim to the land. They sometimes based their appeals on the cultural prestige and dignity of the 'secure and well-defined' right to land ownership which, in the meantime, had been adopted into the mentality of the imperial elite – at least up to a point – as an attribute and measure of a modern Westernized society. The principle of inviolability of land ownership therefore appeared as quite a dangerous argument to the authorities in St Petersburg, who had good reason not to accept it outright. If on the one hand the juridical definition of clearly defined property boundaries appeared to be a desirable indication of the progressive normalization of the legal order in peripheral areas of the Empire, on the other the irrevocable occupation of land by individuals and groups (non-Russians and Russians alike) constituted a serious potential obstacle to the prospective of successful colonization.

The case of Cossack lands in Western Siberia examined by Remnev and Suvorova (2008) is instructive in this respect, as it makes clear the complexity of the logic underlying land possession as an aspect of the construction of the imperial territory. This contingent of highly loyal subjects on its borders – who symbolically were directly subordinate to the reigning dynasty (the Cossack rank of Ataman was traditionally held by the heir to the throne) – had been granted a generous tract of some of the best state lands along the Irtysh River, an important trade route. In theory it was difficult to imagine a category of landholders that could better represent the idea of a trustworthy, certain and definitive physical presence of the state's central authority in regions still largely populated by Muslim nomads. It was no mere chance that they had been entrusted with the task of acting as local police forces. However when the Cossack defensive 'line' was no longer a strategic necessity, and especially when the new, land-hungry immigrants began to pour into the region and the resettlement organization was finding it difficult to find places for them, even the status of Cossack land changed in the hierarchy of assessments of the central government's preferences. Starting in mid-nineteenth century, government officials began to say that this particular historic form of colonization had seen its day, that the steppe lands allotted to Cossack settlements represented a waste of public resources, or even a particularistic corporate privilege, that the Cossacks had turned into a class of lazy rentiers and were no longer good colonizers, and that what therefore

needed to be done was to find a way to modify this presence – which had hitherto been eminently ‘Russian’ and indisputably ‘imperial’ – in the territory.⁴ Not even the Cossack settlements, then, could be considered an irrefutable possession of imperial land.

The same was true to an even greater degree of the lands worked by old settlers, esteemed for their productive solidity, seen as embryos of a promising form of private farming, frequently lauded as the avant-garde of a Russian advance on the outskirts of the Empire, and yet at the same time considered anomalous, irregular vestiges from the past, almost as though they were abusive farmers whose occupancy of state lands had long been tolerated, but which now needed to be given a stable configuration and brought back to principles of legality and a superior imperial ‘virtue’. During his 1896 inspection tour, Kulomzin had noted, for example, in ample stretches of state lands in the area around Minusinsk in the governorate of Enisei, an unexpected and worrying presence of settlements without anyone in charge that had land deeds that were highly questionable, whose inhabitants had ‘lived for over twenty-five years without paying taxes and without sending military conscripts’, with ‘a situation that is particularly disheartening for the young generation, which has been raised in such abnormal conditions’ (Kulomzin 1896, p. 59).

The long-awaited law redefining Siberian landholding patterns (a procedure called *zemleustroistvo* or ‘land organization’⁵) was conceived as a survey of pre-existent uses to determine their relation to the formal settlement of new colonists arriving from European Russia. Its purpose was to ascertain the status of lands farmed by *de facto* occupants and to formally attribute land possession. The rationale for the law consisted of the belief that it would mark a boundary, which it was thought would be definitive, between *de facto* use of land, seen to be ‘chaotic’, ‘undefined’, or sanctioned by obsolete laws, and other public land, which would thus become available for subsequent use by the state. It is worth noting that subjects who were at opposite extremes when considered in terms of Russianness (the Slavic Orthodox *starozhily* and the indigenous sedentary *inorodtsy*) fell into the same category as both groups were occupiers of imperial land that had not yet been ‘regularized’. This complex operation was intended by the authorities to ‘liberate’ public land and allow the building of new villages where colonists arriving from European Russia (whose numbers had surged since the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway) could be settled. The procedure was a laborious one in which there were a number of stages, with authorizations required from different administrative bodies. Although the original plans had envisaged completion within ten years, on the eve of the First World War the land survey was far from complete (*Zemel’nye poriadki* 1914, p. 552 ff; Topchii 1979, pp. 184–222; Korneeva 1982).

Parallel to this delimitation of pre-existing uses, colonization legislation (PSZ 1889, Pravila 1893) provided that local officials should identify acreage to allocate to a congruous number of immigrants, an operation that was to conclude with a deed of *vodvorenje* formally establishing the settlement of a number of new families. Whether regularizing *de facto* occupants or regulating the number of newcomers that could legally settle in a given place, the result was usually a map that delineated the boundaries of a rural community and gave the toponym of the new village or the legalized pre-existing settlement. There were also generic indications of how the land in them was used, for example common lands set aside for pasturage rather than cultivation or timberland, or land set aside for church sustenance. The deed was accompanied by a list of names of the heads of families and alongside each name there was the number of *dushevye doli*, the conventional share ‘per soul’ of the community’s acreage due to each patriarchal household (Spisok 1900). At least in theory, land granted in this way was inalienable and could not be mortgaged or sold. This was, as Ermolov specified, because ‘the fundamental principle’ of Siberian agrarian policy ‘consists in the fact that lands allocated in use to [peasant] populations are state lands, so that those populations that possess user rights obviously have no right to transfer

ownership of the land or mortgage it.’⁶ In practice however, local custom had developed procedures for informal, but widespread, land dealings. New settlers could easily buy a ‘resolution of acceptance’ (*priemnyi prigovor*) from the village elders. It was the right to become part of a community, reside in it and therefore utilize common resources. In this perfectly legitimate exchange, property transfers took the form of a change of residency or population transfer, i.e. the inclusion of new members in a village commune.

The definitive nature of the deed of settlement (*vodvorenie*) was more apparent than real, however. From the very start there was unresolved tension in the legislation between the effort to extend to peripheral regions the principle of homogeneous agrarian ‘order’, understood as the expression in space of a superior ‘imperial citizenship’ (*grazhdanstvennost’*), inspired by the certainty of law, on the one hand, and on the other, a concept of settler land rights that weakened this very order. This tension must be analysed to better appreciate the need for a new, different category of full property rights. From a certain point of view, the legislators’ primary objective was to make the populace conscious of the distinction between their own and others’ landholding. This aspect was solidly present in the strategies worked out by N.Ch. Bunge, President of the Council of Ministers and Vice-President of the Siberian Committee at the time, perhaps one of the best minds in reformist circles in the imperial bureaucracy until his death in 1895. Bunge recognized the perils of socialism and loss of control over the national minorities in the peripheral territories as the greatest challenges facing the imperial government after the revolutionary crisis of 1881. Reducing cultural and social ‘otherness’ (*obosoblenost’*) in far-flung regions and facing the social question – which in Russia was essentially the peasant question – constituted the guidelines for a project of future reforms which, at least in this case, looked to Siberia less as the starting point for further expansion or chimerical Oriental missions, than as an important element in a comprehensive, predominantly internally oriented vision of state-building.

Bunge played a personal and direct role in the formulation of the resettlement policy in 1891–1895, as shown by Stepanov (1987) and described in detail by Kulomzin.⁷ His approach endowed colonization with a self-reforming purpose, mirrored in the many memoranda devoted to the problem of bilingual instruction for the Buryats, the construction of a homogeneous identity for inhabitants of peripheral regions, and above all to the pedagogical function of migration for the Russian peasant. Bunge saw the peasants’ lack of a solid concept of property as one of the principal factors that increased the potential for social conflict. Their vague notion of land ownership, he explained, undermined the bases of all contractual relationships, ‘as there is no documentation about the lands designated for [communal] possession’. The lack of juridical certitude of possession meant on the one hand that ‘the land allocated by means of collective deliberation can always be confiscated by us’, but at the same time bolstered people’s conviction that ‘if there were to be insufficient land, the government would be obliged to furnish peasants with more, either by using its own [state land] or by taking it away from noble landowners’. Writing with exasperated frankness in the 1880s, Bunge declared that:

We do not even admit the spread of private landownership [by peasants] in Siberia (where there is not any at all) and are then surprised if its people progress very slowly, or that the United States of America and Canada have brought colonization and railway lines as far as the Pacific, while among us, although for two centuries we have been dispatching a mass of people to settle Siberia, Siberia is still Siberia, a wild, inaccessible country where colonists go and then return because there is no solid legal framework for acquiring state land (Bunge 1995, p. 232).

The idea of granting private property rights to both new colonists and old Siberians was actually circulating among the imperial elite, as a hypothesis given serious consideration and the opinion of a vociferous minority. The debate was more hard-fought than appears in official texts. At the time, A. Kornilov, better known as a historian and one of the leaders of the

Constitutional Democratic Party, was a young assistant to A.D. Goremykin, Governor General of Eastern Siberia. He participated in the conference held in Irkutsk in 1893–94 to discuss the project that would become the 1896 law on *zemleustroistvo*. Independent-minded, at times even radical, young experts and middle-rank officials had recently joined the work group. Kornilov's memoirs describe heated and quite frank discussions. E.A. Smirnov, a fervent supporter of colonization who later held a high-ranking position in the Ministry of Agriculture, was the most outspoken adversary of the idea of maintaining state property in Siberia. He argued that if this were to happen, the colonists would remain 'perpetually obliged' to pay rent to the state and that under an autocratic regime state property in no way protected the populace from abuses. In remarks that echo Bunge's considerations on the importance of clearly delimiting land ownership rights, Smirnov insisted that were this to happen, 'the certitude of the confines of the lands allocated to the peasants cannot be considered to be guaranteed.'

However the opposite opinion prevailed even in these early discussions in Irkutsk, supported by the Governor General and Kornilov himself. The latter backed the view that public property should be conceded in use because he was already deeply convinced that the autocracy would not survive much longer. Therefore, he argued, 'once the principle of supreme state ownership of land had been repudiated, it would have been extremely difficult if not impossible to return to it afterwards', thus precluding evolution towards socialized agriculture in Siberia (Kornilov 1992, pp. 24, 99). It is interesting to note how the logic of this argument, centred on the fear that conceding full property rights to old Siberians might prejudice desired future developments, echoes – albeit with other intentions – the reasoning behind far different political convictions. According to N. Bogdanovich, Governor of Tobol'sk, also favourable to the idea of tenancy rights and rent paid to the state, 'the appearance of forms of hereditary family possession' among Siberian peasants would have paralyzed further imperial advances in the territory: 'instead of village communities capable of receiving an incoming flow of colonists for many years to come, the state would find itself faced with hundreds and thousands of individual properties closed to immigrants and would thus encounter serious obstacles to its colonization policies' (cited Topchii 1979, p. 200). In this case, too, consolidating land rights was perceived as an obstacle to the region's future development potential.

Measuring the necessary and the superfluous

The legislation concerning the allocation of land to peasant colonists in practice turned out not to corroborate the clear distinction between 'mine and thine' which Bunge had programmatically hoped would serve as an indispensable antidote against the socialist 'threat'. Even though most administrators agreed with the general idea that individual ownership in principle might be a more reliable basic premise – the physical and legal substrate of more rational and 'civilized' agriculturalist – in practice neither the cadastral registering of prior uses, nor the plans for new villages were actually moving towards a definitive clarification of land boundaries, left to horizontal, autonomous negotiation between titleholders. The procedures adopted instead tended to perpetuate the expectations that there would be government intervention – either to confiscate or provide concessions – which Bunge had stigmatized. At least on paper the census of state land allotted fairly generous acreage for use. For every adult male soul, i.e. a man capable of working, the allotment was 15 *desiatiny* (roughly 15 hectares), plus an additional three hectares of woodland and three more in reserve in anticipation of future population growth. Given that the average extended peasant family was three souls, the areas they were to receive (easily 40 hectares) would not have been much smaller than the landholdings of the lesser nobility in European Russia. However, these dimensions did not correspond to the acreage of a more or less well-defined farm but instead represented a

conventional size used to calculate the total area a community composed of a given number of souls was entitled to. The conferring of the deed of possession therefore entailed all the land the entire village could work (generally 2000 hectares, but sometimes as many as 6000) and the legally recognized boundaries were those that delimited it. Communal or family tenure within these boundaries depended on impromptu agreements and each instance reflected the customs of the villagers' regions of origin (e.g. immigrants from the Baltic were accustomed to family farms), the subsequent evolution of its demographic makeup, or contrasts between different groups of immigrants in the village.

Apart from divergences in opinion in the administration on the relative merits of individual or communal farming, or on how generous land grants should be (pro-peasant officials or populist sympathizers tended to argue in favour of larger grants), allocating the imperial territory followed the criteria of effective need, as established by an external authority which sought to gauge as accurately as possible – from above – how much it was really 'necessary' for people to have and how much was instead 'superfluous'. In concrete terms, the official in charge – provided that he carried out his duties conscientiously – was supposed to personally visit and inspect a given locality. He had to evaluate its productive potential (how fertile the soil was and therefore how much land was needed for the subsistence of a certain number of souls) and make a census of *de facto* users (for example irregular immigrants, unauthorized inhabitants or Old Siberians). He then certified the number of people who were 'entitled' to settle in this fairly large area, legalizing the residence/possession of those who had arrived years before or allotting land to new colonists. The standardized forms used by local staff required the government representatives to distinguish between land that was 'suitable' (*udobnaia*) and 'unsuitable' (*neudobnaia*), such as swamps and saline or rocky ground, which in turn required a value judgment on the village's prevalent form of production (land suitable for pasturage might not be good for cereal growing).

The logic of attributing possession resembled to some extent the partitions of the Great Russian commune. The resettlement officials were essentially supposed to serve as village elders arriving from afar and equitably distribute land among those who needed and were capable of working it, in order to 'make space' for new colonists. It followed that subsequent property transfers would take the form of petitions to the authorities, in which it was argued, rightly or wrongly, with cogent or specious reasoning, that the need had been calculated inaccurately, or that these needs had changed and therefore ought to be recalculated. Further haggling over land use between villages or categories of subjects, inevitable given the high demographic mobility in the region, was therefore expressed in the judicial guise of a petition to the authorities asking them to deliberate a different, more 'equitable' distribution of public resources. An equally important effect was that local administrative bodies which were often understaffed, unwilling to work, or corrupt, were regularly being given the task of settling controversies and intervening in local uses to modify previously taken decisions. The frequent complaints from the central authorities in St Petersburg about the excessive slowness of colonization procedures, often translated into accusations of inefficiency and bureaucratic slowness at the local level, in part originated from this way of conceiving legitimate occupation of land.

The continual revision of legally granted land possession is clearly reflected in the high number of administrative cases in which individual colonists or whole villages used any pretext possible to convince the authorities in the governorates to recount their souls (and proportionately recalculate the amount of land assigned to them). People asked for more land because they had been absent when the previous census had been carried out, or because they had 'forgotten' to count some member of the family who had since arrived, or as in the case of the village of Rostovtsevskaja near Tiukalinsk, at the time part of the governorate of

Tobol'sk, because a settlement planned in 1894 for 155 souls counted 236 in 1908, and therefore required the allotment of additional state forest land.⁸ The criterion of equitable need was applied not only in allotting land to colonists, preferred because they generally corresponded to criteria of Russianness, but also in reverse situations in which the space assigned to indigenous nomad animal herders of the steppe was being either protected or reduced. The principle was applied both in the 1890s, when imperial policy still adopted a relatively cautious approach, which at least on paper respected local usages, and under Stolypin, when the policy of confiscating native people's lands became far more aggressive. The long investigation of land use by nomads in the Kazakh steppe, undertaken at the turn of the century, was conceived as an attempt to study the pastoral economy to ascertain how much territory was really needed by this category of the tsar's subjects and therefore how much was left over for colonization. Headed by F.A. Shcherbina, a noted statistician with populist leanings, it superimposed the interpretative categories he had formulated in his pioneering study of production-consumption in family budgets in the Russian peasant village on the Kazakh nomads' ways of using land (Martin 2001, p. 73). The criterion of scientifically or administratively verifiable need was invoked when it was decided that land should be taken away from indigenous people as those 'state lands which happened to be temporarily in use by Kirghiz [Kazakhs]', which as an official in the Omsk region explained, after careful evaluation had been seen to be 'in excess' and therefore liable to expropriation.⁹ A recurring motif in official descriptions was the idea that the steppe nomads had the use of far more public land than they actually needed and enjoyed a 'privileged' position, a situation that it was both right and necessary to remedy (*Zemel'nye poriadki* 1914, p. 540 ff.).

Yet even the colonists' land possession was intrinsically unstable. In numerous cases when there was an 'addition' or 'subtraction of land documented in local institutions' archives, the decisions were made according to the criteria of proportioning resources to the effectively verified needs of potential tenure-holders, although the interpretation of what corresponded to 'necessary' or 'superfluous' could change and reflected whatever the current priorities of colonization policies were. The transformation that such local needs underwent over the years (essentially a conventional ratio between population, arable land and degree of productivity) was an inevitable phenomenon, but one which in Siberia was exacerbated by the region's high rate of demographic and geographic mobility. This required constant adjustment, continually shifting the clear boundaries between one's own and others' property, boundaries that in theory the procedures inherent in *zemleustroistvo* were supposed to have established. It was legally forbidden for these changes to come about through bilateral agreements or pacts established between either individuals or groups. External authorities that were not part of the rural world had to pass judgment on all needs to be satisfied, or 'superfluous' land to be taken away. In other words, even in principle, before observing how these laws drafted by the central government would interact on the ground with the changing, differentiated needs of *de facto* landowners and their pre-existing juridical legacy, the way the imperial policy was set forth tended to reinforce a strongly conditioned and in many ways provisional type of landholding even for peasants whose origins were Russian.

There was also a substantial qualitative difference between the type of possession conceded to peasant immigrants, placed in the same category as former state peasants, and land ownership proper. In the Empire's cultural tradition, private property (*sobstvennost'*) – owned prevalently but not exclusively by the nobility – was far different from 'peasant land use' (*krest'ianskoe zemlepol'zovanie*), despite the fact that the latter was perpetual and hereditary. As Dolbilov (2002, p. 103) has shown, the two concepts were already charged with particularly pregnant social and cultural extralegal values even in the debates that preceded the emancipation of the serfs. Peasant possession was distinguished from full ownership not only because at least in

theory land was held by a community rather than an individual, or because it presupposed the land being inalienable, particular legal ties to a place of residence and forms of taxation other categories were exempt from. It also denoted belonging to a differentiated estate category (*soslovie*) or social group with its own specific, hierarchical administration (the peasant prefects who in Siberia were called *krest'ianskie nachal'niki*) and separate judiciary organs (the local-level *volost'* tribunals). The form of land possession in use underpinned a widely acknowledged notion of social and cultural inferiority, although conditions in Siberia made it possible to get around prohibitions and rigid legal distinctions much more easily than in other regions and continually called into question the cogency of such discriminatory practices. In the eyes of both the conservative and progressive elite, private property and peasant land tenure corresponded to very different social functions and cultural environments and also denoted different models of economic rationality. Private landownership had been consolidated during the reign of Catherine II and then in 1861 had lost the juridical prerogatives connected with the nobility's personal property of serfs. Generations of experts, for example members of the Moscow Agricultural Society (a technical-scientific organization with branches in different regions, including Omsk) had cultivated the image of private estates as a cultured form of production, open to innovation and an authentic agent of progress in a rural world that was largely passive, painting a picture of it that was often rhetorical and partial, but not always lacking an objective basis. Peasant landholding had instead been conceded in 1861 in order to guarantee the survival of the freed serfs. Peasant land represented principally a means of subsistence, a guarantee of bare essentials. A form of social tutelage from the start, this type of landholding now reverberated on the colonization of Siberia, one of whose objectives was to alleviate the suffering of the rural masses.

The parallel development of an alternative economic-juridical school of thought influenced by populist culture which contrasted the advantages of village 'small-scale production' with the nobility's 'large-scale production', and the principle of common people's entitlement to land with exclusive appropriation (for example Kablukov 1898, Kachorovskii 1906), did not substantially contradict this way of attributing cultural functions and values to different forms of land possession. On the contrary, the viewpoint influenced by populism reinforced the distinction, although it inverted the direction of ideological preferences. Peasant communal agriculture was described as the expression of a system of alternative values, the foundation of economic rationality that was not oriented to maximizing profits and as such was contrasted with the exploitative system of the nobility's private estates. Most of these authors, however, emphasized the stagnation and inertia typical of small-scale agriculture and believed it was incapable of progressing on its own, without modernizing input from outside. In this variant, the figure of the enlightened landowner was generally replaced by that of the intellectual who would spread culture and educate the rural masses (Stanziani 1998, Kotsonis 1999).

The differences in significance that distinguished plebeian land tenure from elitist private property also affected the administrative sphere and, indirectly, the political one. The government saw communal possession as being characteristic of a category of subjects that were by definition incapable of self-government outside the restricted world of the village, or else needed patriarchal guidance and protection (or in the socialist variant, as 'friends of the people', willing to fight for it), while the members of the *zemstvo* administrations usually came from the ranks of more or less enlightened European-Russian landowners. The question directly involved one of the most strongly felt problems in Siberia, the repeatedly frustrated hope that St Petersburg would give even the remote regions beyond the Urals the right to elect representatives to local bodies at the governorate and district levels. The argument, repeated over the years, from the writings of Semenov-Tian-Shanskii (1884) to the well-known report by Stolypin and Krivoshein (1910), both discussed in Masoero (2004, p. 1075

ff.), was that the situation in the four Siberian governorates was still premature as there was no social group capable of independently providing qualified administrative officials. In other words they lacked a sufficiently large stratum of landowners who could hold down the subsidiary roles in the local administration that the gentry filled in the European provinces. The lack of private land ownership, far from merely representing only a legal or economic problem was perceived in a deeper sense as a fundamental limit to the territory's assimilation into the framework of the Empire. In some ways it was the symbol of Siberia's partial, incomplete internal colonization.

In search of the stalwart colonizer

This situation created a further paradox. The settlement policies adopted in the 1890s were conceived as extending into peripheral areas the mainly uniform classification of landholding that was at least theoretically pan-Russian, destined in the long run to overcome the anomalous specificity of the Siberian *zaimki* and the cultural and social inferiority of indigenous nomadism. On the other hand, often in descriptions by the same observers, the immigrants appeared fragile and inadequate, incapable of contributing to colonization, seen in epic terms as a national, civilizing mission. Leaving aside results on the ground, which also indicated a not inconsiderable mix of successes and failures, the image of the Russian-European settlers was characterized by a fundamental ambivalence that involved every aspect of their lives. As an agricultural producer, the colonist's mission consisted in settling large areas along the major railway lines (the objective was a 100-kilometre strip both north and south of the Trans-Siberian) to ensure the provision of supplies and subsidiary manpower. But the picture that emerged from the experience of local organizations was of a 'gray mass', a contingent of needy individuals who barely managed to feed themselves so that the authorities were obliged to continually increase aid and subsidies. From the moral and cultural point of view, the Russian-European colonists were described with the attributes of heroism and the Russian people's traditional sense of sacrifice, depicted as martyrs in the imperial cause, whose deeds (hitherto wrongly underrated) should be extolled. In populist-leaning versions, for example Kachorovskii (1893), migration instead appeared as a manifestation of the masses' creative energy, a promising communal 'peasantization' of the national territory. At the same time, however, descriptions by people working with the settlers, emphasized their lack of autonomy, general backwardness and lack of education. After artesian wells were dug in steppe villages, for example, care had to be taken so that the villagers did not ruin them with their 'clumsiness':

This 'Rassija' is ignorant and ill-equipped. The people are gray and needy. But these gray, needy, ignorant and ill-equipped people are carrying to the remote periphery the powerful spirit of the Russian state, forged by the autocrat Scepter of our Imperial Guides, a spirit which incessantly and impetuously extends the confines of our fatherland for the glory of Russian power. Therein lies the great service rendered to the state by Siberian colonists, therein their *right* [italics mine] to solicitous care from the government.¹⁰

These eulogies represented migration as though it were a special form of service to the state – and migrants thus enjoyed the right to receive public resources, including the allocation of land. On close examination, such descriptions did not fully contradict much harsher, more ungenerous views, such as the ones expressed by the administration of the governorate of Tomsk, which in 1898 wrote of the region as a 'boundless surface inhabited by a totally ignorant population, in many localities characterized by hereditary depravation, left to itself far from schools and churches, without proper examples and guidance. In such conditions, even the Siberian's innate capacity to assimilate whatever is good and positive succumbs to temptation and enticement.'¹¹

Not everyone in the administration saw the peasant settlers in the same negative light. The more democratic versions steered clear of monarchic rhetoric and references to the peasants' 'moral decay' due to their dispersion in a vast territory. Yet even the essays of A.A. Kaufman, which represented the most authoritative and intelligent expression of this approach within the administration, emphasized the colonists' inadequacy for the task at hand. Kaufman (1905) insisted on the substantive fact, central to his theory of colonization, that the peasants' backwardness and 'lack of culture' were limits to resettlement, an obstacle that needed to be overcome. According to this more enlightened view, this could be done by reinforcing educational activities and popularizing modern methods of farming and this implicitly entailed greater emphasis on the key role played by experts and intellectuals in colonization.

The ambivalence towards the settlers' status as producers and holders of a legal right to land tenure was also extended to and cast doubt on their national, and more generally civilizing vocation, as Remnev and Suvorova (2008) have shown in their masterful analysis. While it is in fact true that the model of territorial construction was based, in part, on the idea that only earth ploughed by peasants could be fully and definitively considered 'Russian' (Umanets 1884, p. 33), the authorities were the first to have seriously doubted the efficacy and especially the spontaneity of this sort of identity appropriation. There is no other explanation for the meticulous attention that went into all the accessory provisions meant to move not only the peasants but also the symbols of the religious and national culture of their homeland: from laws which prohibited using toponyms which derived from local languages and listed examples of places named for Orthodox saints, Russian historical heroes, or members of the reigning dynasty¹² to a model of a 'field prayer hall' shown in Gins (1912) – small tents that could be pitched along the railway lines to accompany the migrants with the faith that they must in no way forget. 'The most important thing is not to allow them to become savages', a high-ranking official wrote privately, using language that inverted the usual colonial relationship between civilizer and primitive.¹³ The peasant plough did not seem to be entirely up to the task. Something more, something different was needed to make the territory a truly integrated and accepted part of the Empire.

Thus the idea of adding to the customary 15 *desiatiny* per soul in peasant villages a separate category of farms allotted as private property found its way into discussions in the 1890s. In general it was connected to the observation that it was indispensable 'to select' a more stalwart, enterprising contingent of immigrants and attract to Siberia more capable, industrious individuals. After the sharp rise in arrivals in 1896, as explained in the first circular issued by the Resettlement Administration (20 January 1897), the need was felt 'to give thought to selecting an adequate contingent of settlers from among individuals and families suited to the natural and economic conditions in the new settlement areas'.¹⁴ One of the first mentions of the question is found in the Interior Ministry's long 1893 circular sent by future Assistant Minister A. Stishinskii. Encouraging people to move to alleviate poverty in their regions of origin would inevitably attract beyond the Urals the poorest and most pitiful, i.e. people who would then need to be given assistance. *Vice versa*, the circular explained, true 'colonization', understood as an organic government-directed policy of development, and in this case clearly distinct from simple population transfer (thus colonization understood to be more than mere 'resettlement'), required different, more enterprising, human resources. What was needed was 'energetic settlers' that were to be sought 'from among the well-off'. Although it failed to deal with details and left the question open as a topic for subsequent evaluation, the Stishinskii report clearly identified the need to change laws so that these 'energetic' elements would have 'ample freedom for autonomous economic initiative', a condition that only individual or 'family' farming could satisfy.¹⁵ There were minor projects in the years that followed that sought to achieve these goals (but had no significant practical effect), by expediting the allocation of land to veterans or retired army officers, or for impoverished country nobility in European

Russia, who often were little less 'needy' than the peasant immigrants (Po voprosu 1990, Krivoshein 1899).

As has been seen, the idea of privatized farmland available to all, even extended to people of low social status, did effectively circulate together with various opposing opinions within the administration. At times it was expressed in terms of impatiently seeking democratic social transformation, or in the hope that land ownership would be a means of stimulating more assertive and ambitious colonization and modernization, or yet again as a somewhat formal tribute to a vision in which the greater dignity of farm ownership in comparison to other forms of rural enterprise was taken for granted, but achievement of reform was deferred to a gradual process that would only subsequently come to fruition. However, when in 1898 the official discussion of the draft of the law passed in 1901 began, the question was not really couched in terms of an even partial liberalization of land tenure and of the spontaneous migratory process underway, enabling the diverse groups that populated the territory – old Siberians and new colonists of a variety of origins, *inorodtsy* and Cossacks – to freely acquire and trade land in one of the possible juridical forms.

The privatization project reflected the effort to add an element felt to be lacking in order to further shape the demographic makeup and physiognomy of the 'agrarian colony', based on a specific idea of what a well-constructed imperial region should be. The April 1898 report summarized the objectives of the law and asked members of the preparatory commission to express their views on the ways this new category of Siberian farm holdings should be structured: whether there should be long-term leases or immediate, full ownership, how large farms should be, what possible additional obligations should be attached to enjoyment of the property, personal requisites for applicants, and so on. The report determined the course of the discussions that were meant to ascertain the best way of adding (literally 'inserting from outside') a new category of property holders invested with an aura of political, social and cultural significance and seen as superior in rank both to 'primitive' forms of agriculture which already existed beyond the Urals, and to peasant tenure rights in European Russia.

Siberian agriculture was described as still being extremely backward because it was engaged in 'almost exclusively by peasants' and was characterized by 'primitive agricultural relationships' in which it was 'difficult to open avenues to new methods of cultivation without there being an external contribution'. The superiority of private property as a legal form (whose application was also limited, as will shortly be seen) was argued on the basis of the productive function it would probably serve, taken for granted from the outset, since the use of intensive methods appeared to be accessible only to 'individuals who conducted their enterprises on isolated farms at their own risk, and had knowledge and a minimum of capital'. The ideal landholder was explicitly endowed with an educational and civilizing function, because this type of agricultural enterprise, it was stated, 'is always in the avant-garde and it is precisely from them that the ordinary peasant can normally borrow the rules of a higher cultural level' (Kulomzin 1898, p. 2).

One of the details included in the final text of the law, i.e. the recommendation that new private farms should be located in areas between existing peasant villages, reflected the exemplary function that the concept of land ownership had for the lawmakers. The intention to attribute to these new farmers an important role in political and social control in Siberia's highly mobile frontier society was also clear: 'a class of educated landowners, coming principally from the nobility, will represent that conservative element that everywhere affords the state's power with the sure support necessary for maintaining the equilibrium between progressive leanings that may gradually emerge, but are not always built on solid foundations' (Kulomzin 1898, p. 23). The spread of private agriculture was also felt to be necessary to create in situ 'an autonomous class of educated, well-to-do inhabitants which, in the persons of its individual

representatives, will be involved in significant public activities'.¹⁶ This was a clear allusion to the precondition of a future Siberian *zemstvo*.

This way of seeing the spread of ownership as the external addition of a separate category also had the effect of projecting onto a multifaceted, rough-and-tumble frontier society, the difference in status in a juridical tradition that distinguished peasant land tenure from full and 'authentic' ownership, thereby accentuating the latter's elitist connotations. Paradoxically, however, such rigid distinctions in social estate were relatively easily infringed in Siberia. For example a large group of immigrants, who in theory belonged to the category of state peasants, with all the obligations that this entailed, brazenly declared on their arrival after a long journey that they had lost all their papers on the way, and perhaps aided by a bribe, had themselves registered in the intermediary category of *meshchane* (Suvchinskii 1889, pp. 1–3).

The political ends of the project are evident in the review of local opinions included as an appendix to the materials prepared for the lawmakers.¹⁷ Optimistic views of future prospects that would 'without doubt ensue' were preceded by a long series of descriptions from Governors General and governorate administrations, most of whom described an unpropitious situation which afforded little hope of success. If there are problems developing intensive agriculture, the Governor of Tobol'sk objected, 'the reason is to be sought not in a lack of experience or knowledge, but in a long series of insurmountable natural obstacles, with which any and every farmer in the given region must come to grips.' The absence of markets and the low price of land that had previously slowed the development of peasant farms would have to an even greater degree thwarted the success of large-scale, market-oriented private ventures. Although not excluding the usefulness of individual concessions in particular cases, the Governor General of the Steppe Region noted that the availability of large amounts of land at low rents, as well as relatively high labour costs and low prices for cereal crops, meant that agriculture based on the use of paid farmhands and selling crops was unlikely to be profitable. He concluded therefore that 'it is improbable that measures whose purpose is to introduce private ownership in the Steppe Region or in Siberia will meet with success.' In distant Amur, energetic Governor Duchovskij admitted that individual allotments would be advantageous, recommending however that procedures be as simple as possible and that there be careful controls against speculation. But he also described without particular emphasis the bleak prospects for private agriculture in a remote region without 'enterprising individuals', citing the frequent cases in the past in which generous allotments along the region's borders had created absentee owners, who had found it easy to rent their land to Korean immigrants willing to farm it themselves, thwarting the original goal of Russianizing the region.

Only the report from the administration in the governorate of Tomsk, unlike the separate, far more cautious opinion of the Governor himself, was unreservedly in favour of the project. The reasons given, which largely recycled the points made in the general conclusion, admitted there had been failures in the past and objective difficulties that would have to be faced, but pivoted on the certitude of predictable and indubitable future evolution, which thanks to the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway and arrival of the settlers would inevitably push up land values, increase the demand for wheat and make the region part of the pan-Russian market. The report essentially repeated the government's views on the educational, leadership function of 'enlightened landowners' (*intelligentnye sobstvenniki*), reasons which counselled and even made urgent a subjective political decision, a 'duty to be' forcefully future-oriented: the introduction of private farming was seen to be 'not only desirable, but also indispensable'. Taking action was not enough: action had to be taken quickly, before there was no longer land available and it became far more difficult to integrate this reliable and 'civilized' contingent of private owners in the periphery's social space. In some sense, private landowners had to hurry to catch up with the peasants beyond the Urals before it was too late.

Uncertain landowners

This general approach encompassed a range of different orientations, varying in the way they defined the emerging elite. Since the figure indicated by the term 'landowner' was supposed to represent the crowning pinnacle of the Siberian social structure, and facilitating its emergence involved making state resources available on favourable terms, what criteria were chosen to select this contingent of new 'energetic' and 'reliable' settlers? To what extent was the definition of a 'suitable landowner' influenced by factors such as ethnicity, estate and level of education? And, consequently, what legal form did the concept of property acquire in relation to these considerations? The minutes of meetings of the preparatory commission of the Siberian Railroad Committee, held in March and April 1899 to approve the preliminary draft, indicate that discussion may have been quite heated. There are in fact two versions and the second contains long dissenting opinions added afterwards. References here are to this more complete version.¹⁸

Ethnicity as a criterion was less important than might be expected, at least as an explicit reason. Land could be acquired by all *russkie poddannye*, literally all 'Russian subjects'. However, at the turn of the century, this legal definition did not refer only to the Great Russians as opposed to the Empire's many, diverse peoples. While not exactly encompassing all subjects, it still had a meaning that was broadly imperial and supranational. Contributions which dealt with the issue clearly show that the provision was intended to prevent immigration from neighbouring countries and not that of members of the Empire's own ethnic minorities: 'undesired landowners, no less than speculators, are foreigners ... especially in eastern Siberia.' The language was however slightly different from that used in provisions approved after 1905, in which there was much greater emphasis on ethnicity and nationality. In 1913 when plans were being drawn up for a new city on the Irtysh, plots could be sold to 'individuals of all classes, but exclusively of Russian origin (*korennoe russkoe proiskhozhdenie*) and of the Orthodox religion' (Spravochnaia 1913, p. 20). A discriminatory clause which forbade the purchase of private land by 'aliens' was justified with arguments about their nomadic or clan 'socio-economic way of life' or the deep-rooted traditions which made them ill-suited to be private landowners given their 'backwardness' and 'lack of preparation'.¹⁹ The spread of Russianness, understood in a variety of ways, was a strongly felt priority, but as Kappeler (2003) shows, it coexisted within a range of hierarchies of value judgments in which not always and not necessarily did the criteria of nationality prevail over productive, social and political factors. Here, as in other respects, tsarist demographic engineering in peripheral regions diverged from the principle of 'blood and soil' that inspired Eastern Prussia's Germanization policies, a legislative model that was carefully considered by the strategists in charge of the colonization of Asiatic Russia in the 1890s (Germanskaia 1894).

The most controversial issue was the relationship between Siberia's property owners-to-be, whose salient feature was to be 'productive reliability', and the privileges of the nobility as a group. When the job of drawing up the project progressed from statements of principle to the methods that were to be used so that this presence would actually materialize in Siberia, the very concept of landownership seemed to evaporate; its outlines blurred or it was weighed down with accessory restrictions intended to prevent abuses; and it was subdivided into categories for different types of 'candidates'. The first draft, prepared in 1898 by the Ministry of Agriculture,²⁰ did not even espouse the principle that land should be sold. It recommended, at least for an initial period, a form of long-term, hereditary tenancy agreement comparable to emphyteusis, with a prohibition against mortgaging the land or alienating it to third parties, so that the state remained the ultimate owner. What it envisaged was a sort of managed migration of settlers to Siberia, similar to peasant settlement, but more elitist and with more privileges. The choice was in part motivated by caution, by concern that the arrival of sharpies and speculators

(noble and otherwise), who had a long history of abuses, wastefulness and Oblomovian sloth, might adversely affect the still fragile peasant colonization. Yet the reluctance to accept the principle of private property also mirrored a certain deeply rooted notion of territory and deep distrust of conveying to private parties land rights that could be perceived as definitive and would be difficult to revoke: almost a subconscious fear that alienating the land was tantamount to loss of sovereignty over parts of the state territory.

Different points of view emerged in the discussion.²¹ One unhesitatingly espoused the approach that equated landownership with the hereditary landed nobility (*pomeshchiki*). Stishinskii, the Interior Ministry's representative, did not mince words. He ignored the long discussions on the prospects for 'large-scale production' beyond the Urals and in essence said that the purpose of the law was political: the government needed to create a ruling class which was solidly rooted in the region, if it was not to lose control over the periphery, and the landowning hereditary nobility had historically been the monarchy's most stalwart supporters. He proposed that the entire amount of state land earmarked for sale should be reserved for them, and that they should be given ownership because that was the best way to convince nobles to go to live in such distant, inhospitable regions. The right to full and unrestricted enjoyment of the land was seen as a necessary privilege, almost an incentive, which would make it possible to create a reliable elite in the periphery.

But this faith in the colonizing role of the nobility encountered strong resistance from the officials directly responsible for organizing the migrations, many of whom were recent appointees whose ideas were anything but traditionalistic. Although it was in large part adopted in the law that was subsequently approved, the formulation of the problem proposed by Stishinskii turns out to be a minority opinion among participants in the discussion, at least among those on the legislative commission chaired by Kulomzin. Kaufman at this point was virtually isolated in his opposition to the principle of private property, which he considered a 'squandering' of public lands he felt could be better used if an effort were made to ensure that there were 'warehouses [for agricultural equipment], experimental farms, model farms, etc.' In short, he was in favour of colonization led by 'experts'. But some of his views were widely shared, for example his claim that not even in the centre, in European Russia, had landowners with large estates played a significant 'civilizing' role in agriculture. Smirnov, the person in charge of the land survey in the four Siberian governorates, said much the same thing in surprisingly radical, anti-nobility tones. Together with Vasil'ev, the Treasury Ministry's representative, he insisted that 'all the informative material presented to the commission', i.e. the compendium of local authorities' opinions that was mentioned above, 'urges us to say no on the question of introducing [large estates] in Siberia. The government's repeated attempts to do this ... even in other regions which enjoy better climatic and agronomic conditions, for example the Caucasus, have produced results contrary to those intended'.

The polemic against estate privilege was expressed as an urgent request for amendments that would protect the public interest from the new owners. This was one reason the preparatory material devoted so much space to appraising forms of property ownership and tenancy drawn from foreign legal systems that entailed both short- and long-term obligations (Kulomzin 1897). The new legislation was supposed to prevent 'undesired use' of 'private holdings introduced de novo for a specific state purpose', as this type of abuse of the right to landownership would turn out to be 'merely alienation [of public property] for the advantage of private parties'. In some of the more radical minority opinions, the opposition to equating noble estates with future private property in Siberia made use of archaic language and principles. Vasil'ev compared the future Siberian elite to the state servitors (*sluzhilye liudi*) of the Muscovite past and recalled that 'from time immemorial land has been given for service rendered'. The goal of colonization was to ensure that 'in the State's boundless space, rich in natural gifts, there shall not be

indigence and forced idleness (*nebylo nevol'noi prazdnosti i nishchety*). Thus, he argued, the right to landownership derived not only from having served the state, but also from land being needed 'as the immediate object of labor and means of subsistence'. This meant that there should be perpetual lease agreements for land, subject to rent paid to the state, assisting particularly the lower ranks of the Siberian administration. Other objections to Stishinskii's equating ownership with noble estates were more representative of the committee's general stance. A series of authoritative participants, such as Gippius (Director of the Resettlement Administration), Goremykin (Governor General of Irkutsk) and high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Finance, like Kutler and Shipov, defended a more modernizing interpretation of future agriculture in Siberia. They emphasized the importance of selecting 'enterprising and economically trustworthy landowners'. In this variant, that in no way questioned the socially and culturally elite nature of the concept of property (as has been seen, Goremykin had opposed allotting land as private property to the peasant settlers), future landowners were supposed to emerge from a contingent that would be at least somewhat interclass and open to varied input. Removing estate requisites was seen as the factor that would produce a more efficient selection process – in some sense, a productive meritocracy:

It is self-evident that the greater or lesser suitability of the individuals entrusted with the task of economically developing the region cannot be their belonging to one class rather than another. Limiting the circle of persons admitted to productive landownership with restrictions based on estate category or service record, in the views of the aforesaid members, would weaken the economic importance of the measures planned, without however guaranteeing . . . that the formation of an administrative class [in Siberia] would be the result.²²

Members, like Shipov (who was close to Vitte and had been influenced by Bunge) were more receptive to the Ministry of Finance's priorities. They called on others to grasp 'the element of vivacity' in the much-dreaded speculation and argued that one of the goals of the law should be 'creating conditions so that on the Siberian land market there can emerge private agricultural property free from restrictions'. A hypothesis of this sort envisaged, however, a future market in legitimate farmland that would inevitably coexist with the customary, flourishing and equally legitimate dealings in deeds of inclusion in peasant communes. The outcome of these combined pressures – on behalf of the nobility's political trustworthiness and for an essentially meritocratic approach, more open to market logic – was the introduction of a second, parallel channel of access, in addition to the leasing of state lands originally planned, the latter devised for people with little capital and uncertain entrepreneurial talent. Public auctions at market prices were introduced as a separate procedure, although there had been long discussions of a proposal to invite tenders, in order to oversee the emergence of the new agricultural entrepreneurs on a case-by-case basis. The entire discussion had pivoted on the need to prevent 'undesired use' of 'private holdings introduced de novo for a specific state purpose'.

The project drafted by the preparatory commission ended up reflecting these discordant points of view. It is perhaps not exaggerated to speak of a fragmentation of the notion of the 'enlightened landowner' just when this idealized figure was about to become a reality, albeit as a theory and plan. During the debate the concept of agricultural property was also subdivided into qualitatively distinct categories, different not only in size, acquisition procedures and connected obligations, but also in type of development and the social goals these were meant to serve. The definition of future owners was divided into a further hierarchy of internal classifications. In the final draft of the law, the first of these were large holdings of up to 3000 hectares, on which it was likely that there would be hired labourers. These were to be assigned, without consideration of social estate, to individuals of proven entrepreneurial reliability who had sufficient capital. Conditions in Siberia meant that large-scale animal farming was a likely choice. Alongside these large properties sold at public auction to maximize prices, there was a category

of medium-sized farms, leased by the state for twenty-four years, which could be neither sublet nor sold to third parties but could subsequently be converted into hereditary tenancies or redeemed as fully owned at a predefined advantageous price. In this case, possible purchasers had to come from the rural or urban intermediate strata, predominantly nobles. Although the preparatory commission's project envisaged no rigid restriction of estate, the draft spoke vaguely of 'nobles and other estates',²³ this second category was conceived as a sort of subsidy for the weaker strata of the European elite. The state was willing to offer them the opportunity to move to Siberia on condition that during a trial period they could prove themselves to be 'true' landowners and, in a certain sense, to have earned through their work and investments the right to transform their lease into full ownership.

A third category of non-peasant farm emerged from the preparatory discussion. In part it reintroduced into the goals of the law safeguarding the nobility as a privileged group, therefore worthy of differentiated protections. These were farms of 100 to 150 hectares, devised for the impoverished members of the nobility that often were barely distinguishable from peasants. They were fairly frequently found in the central regions of European Russia hardest hit by the agricultural crisis. The assisted migration planned for these people differed little from provisions made for peasants. However the proposal introduced a new form of land tenure for what were called 'noble agriculturalists'. It was a hybrid unknown in Russian legislation, an inter-estate anomaly, as some members of the commission pointed out, because it assigned a type of peasant possession to noble subjects, yet at the same time exempted them from other obligations imposed on taxable rural categories, such as paying village rates and being subject to the jurisdiction of cantonal law courts.²⁴ Further complicating the situation of the much-awaited birth of the new Siberian landowner was the fact that in the same years discussions began on whether it would be advisable to differentiate peasant settlements by introducing individual farms (*khutora*) next to existing communal villages (Korneeva 1991).²⁵ This was of course a harbinger of a further attempt to select energetic, hard-working landowners directly from among the peasants, characteristic of Stolypin's reforms, both in Siberia and European Russia.

Conclusions

This stratification of properties, all of them prospective and marked from the start to serve a specific function, fell rather artificially onto Siberian soil. Local society continued to go its own way and might have found other means to generate an elite and economic growth. A year after the passage of the law that was supposed to create a Siberian elite, Aleksandr Balakshin, a wealthy merchant from Kurgan, wrote to the Ministry of Agriculture requesting permission to start cooperative dairies to produce butter in the area near Tiukalinsk. Within a few years the Union of Siberian Cooperative Dairies had gone on to become an extraordinarily successful production and distribution network (in 1917 there were 500,000 members), with a well-structured organization of office staff and administrators, who were the middlemen between peasant producers and the international market, and production values that topped those of gold mines. Prior to the war it was jointly directed by Balakshin's son, Andrei, and by Nikolai Chaikovskii, a well-known figure in the populist movement of the 1870s (Guterts 2003, p. 726). Successful cooperation between a wealthy entrepreneur and a former socialist militant would have been rare in 'Russia', but was not unusual in Siberia.

The myriad of classifications for real property introduced by the 1898–1901 projects derived in turn from the multiplicity of contrasting functions – productive, social, cultural and administrative – that the central government superimposed on the prime objective, which was to transfer land ownership, loading it with extralegal valences. The law was not really a plan of land

privatization, nor did it represent a step, albeit a timid one, towards overcoming the principle of a society divided into legal categories of subjects. The figure of the hardworking landowner, although outwardly legitimized by liberal vocabulary – a rational producer and subject who obeyed the law because he was personally interested in his property – to a large extent represented an adaptation of the traditional hierarchy of social estates to new conditions and new colonial duties. He was a means of shaping the territory, rather than an individual with rights. Analogously to the European-Russian peasant, the landowner was supposed to journey to Siberia to fulfil Russia's imperial destiny. And, as a final paradox, like the peasant settler, the new property holders were also seen by the lawmakers in ambivalent terms: a mixture of approval, anxiety and deep-seated distrust. As agricultural producers, they had to relocate to areas between villages, most of which were built of straw and mud, and integrate what was a subsistence economy with market-oriented, hopefully more efficient, farming methods. From the political and cultural point of view, they were supposed to swell the ranks of the local gentry and keep at bay supporters of Siberian independence, wealthy, independent-minded progressive merchants, and the many former revolutionaries who had become highly regarded mayors or influential journalists (and within a short time the Buriat autonomists and the progressive intellectuals of the Muslim renaissance would also appear). In a certain sense, therefore, their arrival was impatiently awaited.

On the other hand, the entire discussion on privatizing land in Siberia was seeped in diffidence, albeit not necessarily aroused for the same reasons. The awkward complexity of the privatization procedures set forth in the 1901 law and immediately noted by contemporaries (Peshekhonov 1904, Golovachev 1905, Lenin 1967), was in part due to a persistent authoritarian or paternalistic attitude but also, and perhaps more importantly, to uncertainty about the identity of the civilizing agent who was being given the task of leading the advance of settlement, an ambiguity that in turn reflected divisions within the imperial elite in this transitional phase before the Revolution of 1905.

Those for whom peasant migration was a project of grand patriotic collaboration between reformist ministers and experts in the intelligentsia that would enable the Russian people to prosper beyond the Urals (a stance that was often animated by noble intentions, but not without technocratic offshoots) saw the planned arrival of new landowners as a waste of resources and a step backwards: not only was it an obstacle from the organizational point of view to colonization that was difficult enough as it was, it also potentially competed with a direct relationship with the people that had rarely before been so immediate – yet fully legal and well regarded by the authorities – as in the everyday work of the officials in charge of allotting land to peasant immigrants. Even those who pinned their hopes on entrepreneurial development in Siberia and were therefore in favour of creating a legal framework for this purpose – as liberal economic philosophy already accepted in the mid-nineteenth century had taught – in their hearts feared that once landowners had obtained large tracts of Siberian territory on favourable terms they would turn out to be far different from the idealized image they had been cast in, no less inept and indolent in terms of the state's interests than the 'primitives' that they were being sent to educate. The example of the 'wheeler-dealers' who would profit from the law by renting land to the irregular immigrants that roamed the territory or, even worse, to people from China and Koreans from the Far East, turning into lazy rentiers on the Russian frontier, was never far from the minds of those who wrote the 1901 law. Appeals to the primacy of public interest and to the merit of service as the sole legitimate basis for acquiring land possession were by no means new. In fact they echoed a centuries-long practice of slow transformation of the imperial borderlands. What was new, perhaps, was the growing uncertainty and lack of internal coherence that these appeals revealed at this point in the Empire's history.

The corporative roots of the notion of landownership, an underlying mentality still alive at the turn of the century, made it difficult to give it a single, consistent definition, equal for all subjects and, at least juridically, accessible to all, a condition that in itself was not unrealistic in Siberia's vast spaces. Its political aims emphasized extrajudicial intents and differentiated classifications. This meant that property had to be endowed with more or less cogent accessory conditions, conjugated in the subordinate form of emphyteusis of Treasury land – intrinsically depreciative in comparison to the nobility's right to full enjoyment of their property – or else envisaged as a separate category of occupancy, that would be kept under observation to cautiously experiment with the efficacy of the market in agricultural land. What still needs to be examined is whether and to what extent the function of private ownership changed in colonization policy after 1905, when the imperial government set its sights on creating a reliable propertied elite from the ranks of the peasant settlers, rather than by importing members of the European Russian gentry into the territory. But this will be the subject of a separate analysis.

Archives and abbreviations

Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Omskoi Oblasti (GAOO)

Otdel Rukopisei Russkoi Gosudarstvennoi Biblioteki (OR RGB)

Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii (PSZ)

Russkii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGIA)

Notes

1. PSZ, III, XXI, I, No. 20338, 8 June 1901, pp. 614–617.
2. Collections of unpublished government materials, Russian National Library: *O nasazhdenii chastnoi pozemel'noi sobstvennosti v Sibiri*, (St Petersburg 1897–1900); *Materialy Kantseliarii Komiteta ministrov*, vol. VII, (St Petersburg 1899); *Materialy Zemskogo otdela* (St Petersburg: Ministerstvo Vnutrennykh Del 1882–1895).
3. OR RGB, f.178, M9803, *Vospominaniia Kulomzina*, ed. chr. 5, l.29; Eliseev 1878.
4. OR RGB, f.178, M9803, ed. khr.7, ll.13-14.
5. PSZ, III, XVI, I, No. 1298, May 23 1896, pp. 503–505.
6. RGIA, f. 391, op. 1, d. 432, l. 13.
7. OR RGB, f. 178 M9803, ed. chr. 7, l.3.
8. GAOO, f. 46, op. 1 d. 5, ll.14-16.
9. GAOO, f. 354, op. 1, d. 3, ll. 74-77.
10. Zhurnal Komiteta Sibirskoi zheleznoi dorogi, 27 January 1899, in *Materialy Kantseliarii Komiteta ministrov*, vol. VII, p. 24.
11. Po voprosu o nasazhdenii chastnogo Zemlevladieniia v Sibiri, 1 July 1898, in *O nasazhdenii chastnoi pozemel'noi sobstvennosti*, pp. 30–31.
12. GAOO, f. 46, d.1, l.139, *Tiukalinskaia pozemel'no-ustroitel'naia partiia. Cirkularnye rasporiasheniia po obrazovaniiu pereselencheskikh uchastkov*.
13. OR GRB, f.178, M9803, ed. chr. 8, l.11.
14. V. Goremykin, *Gg. Gubernatoram. Tsirkuliarno*, Ministerstvo Vnutrennykh Del, Pereselencheskoe Upravlenie, 20 January 1897 n.1, *Konfidentsial'no*, in *Materialy Pereselencheskogo upravleniia*, p. 2.
15. A. Stishinskii, *Gg. Gubernatoram. Tsirkuliarno*, Zemskii otdel, Ministerstvo Vnutrennykh del, 11 January 1893, n.13771, in *Materialy Zemskogo otdela*, pp. 1–7.
16. Po voprosu o nasazhdenii, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–36.
18. Po delu o nasazhdenii v Sibiri chastnogo zemlevladieniia, 'Zhurnal Podgotovitel'noi pri Komitete Sibirskoi zheleznoi dorogi Kommisii, N. 68, 19 March, 9 and 14 April 1899 in *Materialy Kantseliarii Komiteta Ministrov*, vol. VII.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
20. Po voprosu o nasazhdenii, *op cit*, pp. 55–58.
21. Po delu o nasazhdenii, *op cit.*, pp. 3–13.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
23. However the definitive 1901 text specified belonging to the nobility as a requirement: PSZ, III, XXI, I, No. 20338, June 8, 1901, p. 615.
24. Po delu o nasazhdenii, *op. cit.*, p. 14; the project was later developed separately by the Resettlement Administration: *O pereselenii na kazennye zemli Sibiri dvorian-zemleposadstvennikov*, Ministerstvo Vnutrennykh Del, Pereselenskoe upravlenie, 9 December 1899, N.7642, in *O nasazhdenii chasnoi pozemel'noi sobstvennosti v Sibiri*'.
25. *Zhurnal Osobogo soveshchaniia dlia vyrabotki pravil ob obrazovanii dlia pereselentsev v Sibiri podvornnykh uchastkov*, 21, 28 April 1900; note from the Resettlement Administration, date 13 May 1899, N. 3635, both in *O nasazhdenii chasnoi pozemel'noi sobstvennosti v Sibiri*'.

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