

Chekhov's Russia (and How It Got that Way)

by Jerry James

"I passionately love anything that is called an estate in Russia. This word has still not lost its poetic sound."
— Anton Chekhov (1885)

Introduction

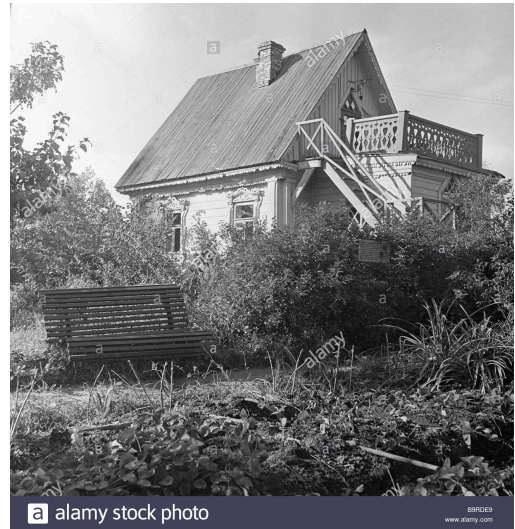
In 1892, Dr. Anton P. Chekhov, the successful short-story writer, bought an estate called Melikhovo, about seventy miles south of Moscow. This was not a mere summer home, a *dacha*, but an estate, small at 639 acres, but still an estate. And it was purchased by a man whose father had, until the age of sixteen, been a serf.

On this estate, the short-story writer would become a playwright. Here he would write two of his four major plays, *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*. (He would write *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* at Yalta, after his tuberculosis had forced his move to a milder climate.) All four of Chekhov's major plays take place in provincial Russia, three of them on country estates. And in the last of these, a former serf buys the estate from those who had been the masters.

How did life on the country estate come to symbolize *fin de siècle* (end of the 19th century) Russia far more than that life lived in the bright lights of St. Petersburg or Moscow? What is it about Chekhov's depiction of these dissatisfied provincials that still attracts our interest over a century later? Part of it, of course, is that we know what they cannot: Their way of life is about to disappear forever, along with a discouraging number of them.

But more importantly, they knew what we can know only at a remove: they were living in an antiquated empire founded on a thousand years of autocracy, and that empire was sliding inexorably towards... what?

Fin de siècle Russia was deeply unsettled, with revolutionary impulses abounding. But no one thought revolution meant anything more than nudging the autocracy towards constitutional monarchy and an elected parliament. After all, the Russian Empire stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea, from the Arctic to the Crimea. It would take time to change its direction.



Anton Chekhov's estate in Melikhovo

But bloody, murderous revolution? Who was in favor of that? Besides, no revolution had ever succeeded without the support of the army, and the army would always support the Czar, wouldn't it?

But even more difficult for us to know is what Chekhov and others of his time must have felt to the bottom of their Slavic souls—the hangover of serfdom. This medieval concept had been abolished in Russia in 1861, the year after Chekhov was born. Marina, the old nurse in *Uncle Vanya*, was born a serf.

Serfdom grew up with Russia, as did the country estate. The estate was fueled by that self-same serfdom, the original sin of the Rus, as slavery was the original sin of the United States. It is not for nothing that *The Cherry Orchard* was reset in the American South by Joshua Logan as *The Wisteria Trees*. But while serfdom ended in Russia before slavery in the U.S., it had begun much earlier.

For Chekhov, the process ended with the son of serfs triumphing over the masters. To see how it began, we must take a look at Russian history,

sometimes benevolent, always autocratic, beginning with a founding legend.

Kievan Rus'

Around 860 AD, there is a chronicle that relates how some of the East Slavic tribes decided that the exact thing they needed to put an end to their tribal conflicts was to import a foreign ruler, a Viking named Rurik. "Our land is great and plentiful," they said, "but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us."

Because the Vikings came up the Volkhov River in a long ship with oars, they were called the Rus, "those who row." (This legend has the air of something invented years later by Rurik's descendants to justify their invasion, as many have argued. But this is Russia, where legend is strong.)

Vikings or not, in 882 Rurik's descendants took Kiev and united most of the East Slavic lands into a state we now call Kievan Rus'.

The Mongols & The Rise of Moscow

Kievan Rus' peaked shortly after it embraced Christianity and began to fall completely to pieces after about 1050. Still, its remnants struggled on until the Mongols invaded in 1237. Over the next three years, they conquered everything in sight, destroying Kiev and almost every other city of the Rus.

After this devastation, many people made their way to the northeast, as far away from the Mongols as possible, and joined the small settlement called Moscow. As long as they paid their taxes, the Mongols left them alone.

The peasants? More and more of them fled the Mongols and found themselves forced to settle on the lands of nobles, who could afford them some measure of protection. In return, the nobles wanted labor, so the peasants traded labor on the noble's land for a small plot of their own. This was a more rigorous form of feudal dependency, but it was not yet serfdom.

In fact, local custom eventually established the right of Yuri's Day (St. George's Day), November 26, the traditional end of the harvest season. For a week before and after this day, a peasant could hire himself to a new master for the upcoming year. It might not be freedom, but it wasn't serfdom, either.

Not until 1480 would Grand Duke Ivan III finally drive out the Mongols. Ivan the Great (as he was now known) proclaimed Yuri's Day the right of every peasant in 1497. He also attached a fee. This came at a moment when serfdom was dying out in Europe (Elizabeth I freed the last remaining serfs in 1574).

Russia remained unified by nothing other than a shared faith (thanks mainly to their love of alcohol) until the reign of the Ivan the Great's grandson, Ivan IV (the Terrible), who succeeded to the throne in 1533 at the age of three. It was not until 1547, however, that he began to call himself Caesar—Czar in the Russian.

Ivan the Terrible crushed the power of his nobles, built up his army and opened the way to Russian expansion into Siberia, and an empire of a size that would have awed Alexander the Great. Unfortunately, he suffered from mental illness, and his son Feodor was "mentally deficient."

Boris Godunov, Feodor's brother-in-law, arrived shortly after Ivan's death to help run things. He figures in our chronicle only as the man who abolished the rights of Yuri's Day in 1597. If this wasn't serfdom, it was close enough, especially since it came with a Fugitive Serf Law that gave the owners five years in which to catch any runaways, expanded in 1607 to criminalize anyone aiding or abetting a runaway.

In 1613, the nobles unanimously elected the young Michael Romanov as Czar. The Romanov Dynasty would rule Russia for the next 304 years.

Peter the Great

By 1649, almost 14 million people were serfs. By 1678 that number had grown to nearly 80% of all Russian peasants.

As far as the West was concerned, Russia (then known as Muscovy) might as well have been Tibet. Foreign access was strictly limited, which was to be expected when Westerners reported: "The magnates have their heads shaved, imagining this to be an ornament." And, "Most Russians express crude and senseless opinions about the elevated natural sciences and the arts."

Czar Alexis outlawed foreign dress and ordered the destruction of all foreign musical instruments. Into this xenophobic society came Peter the Great, the young prince.

Peter had spent much time in the German Suburb, fascinated by the nature of forbidden objects like clocks and music boxes. He came to firmly believe that accruing Western technology was not enough. In order to *think* like Europeans, Russians would have to learn to *act*



like Europeans.

In 1697, the 25-year-old Peter led a group of Russians on a tour of Europe. He took away with him one amazing thing: the concept of the English country estate. Russia had no such thing. Moscow was a rude collection of wooden buildings, while the English nobles lived like gods. Peter absorbed it all, and went to work.

Peter moved Russia to the Julian Calendar; insisted on European dress and style, and, in 1703, began the building of St. Petersburg, his window on the West and new imperial capital.

In 1722, Peter's Table of Ranks not only reorganized the nobility, but also every other aspect of Russian life. (Peter Voinitsky, Vanya's father, was a Privy Councillor, the third-highest rank in the civil service, roughly equivalent to that of a three-star general.)

The wealth of the nobility came not from the amount of land they owned, but by the number of people on it. An adult male serf was called a "soul," and one's fortune was directly related to the number of souls one owned.

By the time Peter the Great died in 1725, the nobility had "internalized his cultural goals."

Elizabeth built the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and did not execute a single person during her reign. But she was childless, so she named her seventeen-year-old German nephew as her successor. She also chose an impoverished sixteen-year-old German princess, to be his bride. Peter and Sophie detested each other.

Peter III ascended to the throne in January 1762. Six months later, Peter was ousted by a coup led by his wife, now known by her Eastern Orthodox name, Catherine.

Catherine the Great

Catherine would rule Russia for over 34 years, until her death in 1796. Under her, Russia would become one of the great powers of Europe, fulfilling many of the dreams of Peter the Great.



Catherine the Great saw herself as an Empress of the Enlightenment—she corresponded with Voltaire—and she hoped to raise the Russian nobility to that superior level. And indeed, the golden age of the Russian nobility was about to be ushered in. But who were these people,

whose nobility stretched "from the foot of the throne into the peasant's hut?"

European visitors marveled at the gorgeous estates, created seemingly out of nowhere, a pinnacle of the sumptuary arts. But the visitors did not realize that, in a very real manner, the nobles were doing what Peter the Great had envisioned, *acting* like Europeans rather than *becoming* them. Nowhere was that distinction more striking than with their dealings with their serfs. Everywhere, one might see advertisements like these:

For sale, a barber and also four bedposts and other pieces of furniture.

For sale: a girl of sixteen, of good behavior, and a ceremonial carriage, hardly used.

Anyone wishing to buy an entire family or a young man and a girl separately, may inquire at the silver-washer's opposite the church of Kazan. The young man, named Ivan, is twenty-one years old, he is healthy, robust, and can curl a lady's hair. The girl, well-made and healthy, named Marfa, aged fifteen, can do sewing and embroidery. They can be examined and had for a reasonable price.

And what might that reasonable price be? The price of a serf was often less than that of a prized hunting dog.

With serfs so cheap, many nobles went to great lengths to establish serf orchestras, serf dance troupes, serf opera companies and serf theatre companies.

The Shermetev serf troupe was considered to be on a level with the Petersburg Court Theatre and far superior to Moscow's best. When their owner decided they should take on French and Italian comic opera, he built a theatre on his estate bigger than the Dresden opera house.

Count Shermetev was said to own 1,200 villages and 200,000 serfs. (Moderate landowners might own 200.)

The last major Cossack revolt (1773-1774) became legendary. Some nobles were shocked to discover that their serfs, if given the choice, would gleefully kill them. And although this rebellion was put down with fire and sword—the leader was hanged, drawn and quartered—there would be hundreds of smaller outbreaks all across Russia right up until the emancipation of the serfs in 1861.

And just as the upper classes were adjusting to what it might mean to live in interesting times, the French Revolution struck (1789).

The Year 1812

Catherine the Great died in 1796. Because of the French Revolution, she had become a bit less fond of the Enlightenment and what it had wrought.

The idea that a familiarity with French was necessary to be cultured hung on for a century, but after Napoleon, the elite found a fluency in reading and writing Russian.

And let us take particular note of the fact that some young Russian officers observed how well the serfs under their command fought (the serfs they had assumed to be sub-human at best) and they began to think.

In the same way the American Civil War made the Irish white, so did The Year 1812 make the serfs human. And one cannot do the same things to a human that one can do to a sub-human.

Alexander I pondered freeing the serfs, but concluded it was impossible, even though the system was both inefficient and morally reprehensible. Too bad. A present-day study concluded. "Russia would have been about twice as rich by 1913 compared to what it actually was, had it abolished serfdom in 1820 instead of 1861."

Serfdom in the Reign of Nicholas I

The thirty-year reign of Nicholas I featured serfdom in its final moments. How did this system work, down on the estate?

Arable land was customarily divided into long, narrow strips of property, as this meant fewer turns of the plow per strip.

Approximately half the strips were the serf villagers', half the landowners'—though the serfs, of course, cultivated them all.

A wise master made sure that all the best land was not allotted to himself. A more just distribution was in his self-interest, for an estate was sustained by its grain harvest. The strong harvested many fields. The weak harvested few. The dead harvested none.

Even a good master might have recourse to the whip, sometimes with the peculiar humiliation of forcing a son to whip his own father's bare buttocks. Sexual predation, of course, was a given.

While the serfs were trying to get by, the landowners discovered that the government would allow them to be mortgaged.

The official estimate is that 10.5 million Russians were privately owned, 9.5 million were in state ownership and another 900,000 serfs were under

the Czar's patronage before the Great Emancipation of 1861.

Into this world was born a serf named Igor Chekhov, grandfather-to-be of the playwright. After many years of hard work, he bought his and his family's freedom. He was able to lift his three sons into the merchant class by apprenticing them. Anton Chekhov's father worked in a sugar beet factory, for a cattle drover and in a merchant's shop.

Alexander II and the Emancipation of the Serfs

In 1857, Alexander called together the Marshals of the Nobility and bluntly announced, "My intention is to abolish serfdom...you can yourself understand that the present order of owning souls cannot remain unchanged. It is better to abolish serfdom from above, than to wait for that time when it starts to abolish itself from below. I ask you to think about the best way to carry this out."

Backed by liberal politicians, Alexander II, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russians, issued his Emancipation Manifesto on March 3, 1861. (Abraham Lincoln would not issue his Emancipation Proclamation until January 1, 1863.)

It would have been a very good thing, had it worked as intended—but the serfs had to continue to work for their landlords for two years and then paid 34% over the market price for the shrunken plots they kept.

The emancipation of the serfs worked only a little better than the Forty Acres and a Mule allegedly promised to former slaves in the American South. But more important was the fact that it had happened at all.

Now, without the free labor the serfs had provided, their estates, which had been divided and subdivided again and again, couldn't possibly pay their way in this brave new world. The estates had to be sold, sold by people like Telegin's uncle to people such as Privy Councillor Peter Voinitsky. But even he had to take out a mortgage for a property with a 26-room house.

Uncle Vanya and What Came After

"By a twist of fate, I'm buying a place of my own, not in Little Russia, but in the cold Serpukhov district, 70 miles from Moscow. And I'm buying not 10-20 *dessiatinas* as I wanted and dreamt of, but 213. I'd like to be a duke."

Chekhov signed letters like these, “*Pomeshchik* [Landowner] Chekhov.”

He had every right to be proud. In only two generations, the Chekhov family had risen from serfdom to the ranks of the intelligentsia. The boy from South Russia who had come to Moscow at 19 graduated from medical school at 24, and published his first story at 25 was now a *pomeshchik*.

But he knew the real reason he was buying the estate called Melikhovo—it was because he, like Professor Serebryakov, couldn’t afford to live in town.

At the play’s end, the professor and his wife are off to Kharkov, remembered fondly by Arkadina in *The Seagull* as “a place where they gave me the warmest reception.” Another Chekhov short story tells us there are professors there. But it isn’t St. Petersburg. Not even close.

At Melikhovo, Chekhov discovered what it was like to try to make a going concern of a small estate, like Vanya and Sonya. Their estate doesn’t lose money, but it brings in only half the return offered on bonds, which are among the safest—and therefore, lowest-paying—of all investments.

Like Astrov, Chekhov was himself the only doctor in the neighborhood and was especially hard-pressed by a cholera epidemic.

The future Mrs. Chekhov, the actress Olga Knipper, visited Melikhovo in 1899. A woman of “volatile tempers and ill moods,” she stayed only three days.

Chekhov read pamphlets, like Mrs. Voinitsky. Perhaps her pamphlet from Kharkov, refuting the writer’s ideas of seven years ago, advocates uniting various progressive factions under the banner of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, whose majority faction (*Bolshevik*) would later morph into the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

And there was always the memory of Chekhov’s serf forbears, like Marina. They had been there when life on the country estates began, and they would be there when, very soon, it would end.

In 1905, in the wake of a crushing defeat by the Japanese (who, in contrast to the Russians, had pulled themselves up from medieval times in only fifty years), there would be a revolution, resulting in the establishment of a parliament. It would also result in

the peasants (no longer serfs) looting as many estates as possible.

Then, in 1914, the Great War would wipe away Czarist Russia and replace it with the Soviet Union. Vanya had hoped to be dead by then. If he was, it was probably for the best, because the Bolshevik Revolution followed hard upon in 1917.

From 1917-1921, during the Russian Civil War, more estates were destroyed. By 1928, Stalin had cemented his power. Some country houses became hospitals, but even more were laid waste.

The Great Patriotic War, ending in 1945, pretty well completed the destruction of any country estates that might have miraculously lasted that long.

However, in the sixty-odd years since Stalin’s death, there has been a renewed interest in the country estate, this once-glorious feature of Russia, even though it seems that no original estates survived intact. Any country estate one sees in present-day Russia has been restored.

Among these is Melikhovo, now a museum where one can see a reproduction of where Chekhov lived and worked. In the 1920s, it had been turned into a Soviet collective farm.

The people living on those restored estates today are the 21st century Russian Oligarchs, the wealthiest of the wealthy—just as it was in the days of the Czars.

“Russia,” said Winston Churchill, “is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”

Or perhaps it is rather that most common of Russian souvenirs, the nested *matryoshka* doll, which seems to link the present with an old and sturdy peasant Rus.



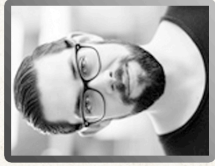
Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director. Being possessed of an intense curiosity, he found writing these essays immensely satisfying.

THE RELATIONSHIPS IN CHEKHOV'S UNCLE VANYA

Telegin
(Godfather to Sonya)
[Vince Lucairini]



Doctor Astrov
[Matt Bowdren]



Marina
(Nanny to Sonya)
[Molly McKasson]



Madame Voynitsky
[Cynthia Meier] Husband
(Deceased)



Alexander Serebryakov
[David Weynand]

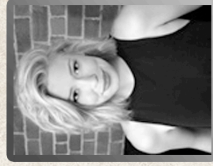
Sister
(Deceased)

Uncle Vanya
(Ivan Petrovich Voynitsky)
[Ryan Parker Knox]



Yelena

[Grace Kirkpatrick]



Sonya
[Holly Griffith]

