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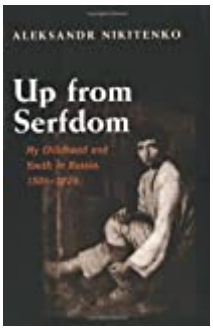


**Aleksandr Nikitenko.** *Up From Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824.* Translated by Helen Saltz Jacobson with foreword by Peter Kolchin. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. xxiv + 228 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08414-6.

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## A Serf in the Provincial Intelligentsia

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In the literature on Russia in the period 1700-1861, one of the greatest lacunae involves the middling strata of society, those who mediated between the cultures of the elite (or intelligentsia) and the *narod*, and who occupy such a central place in the historiography of the other countries of the Atlantic world. While we are fairly well informed about court politics, high culture, and peasant society, we know little about the evolution of Russia's counterpart to the middle classes of the West, and of course, we have few autobiographical narratives by serfs.

Helen Saltz Jacobson's translation of Aleksandr Vasil'evich Nikitenko's account of his childhood and youth represents a major contribution to the English-language literature in both fields–the provincial "middle classes" and serfdom. A kind of "prequel" to Nikitenko's well-known *Diary of a Russian Censor* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), likewise translated and edited by Jacobson, the present volume–originally published in several Russian editions between 1888 and 1904–deals with Nikitenko's life up to the time when he was emancipated from serfdom in 1824, at the age of nineteen or twenty. The title that Jacobson gave the book, *Up From Serfdom*, is explicitly intended as an allusion to Booker T. Washington's 1901 autobiography, *Up From Slavery.* The parallels between Russian serfdom and American slavery are developed by Peter Kolchin, whose preface revisits key ideas from his seminal *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) and applies them to the case of Nikitenko.

Nikitenko was born to Ukraininan parents in Voronezh Province in 1804 or 1805. They were serfs of the spectacularly wealthy Sheremetev family; the father was the son of a village cobbler, while the mother's parents were poor farmers. That, however, is the only way in which the family was "ordinary" by the standards of serf society. Nikitenko's father was recruited at an early age to go to Moscow to sing in Count Sheremetev's choir. There, he received an education that enabled him to pursue serious intellectual interests in the future, as well as aspirations for respect and dignity that, in his son's view, made him permanently unfit to accept the indignities that serfdom entailed once he returned to his na-

tive village. Carried away by his idealistic impulses after his return home, he used his position as village clerk to embark on a quixotic crusade against the corrupt local power structure only to find himself denounced by the faraway Count Sheremetev and "exiled," with his family, to another Sheremetev *votchina* in Smolensk Province, which Nikitenko describes as though it were located in the depths of Siberia.

This early experience established a pattern that Nikitenko sees continued throughout his father's life: driven by the noblest of impulses, and sufficiently literate to interact with the mighty by serving as an estate administrator, engaging in lawsuits, or petitioning the governor and even Empress Mariia Fedorovna, the father continually suffers mistreatment and humiliation at the hands of landlords and officials but refuses to see how deeply bribery and arbitrary despotism had etched themselves into the structures of Russian society. The father is rendered morose by repeated failures, while his bitterness and frustration find a release in both periodic outbursts against his family and hopeless romances with beautiful widows whom he selflessly rescues from distress. The father is thus, in his son's account, an admirable figure whose flaws are the product of tragic circumstances created by an unjust social order that grants him education and knowledge yet keeps him in bondage. Nikitenko's mother represents a very different archetype: stoic, loving, commonsensical, and firmly rooted in her peasant background, she holds the family together and stands by her man despite his flaws and misfortunes, out of respect for the purity of his motives and the depth of his pain.

The Nikitenko family suffers from the oppressiveness of serfdom precisely because no cultural divide separates the father, and later the son, from their social betters. The ease with which the father is exiled or jailed for exposing the corruption of local oligarchs is reproduced in the experience of his son, the author, who excels at the lower public school in Voronezh only to be denied admission to a gimnaziia because of his serf status. When well-meaning teachers offer to issue him a certificate of graduation that would falsely identify him as the son of a bureaucrat, it only compounds the humiliation. Repeatedly, he is accepted by enlightened members of the provincial intelligentsia only to be reminded eventually of his fatally inferior social status. However, even at the darkest moments, he finds benevolent patrons willing to lend him a helping hand. He is finally manumitted in 1824 thanks to the dedicated intercession of the powerful Prince Aleksandr Nikolaevich Golitsyn, but only after a long, humiliating struggle in which his master–a shallow, spoiled, self-indulgent aristocrat–tries to retain him as his serf simply to remind the world of his own power.

Nikitenko's story thus revolves around serfdom but does not involve the situations or cast of characters one might expect, since he is neither a peasant nor a domestic servant or migrant worker, and agriculture or the village community play no significant role in his account. Instead, we see a family that, had it not been for serfdom, ought to have formed part of an upwardly mobile provincial middle class: the grandfather was a shoemaker, the father became a clerk and estate administrator, and Nikitenko himself makes his living as a teacher. The family wears "urban" (rather than peasant) clothes, cultivates genteel manners in its daily life, and associates with nobles, clerics, and merchants whose common tie is an interest in cultural refinement and intellectual inquisitiveness.

One of the book's most interesting features is precisely the light that it sheds on the early-intelligentsia milieu in such seeming backwaters as Boguchar and Ostrogozhsk, two towns south of Voronezh, where a cultivated local society that crossed *soslovie* boundaries evidently already existed in the early nineteenth century. Nikitenko evokes this milieu with great skill and verve, and gives us a sense of their response to some of the seminal historical developments of the time, including the 1812 Napoleonic invasion, about which his protagonists seemed surprisingly unconcerned; the rise of the Russian Bible Society and post-1814 religious mysticism, to which Nikitenko was at first strongly attracted; the experiment with clustering groups of provinces into governor-generalships, which Nikitenko considered a failure; the school system that came out of the reforms promulgated by Catherine II and Alexander I; the resistance to reform by the nobles, bureaucrats, merchants, and clerics who formed the local oligarchy; and the Russian army of the era of Arakcheev and "paradomania."

At times, the reader is reminded of the autobiography of Semen Kanatchikov (*A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia: The Autobiography of Semen Ivanovich Kanatchikov*, trans. Reginald E. Zelnik [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986]). Both of them feel a tinge of nostalgia for the lost, innocent rural world of their childhood, which Nikitenko expresses in the form of an intense attachment to the folkways, national character, and landscape of "Little Russia" (which is explicitly contrasted with a grim, unfriendly "Great Russia"). At the same time, they are anxious to assimilate the manners, attitude and identity of

an intermediate social level that stands between the peasantry and the ruling stratum–the provincial intelligentsia for Nikitenko, the working class for Kanatchikov. In both cases, any desire that might exist to join the upper classes is offset by a deep suspiciousness toward the elite's values and morals. Both authors thus seek to achieve a socioeconomic middle ground that is also conceived as an ethical high ground. However, living at opposite ends of the nineteenth century, their responses to these challenges are different and reflect the profound transformation of Russian society: Nikitenko's world is still split in two by the insitution of serfdom, a social reality that is central to his worldview but is absent from Kanatchikov's; at the same time, growing up in a period still marked by enlightened absolutism, Nikitenko advocates no sociopolitical program beyond the right to live in freedom and dignity. From the vantage point of his old age, as a man who had escaped serfdom and achieved a successful career in Imperial Russia, Nikitenko focuses his social commentary on a specific critique of serfdom in times past, not the utopian vision of a post-revolutionary future that animates Kanatchikov.

This book is an excellent addition to the literature on serfdom, pre-reform provincial society, Russian history in the early nineteenth century, and the development of sociopolitical thought among non-elite groups during that period. The translation is smooth and idiomatic, the illustrations concerning rural society are highly evocative, and the maps are also helpful (though it would have been useful to include one that shows Boguchar, Ostrogozhsk, Alekseevka, and the other specific locales where the story takes place). For the non-specialist, Peter Kolchin's foreword and the explanatory endnotes provide useful background. We can only hope that a paperback version is in the works as well for use as a course text.



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