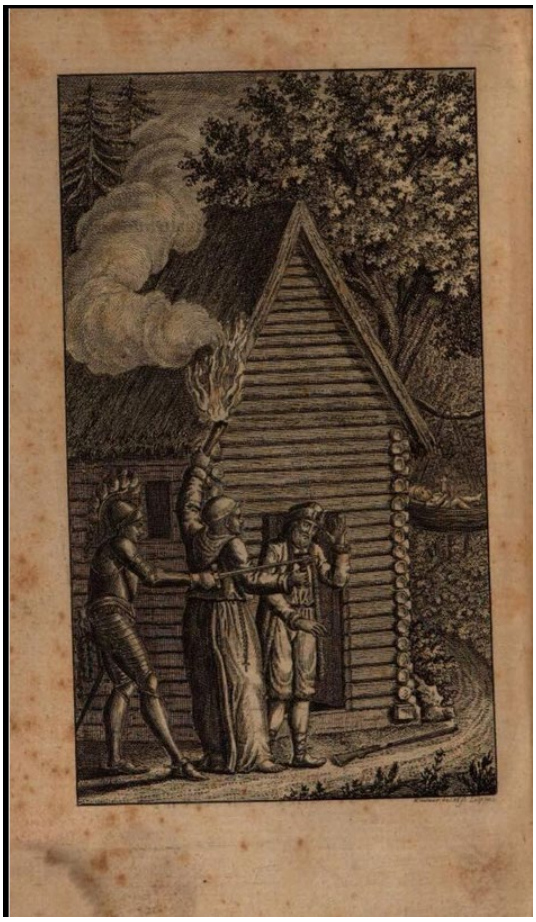
Serfdom in the Baltics: Unfree Labor Systems in Contact with Intellectual Upheaval



“The serfs at the end of the philosophical Century” Garlieb Merkel

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Senior Honors Thesis

Advised by: Dr. Geoffery Durham

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Introduction:

During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Russia was in a rush to modernize. Many people, both Russian and foreign alike, saw the country as backward, pointing toward the large amount of people in abject poverty.[1] Thus, when Peter the Great (r. 1689-1725) ascended to the throne, the pressure was on to modernize. After many years of travel, Peter understood that Russia was indeed not on pace with the rest of Europe. In order to bring Russia onto the European stage, Peter knew that he would need to project power in a way that Russia had never done before: military combat with a European superpower.[2] This opportunity presented itself to Peter in 1700 where a weakened Sweden had just lost their king. To modernize Russia, Peter felt that this was the chance to finally strike and deliver Russia into major power.[3] Thus, he declared war on Sweden to cement his power in Northern Europe.[4]

The Great Northern War would end in 1721. Notably, in 1703, Russia would beat Sweden out of their holdings in present day Western Russia and the Baltics. Upon doing so, Peter began to build St. Petersburg, an imperial capital that he hoped would serve as a symbol of power and

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[1] John Perry, "The State of Russia under the Present Czar, 1716", In *A Source Book for Russian History from Early times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas* I. Vol II, ed. By George Veransky and Sergĭ Germanovich Pushkarev. (Yale University Press, 1972), 318.
[2] Lindsey Hughes. "Petrine Russia." In *A Companion to Russian History*, ed. Abbott Gleason (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). 167.
[3] Ibid., 168.
[4] Michael Noth. *The Baltic: A History*. Translated by Kenneth Kronnenberg. (Harvard University Press, 2015), 146.

modernization in Russia, much like the Palace of Versailles did in France.[5] However, the construction of St. Petersburg was merely a step on the road which Peter had charted. Peter's real eyes were on a region often forgotten about in contemporary geopolitical discourse: The Baltics.

Following Peter the Great, other Russian tsars would come to view the Baltics as valuable, such as Catherine the II (or Catherine the Great) and Alexander I.[6] The Baltics would become a lab in which policy on reform and labor would often be tested.[7] Here, abolition was elaborated upon in detail by Baltic German noblemen.[8] But who were these Baltic German noblemen? And what aspects of the Baltic Germans' arguments were relevant to questions about serfdom during the early nineteenth century? Specifically, this thesis will look at how different aspects of Enlightenment-era thought circulated by the Baltic Germans actualized themselves in policy on serfdom in the Baltics among the Baltic-German nobility, culminating in the emancipation of the Baltic serfs. To discuss these questions, I will begin with a discussion of labor, looking at how humanitarian narratives of abolition worked their way into the emancipation debate. I contend that Baltic German abolitionists used humanitarian narratives of abolition to address the social, intellectual, and political aspects of the debate on emancipation in addition to veiling their true intentions behind abolition. These intentions often were not related to humanitarianism, which I explore in a future section.

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[5] Lindsey Hughes, "Petrine Russia," in Gleason, *A Companion to Russian* History,168.
[6] William Sunderland, "The Great Emancipator: Abolition and Empire in Tsarist Russia," *The Journal of Modern* History, 93, no. 3 (2021): 581 & 586. https://doi.org/10.1086/715643.
[7] Ibid., 586.
[8] Garlieb Merkel. *Die Lettein in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts* (Heinrich Gräff, 1800). 2.

The Free and the Unfree: Questions of Labor in the 18th and 19th centuries

For much of the 20th century, one theory of emancipation dominated all discussion of abolitionist thought: humanitarianism. Humanitarianism posits that abolition occurred across the world in different contexts due to a rising feeling of moral obligation and love for the unfree laborers from the wealthy elites.[9] In his seminal book *Moral Capital*, Cristopher L. Brown lays out the inconsistencies in the humanitarian narrative. For example, some British abolitionists claimed that they became abolitionists out of concern for the slaves. However, Brown points out that this was misleading and, if anything, was at the most a secondary motivator for supporting abolition. These abolitionists recognized the fact that unfree labor systems were becoming less and less effective.[10] This rise in recognition of the effects of capitalism suggests an inextricable link to the growth of the Enlightenment in the thinking of British abolitionists.[11]

However, this thesis does not focus on Britain. Russia had a much different situation to Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There were many kinds of labor in Britain that were considered "free." For example, contracted laborers and apprentices who had no real recourse outside of working for their masters were considered as free laborers.[12] While there were such "free" laborers in the Russian Empire, labor classified as "free" in Britain would have largely been considered "unfree" in the Russian Empire.[13]

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[9] Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006). 16.
[10] Ibid., 13.
[11] Kolchin, "Introduction: Unfree Labor in Crisis." In *Emancipation: The Abolition and Aftermath of American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Yale University Press, 2024). 12.
[12] Alessandro Stanziani, "The Traveling Panopticon: Labor Institutions and Labor Practices in Russia and Britain in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Comparative Studies in Society and* History, 51, no. 4 (2009): 716. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417509990119.
[13] Ibid., 717.

Discussions of unfree labor in Russia were variable and largely depended upon the definition of what "unfree" meant. Jeremy Bentham, an Englishman hired by Catherine II's favorite, Prince Grigory Potemkin, thought of slavery as a system in which a master has unlimited power over the laborer.[14] This differed from serfdom wherein the serf was protected by the state, even if most laws were vague on the topic of serfdom. The noble landowner was able to govern their property as they pleased, leading to variation in how serfs were treated from estate to estate.[15] This indicates that Russia conceived of slavery as separate from serfdom. Indeed, Russia was against the idea of slavery. They often fought against slavery outside of Russia and scaled back slavery in the Caucasus and Central Asia.[16] For the Russians, slavery was likely considered to be more unfree than serfdom. While slavery was a method of control over a populace, it also often was more brutal. Brutality was often something the Russians' discouraged in labor relations.[17] This indicates that the imperial regime saw a clear difference between serfdom and slavery, complicating the term "unfree labor" in the Russian context.

Further, it is important to understand that capitalism is not the sole reason that unfree labor systems waned. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some thinkers began to see capitalism as incompatible with unfree labor.[18] However, this idea ignores two other underlying rationales for why unfree labor systems were called into question during the 18th and 19th centuries. First, some abolitionists saw unfree labor systems as in violation of their moral creed. For example, an Evangelical Christian might see slavery as intolerable due to the teachings of

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[14] Ibid., 730.
[15] Ibid., 734.
[16] Megan Dean Farah, "Autocratic Abolitionists: Tsarist Anti-Slavery Campaigns," in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. W. Mulligan and M. Bric (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). 97.
[17] Ibid., 98.
[18] Peter Kolchin, "Introduction: Unfree Labor in Crisis." In *Emancipation: The Abolition and Aftermath of American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*. 12.

their church which claimed that all people are supposed to be free.[19] For these Christians, it was not out of a concern for the wellbeing of the unfree laborers that they favored abolition. Instead, the unfree labor system itself made incorrect these abolitionists' belief systems.

Secondly, and perhaps most important within the context of the Russian Empire, rulers used emancipation as a tool to gain "moral capital." Moral capital is a resource that powerful institutions acquire by acquiescing to and imposing their own views on societal pressures to gain the favor of the public. Further, moral capital is spent by doing things against popular will.[20] A good example of this within the Russian context would be the Legislative Commission of 1767-68. Catherine II had recently ascended to the throne in 1763. Before and upon becoming tsarina, Catherine II had espoused pro-abolitionist views.[21] Initially, Catherine had permitted the Legislative Commission to discuss how emancipation might benefit the empire.[22] However, in 1768, Catherine forbade members of the commission from suggesting any law related to emancipation as she saw the institution as too valuable for control over the people and economy. Further, Catherine had only recently come to power after aiding in a coup against her husband, likely influencing her want to not disturb the nobility.[23] Thus, Catherine gained moral capital by allowing for the Legislative Committee. However, she spent moral capital by halting discussion on serfdom in the Committee.

Furthermore, Brown discusses the how and why of the rise of abolition at specific times in history. For example, Brown argues that a mix of sources, such as capitalism, eventually lead

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[19] Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. 26.
[20] Ibid., 29.
[21] Farah, Anti-Slavery Campaigns in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* 98.
[22] "Catherine's Instructions on a new Code of Laws," *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas* I ed. Veransky & Pushkarev. 404.
[23] Farah, in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century*. 100.

to abolition in Britain.[24] Time is an important aspect to consider when looking at abolition. In Russia, the abolition discussion had been brought back to the forefront during Catherine the Great's reign.[25] While an important aspect of Brown's argument, I have chosen to analyze the specific uses of humanitarianism and moral capital occurring in the Baltics.

It is important to understand how humanitarianism and moral capital play their respective roles in abolitionist thought. The Baltics were no exception to humanitarian narratives of abolition. However, different Baltic-German thinkers utilized humanitarianism in order to accomplish varying goals. This thesis will explore the uses of humanitarianism from these thinkers and the subsequent use of moral capital in relation to abolition in the Baltics.

The Context of the Baltics

In the 13th century CE, the Teutonic Knights conquered the Baltics as a part of the Crusades, bringing serfdom in their conquest.[26] The Baltic provinces would change hands multiple times before the eighteenth century when Russia took control of the area. Incorporating the Baltics involved Russia working with the local Baltic-German nobility who ruled over the native Latvian and Estonian peasantry and serfs.[27] This included the *Landtag*, or in English "diet," which allowed the Baltic-German nobility a certain amount of autonomy to pass laws for themselves, such as authority on taxation.[28] The *Landtag* was critical in local administration. For

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[24] Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, 26.
[25] Roger Bartlett, "Russia's First Abolitionist: The Political Philosophy of J.G. Eisen," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas,* 39, no. 2 (1991): 168.
[26] Andre Kruusmaa, "Baltic-German Pro-Serfdom Thought in the Russian Baltic Provinces from a Comparative Perspective," *Slavery & Abolition,* 42, no. 2 (2021): 346. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2020.1816101
[27] Roger Bartlett, "The Russian and the Baltic German nobility in the eighteenth century. Bartlett: Russian Baltic-German nobility," *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 34, no. 1-2 (1993): 234. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20170857.
[28] Ibid., 234.

example, in 1739, the Livonian *Landtag* the Rosen Declaration, which clarified that the landowners had absolute authority and power over all serfs.[29]

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Baltics would play a unique role within the Russian empire. The provinces of Estland, Livland, and Courland (modern day Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) were seen as aspects of Western Europe nestled within the Russian Empire.[30] Many Russians saw the Baltics as more advanced than most of the Russian Empire, leading some Russian tsars to use the Baltics as an experimental playground where they could test policy before applying it to the rest of the Empire. One such policy that the Russians tested in the Baltics was the gradual decline in the rights of the nobility. In the 1780s, Catherine II removed some of the privileges of the nobility living in cities (such as Riga) with the intention of applying this policy elsewhere in the Russian Empire should it succeed. These policies included taxation, changes to municipal ordinances, and the elimination of feudal rights to land.[31]

It was not without reason that the Russians saw the Baltics as a lab of policy. To the Russians, the Baltics represented the growth of Enlightenment ideals. As mentioned previously, the Baltic Germans had their own diet that was unique in its semi-democratic scope within the Russian Empire. Further, the Baltic German nobility were well-known within the Russian Empire for their high levels of education. Often, Baltic German noble families would hire *Hofmeistern* to educate their children. *Hofmeistern* had very similar duties to a tutor; however, they served an added function as a popular distributor of the Enlightenment to the general,

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[29] Maureeen Maguire Bruns, "Privilege and Freedom: The Emancipation Debate in Liviland, 1817-1819." *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 29, no .3 (1998): 225. https://doi.org/10.1080/01629779800000091.
[30] Noth, *The Baltic*,164.
[31] Ibid., 153.

literate public through speeches and texts on popular issues,[32] such as serfdom. For example, abolitionist Johann Georg Hamann and capitalist Jakob Kraus came to the Baltics as *Hofmeistern* and gained influence over powerful Baltic German landowners. After gaining influence, these Hamann and Kraus were able to circulate their works widely in the Baltics, gaining traction among the nobility for their ideas.[33] Additionally, these *Hofmeistern* regularly found employment in the growing number of universities in the Baltics during the mid to late 18th century.[34]

Because of the perceived advanced nature of the Baltic-Germans, Russia continued to experiment and answer questions about government with policies in the area. Paul I (r. 1796-1801) experimented with expanding military service to include nobility and serfs in the Baltics as a part of his militarization campaign.[35] This experimentation from the Russians would continue well into the nineteenth century. When we discuss serfdom throughout the Russian Empire, it is important to consider how different tsars thought in relation to one another on unfree labor leading up to the emancipation of the serfs in the Baltics. However, from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, no question loomed larger than that of the "flagrant evil"[36] that was serfdom.

Serfdom in the Baltics was a contentious topic. Thinkers often disagreed with one another, even if they took the same side of the argument. Understanding these discussions on serfdom is critical to understanding how emancipation was viewed by the local Baltic-Germans

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[32] Ibid., 165.
[33] Ibid., 166.
[34] Ibid., 171.
[35] Ibid., 154.
[36] "Nicholas I," Encyclopedia.com, last modified May 21, 2018. https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/russian-soviet-and-cis-history-biographies/nicholas-i-russia.

and the Russian government. This thesis will consider the differing viewpoints of the Baltic-Germans and how their voices manifested in policy on labor.

Method

In this thesis, I will analyze a series of books and pamphlets written in the early nineteenth century by Baltic German nobles on the topic of serfdom. These thinkers were at the forefront of discussions about the peasant question in the Baltics, often submitting their work to popular essay competitions in Riga, St. Petersburg, and Moscow.[37] Often, these works were in response to one another. All works were published from 1796-1804, before the emancipation of the serfs in the Baltics.

This thesis does not focus on perspectives of the serfs and peasants. In 1800, literacy rates in the Russian Empire were low, at only about 4% being fully literate.[38] This literacy rate included the nobility. Therefore, it is unlikely that peasants and serfs would have the means to write about and conceive of unfree labor systems. Thus, this thesis focuses on the perspectives of the nobility as they left an account of discussions of serfdom.

The reason that unfree labor systems have been perpetuated and abolished has often been misunderstood. As mentioned previously, the previous consensus of humanitarianism has been challenged and, in some cases, disregarded.[39] Through this thesis, I will take a critical lens of these humanitarian perspectives on abolitionism, focusing on where the Baltic German thinkers deviate from the humanitarian narrative.

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[37] Kotkin, *Emancipation: The Abolition and Aftermath of American Slavery and Russian Serfdom,* 17.
[38] Jörg Baten, Mikołaj Szołtysek, "A Golden Age before Serfdom? The Human Capital of Central-Eastern and Eastern Europe in the 17th-19th Centuries," *MPIDR Working Papers*, 9 (2014): 5. https://doi.org/10.4054/MPIDR-WP-2014-008.
[39] Brown, *Moral Capital: The Foundations of British Abolitionism*, 16.

Research Question and Thesis

In the 18th and into 19th centuries, serfdom in the Russian Empire was an increasingly polarizing issue. Particularly in the early 19th century, these discussions came to a head, necessitating some action from the Russian Empire.[40]

In order to answer this question, there are multiple facets to discuss that affected Russia at the time. Throughout this thesis, I seek to answer the question of: how did social, intellectual, and political aspects of the discourse on unfree labor manifest themselves in policy and discussion on serfdom in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, culminating in Imperial Russia's decision to emancipate the serfs in the Baltics from 1816-1819?

In order to demonstrate this discussion on serfdom, I will begin by analyzing changes in Russian policy on the serf and peasant question during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, along with both domestic and foreign reactions to these policies. Following this, I will analyze both abolitionist and pro-serfdom pieces written by Baltic Germans nobles, looking at similarities and differences in arguments between the writers and how these pieces relate to different narratives of abolition and pro-serfdom. Finally, I will end with a discussion of the actual emancipation of the serfs in the Baltics (1816-1819), specifically looking at how the ideas in the Baltic-Germans' writings would be reflected in eventual policy from the Russian government.

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[40] Kotkin, *Emancipation: The Abolition and Aftermath of American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*, 24.

18th Century Russian Policy on Serfdom

For the majority of the eighteenth century, the serf question was consistently debated in the Russian Empire. Overall, most decrees and laws passed on serfdom during this century either expanded or increased the rights of the nobility over the serfs. However, different rulers chose to enact different policies on serfdom and in the late 18th century, a marked change began in which most policy on serfdom favored the serf over the landowner.

In 1649, serfdom was legally codified in Russia in order to gain control over a rapidly expanding population.[41] Before this, serfdom had still existed in the Russian Empire. However, it had never been institutionalized, with many nobles exerting individual power over their serfs rather than a central government.[42] By consolidating power, Russia was able to exert indirect power over the people in all regions. This consolidation of power over the serfs increased the power of the Russian government at a time when it was attempting to model itself as an up-and-coming power in Eurasia.[43]

Fast forward to the eighteenth century and serfdom was still highly contended in Russia. At the end of the Great Northern War, Peter I began to consider how to administrate his expanding empire. Particularly, he was concerned with how to incorporate the hundreds of thousands of new peasants and serfs.[44] On August 16, 1710, Peter I issued the Charter of the Estonian Principality. This Charter incorporated Estland as a province into the Russian Empire. Further, it answered questions about how Peter I would handle power and servitude in the

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[41] Farah, Anti-Slavery Campaigns in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* 98.
[42] Roger Bartlett, "Serfdom and State Power in Imperial Russia," *European History* Quarterly, 33, no. 1 (2003): 30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691403033001638
[43] Farah, Anti-Slavery Campaigns in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* 98.
[44] Noth, *The Baltic,* 146.

Baltics. Peter I restored the power of the Baltic-German nobility to own and control native Estonian and Latvian peasants, therefore expanding serfdom as a way of appeasing and controlling the nobility in Estland.[45] Further, Peter I allowed for the continuation of the *Landtag*. This institution was pivotal in allowing the Baltic-German nobility some degree of autonomy from the Russian government by setting up their own judicial system and taxation rights while still staying within the control of the Russians.[46]

Peter I was a staunch advocate of serfdom. However, he did not approve of wanton violence against serfs. In order to curb the systemic violence within Russian Empire, Peter issued two orders that empowered the serfs to report violent masters and that outlawed the sale of serfs between 1719-1721.[47]. These orders were intended to better the lives of the serfs and provide security. Both abroad and domestically, these actions were regarded positively. Writers from England viewed Peter's actions as increasing the power of the Russian Empire, which while both modernized the empire and posed as a threat to English power.[48]

Peter's actions are a classic example of the use of moral capital. Peter the Great gained favor with not only the Baltic-Germans, but also much of the Russian nobility by expanding serfdom and consolidating control over the peasants in the Baltics. Ten years later, Peter would spend the moral capital that he gained with the nobility by curbing the power that they had over the serfs.

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[45] "The Charter of the Esthonian Principality," *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 334.
[46] Bartlett, "The Russian and the Baltic German nobility in the eighteenth century," 235.
[47] "Peter's Orders Designed to Curb the Growth of Serfdom, 1719" *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas* I, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 354.
[48] Perry, "The State of Russia under the Present Czar"*A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas* I, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev,318.

Future rulers would also utilize moral capital when it came to serfdom. As mentioned before, Catherine the Great utilized serfdom to gain favor with the majority of the nobility who favored serfdom.[49] During the Legislative Commission of 1767-68, Catherine II instigated a nobleman, Grigorrii Korob'in, to speak out against serfdom before she outright banned the commission from speaking about serfdom.[50] This represented the major issue in Catherine's views on serfdom. On the one hand, Catherine disliked serfdom, likely because of the time that she spent with French philosophers.[51] On the other hand, Catherine the Great's need to control the peasantry made serfdom important for the stability of her reign.

Despite her policy enhancing landowner control, Catherine would routinely experiment with the idea of abolitionist thought. For example, Catherine issued a stern warning in 1765 to the *Landtag* in Livland, complaining about the abject conditions of the serfs in Livland and encouraging the nobility to treat the serfs with more consideration.[52] Furthermore, Catherine would employ the "first" abolitionist in Russia, J.G. Eisen, to experiment with emancipation with some crown-peasants.[53] After receiving his education at Jena (in Prussia),[54] Eisen came to the Russian Empire. His education had imbued him with a proclivity toward abolitionism, which he would continue to fight for through his writings.[55] Eisen viewed serfdom as a disease imposed upon the peasants. He believed that in reality, the serfs were just as capable of intelligence as any

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[49] Anti-Slavery campaigns, 4 (check page number)
[50] "The Legislative Commission: The Discussion of Serfdom by Korob'in, Shcherbatov, and Chuprov, May 1768," *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas* I, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 433.
[51] Frank Brechka, "Catherine the Great: The Books She Read, *The Journal fo Library* History, 4, no. 1 (1969): 42. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25540141.
[52] Bruns, "Privilege and Freedom: The Emancipation Debate in Livland," 225.
[53] Bartlett, "Russia's First Abolitionist: The Political Philosophy of J.G. Eisen," 169.
[54] Ibid., 161.
[55] Ibid.,162.

noble.[56] Catherine's employment of Eisen suggests her somewhat warm feelings to the idea of abolition.

Outside of the Legislative Commission, Catherine enacted policy that decreased the rights of the serfs by giving the nobility more rights. The nobility could not only more easily exile serfs, therefore getting rid of those which they disliked, but serfs could also no longer complain about their landowners if they were experiencing abuse.[57] Some have argued that Catherine's restrictions on serfdom indicate that in reality, she did not actually believe in abolitionism as an idea.[58] However, taking into account the views of moral capital theory, Catherine was likely weighing the loss of a system of control of people along with the views that some of the nobility had. Even though people from other countries approved of her because she supposedly supported emancipation,[59] she chose to gain favor with the pro-serfdom crowd.

However, a change in tone on serfdom policy would be coming with the ascension of Paul I. Apart from one early decree which forbade the free movement of the peasantry,[60] Paul largely expanded the rights of the peasants and the serfs.[61] Paul ensured that all serfs and peasants who had low land allotments would get an increase in farmable land,[62] thereby increasing the possible economic output that a serf/peasant could attain for themselves.

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[56] Ibid., 167.
[57] "The Decree Enabling Estate Owners to send Serfs to Forced Labor, January 17, 1765," & "The Decree Prohibiting Complaints by Serfs, August 22, 1767," in "*A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 453.
[58] Sunderland, "The Great Emancipator: Abolition and Empire in Tsarist Russia," 579.
[59] "Reports of French Diplomats at Catherine's Court, 1762-1765," in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 398.
[60] "The Decree forbidding Free Movement of Peasants in Southern Russia, December 12, 1796," in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 473-4.
[61] Roderick E. McGrew, *Paul I of Russia: 1754-1801* (Clarendon Press, 1992), 239.
[62] "Decrees Concerning the Allotment of State Lands to Certain State Peasants, November 27, 1797 and July, 1800," in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 475-476.

Furthermore, during Catherine II's reign, a nobleman named Alexander Radishchev published *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*. In this book, Radishchev was very critical of Catherine II for allowing serfdom to continue. Catherine II would not only ban this book but also exile Radishchev to Siberia. In 1796, Paul would reverse this exile, allowing Radishchev to leave Siberia.[63] These changes in policy toward not only the peasantry and serfs, but also toward critics of serfdom indicates a marked difference from any previous Russian regime.

Paul I's reign would be cut short upon his assassination in 1801. During his five-year reign, Paul butted heads with much of the nobility, particularly those who still felt allegiance toward his mother, Catherine II.[64] Because of this, it is possible that Paul's changing policy on serfdom came as a result of this hatred for his mother. However, the Prussians had always been an influence on Paul.[65] The Prussians, along with the Austrians, had been deescalating serfdom,[66] giving Paul ample precedent to consider reform on serfdom in Russia. Overall, Paul's actions are a poor example of the use of moral capital. Not only on serfdom, but on a variety of issues, Paul I angered the nobility, giving them not much in return for their troubles. Paul I did not acquiesce to the powerful remnants Catherine II's, leading to their strong hatred of him and any policy he supported. This led to his assassination and the eventual ascension of his son: Alexander I.

Early on, Alexander I was focused on bettering the lives of not only the peasantry and serfs. Within the first year of his reign, Alexander would abolish not only all torture methods against serfs,[67] but also expand the right of the peasantry and serfs who had undergone

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[63] McGrew, *Paul I of Russia: 1754-1801*, 196.
[64] Ibid., 248.
[65] Ibid., 112.
[66] Ibid., 198.
[67] "The Decree Prohibiting the Use of Torture in the Prosecution of Criminal Trials, September 27, 1801" in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 483.

manumission to buy land.[68] These actions scaled back the rights of the nobility while providing the lowest classes of society more freedom. Furthermore, Alexander issued a decree in 1803 that designated a new *sosloviia* (or "social estate") called the "Free Farmers". Before discussing this new class, it is important to understand exactly what a *sosloviia* was in the Russian Empire. *Sosloviia* were government categories into which people would be classified.[69] *Sosloviia* were general, categorizing people as noblemen, state-peasants, etcetera. S*osloviia* would change over time, particularly during the 19th century, reflecting the dynamic state of Russian social classes and class mobility throughout this century.[70] One such change to the *sosloviia* was the creation of the free farmers, which Alexander I set up as an estate which emancipated and manumitted serfs could join.[71]

Furthermore, Alexander I was very concerned with the state of Europeans living in the Russian Empire in areas such as Poland and the Baltics. Alexander's closest confidant, Adam Czartoryski, was a Polish nobleman. In his memoir, Czartoryski noted that Alexander wished for greater independence for the Poles within the Russian Empire and that he intended to continue expanding autonomy to other European provinces in Russia.[72] Alexander I was specifically concerned with who would govern in the Baltics. While Alexander did not dislike the Baltic Germans, he did not approve the nobility's attempts to undermine Russian governance by

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[68] "The Decree Permitting all Free Persons to Purchase and Own Land, December 12, 1801," in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 483.
[69] Gregory L. Freeze, "The Soslovie (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History," *The American Historical* Review, 91, no. 1 (1986): 11. https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/91.1.11
[70] Ibid., 12.
[71] "The Decree Permitting all Free Persons to Purchase and Own Land, December 12, 1801," 483.
[72] "The Memoirs of Prince Adam Czartoryski, Concerning 1796 and 1801-1802," in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 479.

instituting laws that conflicted with Russian policy.[73] However, Alexander would not act due to his desire to allow these aspects of Europe within the Russian Empire to function as they saw fit.

Further discussion of Alexander will follow in a future section of this thesis, including how Alexander's actions fit into discussions of moral capital usage as it relates to unfree labor. For now, it is important to note that early on in his reign, Alexander was preparing for the emancipation of the serfs. Despite Alexander's gradual change into conservatism, these plans would still eventually play out, even if it was not on as grand of a scale as the entire Empire. Instead, Alexander would experiment with emancipation on the European stage in the Baltics.

The Heated Debate on Serfdom in the Baltics

In the following discussion, I will analyze both abolitionist and pro-serfdom arguments from influential Baltic-German thinkers as they relate to other contemporaries and humanitarian narratives of serfdom. The selected works were all published within 10 years of each other, from 1796-1804. Further, most of these works were written in response to one author: Garlieb Merkel. Thus, I will analyze each work that responded to Merkel's *Die Letten* (*The Latvians/Serfs*). I will begin by analyzing influences and implications for emancipation from abolitionists, along with framings of abolition, focusing on the works of Garlieb Merkel and Johann Cristoph Petri. Following this, I will focus on writers who favored the continuation of serfdom, again analyzing influences and implications for emancipation on the works of Georg Friedrich von Fircks and Hermann Friedrich Tiebe.

<u>Garlieb Merkel's Polemics</u>

[73] John P. LeDonne, "Unitary State or Empire? 1815-1855," in *Forging a Unitary* State (University of Toronto Press, 2020). 147.

Garlieb Merkel was born into a Baltic German noble family in the mid-eighteenth century in Livland (present day Latvia). Growing up, Merkel was steeped in the debates occurring in the Baltics as his father had been a pastor. After working in a theater in Riga and obtaining his doctorate in Philosophy in Prussia, Merkel joined the Baltic German intelligentsia. Merkel worked as a journalist, ethnographer, and public figure, primarily being very critical of the Baltic-German nobility. Merkel was first and foremost concerned with the state of the Latvian serfs. Some of these writings would gain wide notoriety, such as one essay that got second place in St. Petersburg's Free Economic Society essay competition on serfdom. This led to strained relationships between Merkel and the Baltic Germans.[74]

Perhaps the most famous of Merkel's works was *Die Letten vorzüglich in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts* (The serfs in Livland at the end of the philosophical century). Originally written in 1796, Merkel would expand the work in 1800 to include responses to the criticism that Merkel faced from the German-speaking community.[75] At the end of the eighteenth century, discourse on serfdom had become increasingly polemical due to the French Revolution. Conservatives around Europe feared what the French Revolution meant for their status while liberals were divided on the implications of such a bloody revolution.[76] Merkel's *Die Letten* was written in this polemical vein, reflecting the increasing contention of serfdom.

Primarily, Merkel was concerned with the state of the Latvian peasant. Merkel categorized all of the peasantry into one, unfree category, routinely referring to this category with

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[74] Māra Grudule, "500 Years of Latvian Books: Who was Garlieb Merkel?" *Latvijas Sabriedriskie Mediji*, June 6, 2024. https://eng.lsm.lv/article/culture/literature/06.06.2024-500-years-of-latvian-books-who-was-garlieb-merkel.a556569/

[75] Ibid.

[76] Earl W. Jennison Jr., "Christian Garve and Garlieb Merkel: Two Theorists of Peasant Emancipation during the Ages of Enlightenment and Revolution," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 4, no. 5 (1973): 351. https://doi.org/10.1080/01629777300000371.

different names. These names included the German words for "Latvian." "Farmer," "Serf," and "Slave."[77] Furthermore, Merkel begins his discussion of serfdom through a discussion of the Latvian people. This initial discussion focuses on the history of the Latvians through the "noble savage" narrative, which contended that the Latvians were a group of intelligent, yet dangerous and uncivilized people who were civilized by the introduction of the Germans and Christianity in the 13th century.[78] While Merkel does recognize the introduction of Christianity as a positive force among the Latvians, he also contends that the Germans interrupted the progress of the Latvian nation. Instead of providing aid, the Germans subjugated the Latvians and made them slaves to German goals, thereby destroying the beginnings of a Latvian national conscience.[79]

Merkel would continue his discussion of the Latvian people throughout his book. Merkel explains that the Latvian is a simple person, albeit subjugated. This simplicity is manifested when one speaks to them. For example, the Latvian is commonly skittish and distrusting of those around them.[80] Furthermore, the Latvians are often focused on celebration and alcohol. The common farmer/serf will often spend their excess money on buying alcohol. Even if they have no money, this does not matter to the serf. They will find a way to get the alcohol, either illegally or by going into debt.[81] For Merkel, the Latvians were unintelligent, only barely knowing how to speak their own language and rarely conversing in German.[82] Taken together, Merkel paints a picture of the Latvians as a simple, struggling people, often unable to experience.

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[77] Merkel, *Die Letten in Liefland am Endes des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, 156.
[78] Ibid., 20.
[79] Ibid., 23-25.
[80] Ibid., 35.
[81] Ibid., 41.
[82] Merkel, *Die Letten in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, 55.

However, Merkel did not ascribe what he saw as the deficiencies of the serfs to the character of the Latvian people. Instead, Merkel blames the nobility for their treatment of the Latvians.[83] Thus, it isn't that the Latvians are inherently unintelligent or drunkards. Instead, it is centuries long subjugation at the hand of the Baltic Germans that have caused the Latvians to end up being skittish, drunk, and apathetic.[84] In other words, it is not the nature of the Latvian to be a drunkard, but the way in which they have been treated, or nurtured, that has led them down the path of alcohol. In order to exemplify this, Merkel explains how even Latvians who were showing great talent in the arts would be forced into serfdom.[85] Thus, Merkel argues that it is not the nature of the Latvians to be servile and dull. Instead, they have been made to be so by the Baltic-Germans, a crime that Merkel argues makes it impossible for the Latvians to create their own national identity as they must focus on their own basic needs.[86]

Merkel becomes increasingly critical of the Baltic Germans throughout his writing. Merkel explains that the relationships have broken down between the Latvian serfs and the Baltic Germans because of the latter's abuse of the former. Using Rousseau's social contract theory, which stipulates that there must be an agreement between a ruling body and the people that is agreeable to both parties,[87] Merkel explains that the contract between the serfs and the nobility was one in which the serfs had no say.[88] The contract compels the Latvians to not only work until they are about to die, but also to do whatever work the nobility says with little to no reward.[89] Because the nobility is the only party with any say in governing, they can do as they please with

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[83] Ibid., 161.
[84] Ibid., 51.
[85] Ibid., 49.
[86] Ibid., 67.
[87] Ibid., 80.
[88] Ibid., 85.
[89] Merkel, *Die Letten in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, 93.

the serfs. The nobility is able to keep the serfs indebted to them, therefore increasing how dependent the serfs are on the nobility.

Merkel characterizes the Baltic-Germans as an evil working against the serfs. Because the nobility compels the Latvian serf into forced labor, the Latvians gain no joy or meaning from work.[90] Merkel sees this as a tragedy. He ascribes meaning in work to meaning in life, which because the serfs often do not find meaning in work, this means that the serfs will not find meaning in life.[91] Perhaps more importantly to Merkel, if the serfs are not able to find meaning in life, then there is no hope for the Latvians to create their own national identity. Merkel explains that the nobility's treatment of the serfs will only continue to spread this lack of meaning, which could lead to growing discontent and an atmosphere similar to France on the eve of their revolution.[92] Thus, Merkel clearly places the majority of the blame for the Latvians' pitiful state on the actions of the Baltic Germans.

Merkel was not one to just lay out a problem and not attempt a solution. As mentioned previously, Merkel was a believer in Rousseau's social contract theory. He also believed in a revised constitution that would not only emancipate the serfs but also issue serfs greater rights as citizens of the Russian Empire. Merkel indicates that the most important part of any constitutional reform would be to ensure that serfs have a right to the land which they work on.[93] While this did not meant that the landowners would be dispossessed of their lands, it would mean that the former serfs would be able to form their own estate-courts, which would replace the landowner's former power. The landowner would still have control over the land itself and

[90] Ibid., 92.
[91] Ibid., 155.
[92] Ibid., 37.
[93] Ibid., 154.

reap some benefits, but the former serfs would now be able to ensure that the landowner would not be able to abuse their power and that they would be paid well.[94] This, Merkel argued, would make it so that the serfs would no longer be forced to go hungry. If the Latvians could satisfy their basic needs, then they would be able to form a national identity, which would eventually lead to the creation of a Latvian state in the future. This is not to say that Merkel wanted independence from Russia. Instead, he envisioned a state within Russia that would be able to operate with some autonomy,[95] which had precedent in the Russian Empire in the forms of Finland and Poland.[96]

Further, Merkel was concerned with other basic rights of the Latvians. For example, Merkel wished for people to be able to marry anybody whom they pleased. Merkel was responding to noblemen being able to decide who their serfs could marry, particularly if a serf could marry somebody from another estate.[97] In addition to this, Merkel was concerned with the nobility attempting to exert control over the serfs day-to-day lives. Thus, he suggested laws that would not only require the nobility to meet the basic needs of the Latvians,[98] but that would also ensure that the *Landtag* would not be able to pass legislation that would diminish the role of the Latvians in government. This focus on the right of the Latvians to the land which they work, partnered with Merkel's underlying nation-building schemes, further indicate Merkel's primary goal of securing freedom from bondage.

As mentioned previously, Merkel was very much a child of the Enlightenment. Studying at Jena helped to get Merkel in conversation with some Enlightenment figures. For example, a

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[94] Merkel, *Die Letten in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, 310-312.
[95] Ibid., 189.
[96] Noth, *The Baltic*, 149.
[97] Merkel, *Die Letten in Liefland am Endes des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, 179.
[98] Ibid., 190.

lot of the ideas that Merkel expressed in his *Die Letten* have a basis in Prussian thinker Christian Garve's work, published a decade prior, *Über den Charakter den Bauern* (About the character of the farmers). Much like Merkel, Garve was writing in response to larger discussions on serfdom, specifically on the failure of the enlightened despots (i.e. Frederick II, Catherine II, Joseph II) to fully abolish serfdom.[99] Like Merkel, Garve argued that the peasants and serfs were not naturally idiots, but that the actions of the nobility and society had made it such that they could not pursue education and ambition.[100] Merkel likely read Garve before writing *Die Letten*,[101] which is likely why the two shared arguments surrounding the character of the serfs. However, Garve was by no means Merkel's biggest influence. Merkel would become acquainted with two major figures while in Riga, one a German playwright and the other a popular Baltic-German noble thinker. When Merkel was working in the theater in Riga, he became acquainted with the famous German playwright August von Kotzebue. Kotzebue held similar abolitionist views as Merkel did, which is reflected in his 1796 play *Die Negersklaven*.[102] While this play was about American slavery, not Latvian serfdom, the play drew upon sources that Merkel himself cited, such as Rousseau.[103] Furthermore, Kotzebue contributed to the idea of the "noble savage",[104] an idea that Merkel would at times produce in his *Die Letten*. Kotzebue and Merkel would continue working together, forming their own journal that espoused similarly abolitionist ideas.[105] Additionally, Merkel was influenced by the famous Baltic German Johann Gottfried Herder. At the time of

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[99] Jennison Jr., "Christian Garve and Garlieb Merkel: Two Theorists of Peasant Emancipation during the Ages of Enlightenment and Revolution," 345.
[100] Ibid., 346.
[101] Ibid., 351.
[102] Sarah J. Adams, "Democratizing Abolitionism: Anti-Slavery Discourses and Sentiments in August von Kotzebue's *Die Negersklaven* (1796)," *Cultural Histor Cultural History,* 9, no. 1, (2020): 26. http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-8637724.
[103] Ibid., 32.
[104] Ibid., 31.
[105] Grudule, "500 Years of Latvian Books: Who was Garlieb Merkel?".

their meeting, Herder had become well-known for his ethnographic work. This work focused on "unfinished race(s) of men",[106] which most Baltic ethnic groups fit into. Furthermore, Herder possessed a private library from which Merkel pulled ideas for his publications.[107] Herder's ethnography likely influenced the ways in which Merkel chose to represent the Latvians, particularly in his arguments about how the Latvians simply needed education and assistance in order to better themselves. Taken together, these influences indicated Merkel's deep involvement with Enlightenment-era ideas. This involvement in these ideas likely lead to his publications on serfdom and unfree labor, resulting in a paradigm of landed emancipation.

Upon first glance, Merkel seems to be making humanitarian-based arguments. For example, he appeals to the reader's morality in discussing how mother's often have to make the difficult decision to kill their kid or let their kid die slowly when the child becomes infected with smallpox as they cannot afford treatment.[108]

However, these humanitarian arguments are not the primary purpose of Merkel's writing on unfree labor. Instead, if Merkel utilized appeals to humanity, it is only in order to support his central argument: the development of a Latvian nation. Merkel utilizes the example of a mother having to make a choice to kill her child when the child comes to down with small pox in order to support of the idea that Latvian serfs must develop a certain amount of apathy to survive, which discourages the development of national identity.[109] This example of the mother and the child is used to accent the dire state of the serfs. Perhaps more importantly, it depicts how such conditions made it impossible for the Latvians to thrive. If a nation cannot thrive, then how can

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[106] Peter Hallberg, "Johann Gotfried Herder on European Ethnographic Representation," *Intellectual History Review*, 26, no. 4 (2016): 498. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2016.1159787.
[107] Grudule, "500 Years of Latvian Books: Who was Garlieb Merkel?".
[108] Merkel, *Die Letten in Liefland am Endes des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, 53.
[109] Ibid., 51.

this nation develop national virtues worthy of a great nation? This is a question the Merkel explores in his argument by pointing to the national virtues of other nations. The Germans have their integrity and the British their patriotism. They have been able to develop these virtues as both nations have enjoyed prosperity and less subjugation than the Latvians have. Merkel does not argue for an independent Latvian state. Instead, he posits that emancipation of the Latvians would allow for the Russians to better govern the region.[110] Thus, he argues that should the Latvians be allowed freedom, they would develop their own national virtues and identity.[111] This supports Christopher L. Brown's summation about humanitarianism within abolitionist narratives. While Merkel does seem to care about the state of the Latvian serfs, he only cares about them in so much as he needs Latvian serfs to be free in order for them to develop national identity, which is his underlying goal in *Die Letten*.

Taken together, Merkel's entry into discussions of unfree labor were highly polemical. He routinely insults the character of the Baltic Germans in order to advance his nationalistic argument. While he did not support a revolution, Merkel's repeated reference to a revolution indicate that he did not consider it impossible. However, Merkel's abolitionism was by no means the consensus in the Baltics. Other abolitionists, such as Johann Cristoph Petri, would counter some of his arguments, taking a more moderate approach in contrast to Merkel.

Johann Cristoph Petri's Emancipation in Moderation

Unlike Garlieb Merkel, Johann Cristoph Petri was not a Baltic German. Petri was born and studied in Erfurt (in present day Germany) before coming to Estland (present day Estonia) to serve as a *Hofmeister* (as a reminder, these were the class of intellectuals in the Baltics who were

[110] Ibid., 190.
[111] Ibid., 67.

both tutors and Enlightenment communicators).[112] Petri's studies would take him throughout the Russian Empire, leading him to write on subjects outside of Estland (such as the Cossacks and Tatars).[113] However, Petri's main concern was always the Baltics, which he viewed as a region full of untapped economic potential.[114] In total, Petri would publish a total of 371 works in his lifetime. His most famous works would center on the unfree labor systems present in the Baltics.[115] In the following analysis I will briefly survey aspects of another larger work of Petri's, *Ehstland und die Ehsten* (1802) before diving into an analysis of his *Briefe über Reval* (1800); additionally, I will make comparisons to Garlieb Merkel's *Die Letten* as Petri wrote both of the aforementioned works in response to Merkel,[116] along with making note of Petri's influences and relation to humanitarian narratives of unfree labor.

Petri was a geographer, ethnographer, and theologian by training.[117] In *Ehstland und die Ehsten*, Petri devotes much more time to discussing the ethnic background of the Estonian people than Garlieb Merkel did. However, Petri followed a very similar path to that which Merkel charted by starting with a history of the Estonians before launching into characterizing the Estonians and nobility and finishing with recommendations on policy.[118] While Petri's does converge and differ in myriad ways from Merkel's abolitionism, these differences are best represented in one of Petri's previous works: *Briefe über Reval*.

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[112] Jürgen Heeg, "Die Publikationen Johann Cristoph Petris (1762-1851) über Estland, Livland, und Rußland," *Journal of Baltic Studies,* 16, no. 2 (1985): 128. https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778500000041.
[113] E. Donnert, "Johann Critsoph Petri (1762-1851) als gesellschaftspolitichers Denker," *Zeitschrift für Slawistik,* 34, no. 1-6 (1989), 412.
[114] Heeg, "Die Publikationen Johann Cristoph Petris (1762-1851) über Estland, Livland, und Rußland," *131.*
[115] Ibid., 133.
[116] Johann Cristoph Petri, „*Ehstland und die Ehsten, oder Historisch-Geographisch-Statistisches Gemälde von Ehstland* (Carl Willhelm Ettinger, 1802). I.
[117] E. Donnert, "Johann Critsoph petri (1762-1851) als gesellschaftspolitichers Denker," 412.
[118] Petri, „*Ehstland und die Ehsten, oder Historisch-Geographisch-Statistisches Gemälde von Ehstland*, XI.

Briefe über Reval (present day Tallinn) is immediately indicated as a "side piece" to Merkel's *Die Letten*,[119] indicating Petri's intention to enter discussion with the ideas of Merkel. For example, like Merkel, Petri uses the term "Ehsten", or Estonian, to mean the German word for "serf",[120] much how Merkel deployed the term "Letten". Later thinkers would additionally use the terms of ethnicity, such as "Ehsten" or "Letten", to refer to the broader serf population.[121] This requires some interpretation. Likely, the Baltic-German nobility conceived of the serfs as one whole group. Very few Baltic-German nobles seem to have identified with the province that they were in. Merkel seems to be an exception to this. However, even he uses the term for Latvian to mean peasant as well. These are the same terms used today in German to refer to Estonian (Este) and Latvian (Lette). While out of the scope of this paper, this difference in usage of terms is important to consider. Little scholarship has been done on why the Baltic German nobility may have chosen to refer to serfs using ethnic terms. However, this use of ethnicity to discuss unfree labor hints at the distinctions which the Baltic Germans themselves used.

Furthermore, Petri characterizes the situation in Estonia as very similar to that of how Merkel characterizes Latvia. Petri discusses the Estonians as victims of subjugation by the Baltic German nobility.[122] Petri's characterization also focuses on the sorry state of the Estonians. Petri discusses how the Estonians are by no means naturally dull or naturally prone to being drunk, but that the situation that they find themselves in has led to their need to meet their basic needs and

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[119] Johann Cristoph Petri, *Briefe über Reval nebst Nochrichten von Esth- und Liefland*, 1.
[120] Ibid., 28.
[121] Georg Firedirch von Fircks, *Die Letten in Kurland oder Verttheidigung meines Vaterlands gegen die Angriffe von G. Merkel in dessen Letten* (J.B. Hirschfeld, 1804). 1.; Hermann Friedrich Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthalnds Ehrenrettung gegen Herrn Merkel und Petri* (Johann Jcaob Gebauer, 1804). 1.
[122] Petri, *Briefe über Reval nebst Nochrichten von Esth- und Liefland*, 26

drink to forget.[123] Further, both Merkel[124] and Petri[125] discuss how previous decrees and legislation have failed to help the Baltic serfs. These similarities indicate that Petri did agree with Merkel, which is to be expected considering that both thinkers were abolitionists writing about the same region.

However, this is not to say that Petri was parroting the ideas of Merkel. In fact, Petri adds nuance to some of the more polemical ideas of Merkel. The largest difference between the two writers is Petri's characterization of the Baltic Germans. Merkel characterized the Baltic Germans as heartless, incompetent rulers. On the other hand, Petri argues that while the Baltic Germans are hypocrites, they are also highly intelligent and hospitable. In talking about their hypocrisy, Petri indicates that the Baltic Germans have distanced themselves from Prussia mentally. When Petri wrote *Briefe über Reval* in 1800, Prussian thinkers had grown in their proclivity toward abolition.[126] Even though the Baltic Germans identified as German, they chose to ignore some of the popular trends of the Enlightenment and Christianity, such as the rise of abolitionism in Prussia, because it did not fit in with their want to stay in power over the serfs.[127] Petri is much more kind to the character of the Baltic Germans. He speaks to his work as a *Hofmeister* in which he tutored the noble families, mentioning that many Baltic Germans know much of the Enlightenment, even if they don't act on it.[128] Furthermore, he expresses that the Baltic Germans are hospitable and ingenious, referencing times at which different families have helped him when he was in need and their booming industry in ports such as Tallinn.[129] This

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[123] Ibid., 28.
[124] Merkel, *Die Letten in Liefland am Endes des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, 163.
[125] Petri, *Briefe über Reval nebst Nochrichten von Esth- und Liefland*, 34.
[126] Jennison Jr., "Christian Garve and Garlieb Merkel: Two Theorists of Peasant Emancipation during the Ages of Enlightenment and Revolution," 345.
[127] Petri, *Briefe über Reval nebst Nochrichten von Esth- und Liefland*., 64.
[128] Ibid., 110.
[129] Ibid., 73.

characterization indicates Petri's warmer feelings to the Baltic Germans, which likely influenced his differences in opinion as compared to Merkel.

Unlike Merkel, Petri was not as polemical. For example, Petri does not even suggest the possibility of a revolution. In Merkel's *Die Letten,* he hints at the possibility of a revolution, but does not advocate for it.[130] Petri immediately shuts down the idea of a revolution even being possible in favor of a gradual, more moderate idea on emancipation.[131] Petri's preference for reform is further exemplified by his support of the recently reinstituted constitutions in the Baltics. He cites Paul I's consideration of a constitution for Estonia as a good step along the way to reform, indicating his want to go through proper legal channels with the Russian government before going ahead with emancipation.[132]Furthermore, he includes both the Russians and the clergy in this conversation. Whereas Merkel mentioned the Russians as an aside, Petri devotes pages to discussing how even though the Russians are of a different denomination than much of the Baltics (Orthodox as compared to Lutheran), they are able to show great industry and nimbleness.[133] This depicts the reciprocal relationship of positivity between the nobility in the Baltics and the Russian Empire. The Russian Empire viewed the Baltics as an element of Western Europe in which they could test policy informed by the Enlightenment. Just as the Russians saw the Baltics as advanced, so did the Baltic Germans see Russia as advanced. Russia was powerful and rapidly modernizing, likely leading to Petri's characterization of the Russians as industrious. Petri also devotes much space to discussing the role of the Lutheran church in abolition. In his opinion, the church had been declining in virtue. It was heavily influenced by

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[130] Merkel, *Die Letten in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts*, 37.
[131] Petri, *Briefe über Reval nebst Nochrichten von Esth- und Liefland*, 27.
[132] Ibid., 57.
[133] Ibid., 30-31.

money and power from the Baltic German nobility. Petri argued that any attempt at emancipation would need to include the church.[134] Petri is thus more moderate than Merkel as he focuses on including other groups in the emancipation discussion and advocates for gradual abolition rather than instant.

When looking at Petri's own influences, his more moderate stances make sense. Petri was heavily influenced by the pastor August Wilhelm Hupel. Hupel was a Baltic-German pastor who advocated for emancipation. Furthermore, Hupel encouraged Petri to write on the Estonians. Petri had already been interested in advocating for the serfs upon coming to the Baltics. However, Hupel's guidance led him to write works such as *Briefe über Reval*. Hupel was also more moderate, advocating for gradual emancipation.[135] This moderate viewpoint on emancipation likely influenced Petri's works as Hupel was one of his main patrons. Further, like other writers at the time, Petri was mindful of the recent American and French Revolutions. Instead of supporting revolution, Petri's more moderate stances indicate his unwillingness to be perceived as a Jacobin.[136] These influences likely led to his moderate approach to emancipation.

Like Merkel, Petri espouses some humanitarian claims about the serfs. He talks about how peasants in Tallinn and Estonia as a whole sometimes go either unhoused or housed in unsanitary conditions.[137] Further, he says that emancipation would bring culture to the Estonians, something that would benefit the people and lift them out of their stupor.[138] However, he uses much less of these humanitarian arguments and focuses his arguments upon two core concepts: theology and capitalism. First and foremost, Petri is concerned with the religious state of the

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[134] Ibid., 34-36.
[135] E. Donnert, "Johann Critsoph petri (1762-1851) als gesellschaftspolitichers Denker," 129-130.
[136] Petri, *Briefe über Reval nebst Nochrichten von Esth- und Liefland*, 27.
[137] Ibid., 4.
[138] Ibid., 98.

Baltics. He mentions the growing corruption in the church, going into detail about how the church needs to be reformed. He believes that church reform is one of the most important aspects to emancipation and enlightenment, especially by including Kant's work in church curriculum.[139] Petri ascribes the decrease in religiosity of the church and the people to a decrease in the moral principles necessary for abolition.[140] Furthermore, Petri is concerned about the untapped potential of the Baltics. He sees the Baltics as a place of great potential for industry and economic output. One of his primary concerns about serfdom is that it limited the ability of cities such as Tallinn to progress as cities in Britain and Prussia are. Thus, he believes that by entering fully into a market economy that all people in Estonia will benefit.[141] Petri's underlying arguments of need for increased religiosity and capitalism are thus somewhat shrouded in a humanitarian argument, but not as much as Merkel, indicating that Petri likely did not subscribe to a humanitarian view of abolition.

The examples of Garlieb Merkel and Johann Cristoph Petri paint a picture of disagreement in the Baltics. Whereas thinkers such as Merkel believed in abolition for the purposes of nationalistic fervor, thinkers such as Johann Cristoph petri believed in abolition as necessary for benefiting the people's religious views and overall capital. The arguments of both Merkel and Petri would be considered, and in some ways actualized, later on in the nineteenth century. However, these ideas would not go without contention from the pro-serfdom thinkers.

Fircks and Tiebe: Countering Abolition with the Past

[139] Ibid., 41.
[140] Ibid., 101.
[141] Ibid., 49.

Following the pieces by Garlieb Merkel and Johann Cristoph Petri, there was a lack of pro-serfdom material published. Merkel would only continue to gain notoriety from this piece,[142] leading to the perpetuation of abolitionist ideas in the Baltics. However, in 1804, two prominent figures in the Baltics refuted Merkel. The following section will briefly overview two major works from the pastor Hermann Friedrich Tiebe and the baron Georg Friedrich von Fircks that criticized abolitionism. Both thinkers converged on the idea that Merkel and other writers were not reliable sources to be discussing the serfs along with rationales for the perpetuation of serfdom; however, these two thinkers would also diverge from one another in discussing the underlying reasons that serfdom should still exist, with Tiebe citing religion and capital while Fircks focused more on the economy of the Baltics.

Hermann Friedrich Tiebe was both a pastor and landowner in Livland during the early 18th and 19th centuries. Educated at Halle in theology, Tiebe would return to Livland, espousing pro-serfdom views and often corresponding with wealthy elites in the area. What makes Tiebe most interesting is that despite being educated at Halle, an institution known for its proclivity toward the German Enlightenment, he despised abolitionism.[143] Tiebe's interesting mix of religious, personal, and economic interests in the debate on serfdom make him a fascinating character to understand when it comes to unfree labor discussions. Tiebe is very critical of Merkel, even citing old scripture in order to demonstrate the folly of Merkel's arguments.[144]

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[142] Kruusmaa, "Baltic-German pro-serfdom Thought in the Russian Baltic Provinces from a Comparative Perspective," 355.
[143] Ibid., 347.
[144] Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands Ehrenrettung Gegen Herrn Merkel und Petri*, 6.

Georg Friedrich von Fircks was a well-known, wealthy estate owner in Courland (modern day Lithuania) during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.[145] Having been educated in Germany and descended from a powerful family who had lived in Courland for some time, von Fircks felt a need to comment on the question of serfdom.[146] Von Fircks' wrote in direct response to Merkel. Often, von Fircks references Merkel's *Die Letten*, explaining that Merkel must have felt that he needed to prove something with the writing. Elaborating upon this, he points to Merkel's characterization of the Baltic Germans as incorrect and something that Merkel only did in order to be absurd.[147]

To begin, both Tiebe and von Fircks make similar arguments as to why serfdom is beneficial for the Baltic provinces. Both writers point to the Prussians' version of serfdom as an example of effective administration. Von Fircks suggests that Merkel is not only ignorant of the situation of the nobility and landowners in Livland, but that he also purposely mischaracterizes the situation of serfdom in all of Germany in order to further abolitionist arguments.[148] Additionally, von Fircks asks whether or not Merkel was even cognizant of Courland when writing about the Baltics, indicating that von Fircks thought Merkel's arguments to not be based in fact.[149] Tiebe furthers this argument by suggesting that Merkel and Petri did not have an actual understanding of the peasantry. Tiebe suggests that Petri could never have understood the Estonian serfs because he did not have native fluency in the Estonian language. Tiebe contends that Petri's misunderstanding of the Estonian language likely led to his mischaracterization of the

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[145] Kruusmaa, "Baltic-German pro-serfdom Thought in the Russian Baltic Provinces from a Comparative Perspective," 347.
[146] Fircks, *Die Letten in Kurland oder Vertheidigung meines Vaterlands gegen die Angriffe von G. Merkel in dessen Letten,* VI.
[147] Ibid., 4-5.
[148] Ibid., 146-147.
[149] Ibid., 158.

serfs as discontent.[150] Tiebe additionally claims that abolitionists such as Petri were foreigners. Because of this, abolitionists could not understand the history of the Estonians/Latvians and Baltic Germans, making their views on serfdom foreign and therefore inapplicable to the Baltic context.[151] Therefore, both von Ficks and Tiebe attempt to undermine the arguments of abolitionists through a demonstration of their misunderstanding of the serf population.

Furthermore, von Fircks and Tiebe both characterize serfs and their conditions to be very similar. Both thinkers discussed the serfs as simple people by nature with no ability to advance their education and status.[152] Von Fircks thought freedom to be an arbitrary idea. The ways in which von Fircks saw the discussion of freedom as polite but unrealistic thought experiments.[153] Freedom as a concept was something that both von Fircks and Tiebe heavily refuted. Tiebe stated that Merkel's ideas about the serfs desiring and coveting freedom were unfounded and that the serfs were happier in their current state. He furthers this argument by stating that even if the serfs desired freedom, they would not know what to do with themselves once free.[154] As mentioned previously, both thinkers also saw the serfs as drunk idiots by nature. This means that even if the serfs were to be set free, they would remain inert without the guidance of the landowner. Taken together, neither von Fircks nor Tiebe saw the serfs as deserving or ready for freedom.

However, just as Merkel and Petri had nuanced differences in their views, so did von Fircks and Tiebe diverge. For example, von Fircks employs economic and labor-intensive rationales when discussing why serfdom is good for everybody. In discussing an estate, von

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[150] Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands Ehrenrettung Gegen Herrn Merkel und Petri,* 286.
[151] Ibid., 13.
[152] Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands Ehrenrettung Gegen Herrn Merkel und Petri*, 17-18.; Fircks, *Die Letten in Kurland oder Vertheidigung meines Vaterlands gegen die Angriffe von G. Merkel in dessen Letten*, 161.
[153] Ibid., 226-27.
[154] Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands Ehrenrettung Gegen Herrn Merkel und Petri,* 53-4.

Fircks discusses how different Baltic-Germans manage their properties and how management of properties is one of the most important parts of a landowners' position.[155] This was perhaps the most important part to von Fircks. Since von Fircks did not believe in the serfs ability to be industrious without the guidance of a landowner, then any attempt at abolition would lead to economic ruin in his eyes. Furthermore, von Fircks saw the serfs in a different way than Tiebe did. Tiebe viewed the serfs as merely unintelligent, as discussed earlier. However, von Fircks had nuance to his view that actually corresponded to how Merkel saw the serfs. Like Merkel, von Fircks uses "noble savage" language to discuss the serfs. He describes them as having an arbitrary heart, but a character that makes them good workers.[156] However, this is where the similarities to Merkel end. Where Merkel then argued that the Latvians could be raised out of their stupor through education, von Fircks argues that their savage nature means that freedom is not something they are capable of.[157] Finally, von Fircks argues that there is no change of a revolution among the serfs because of their docility. He points to a Polish serf revolt as an example of this. Despite the revolt happening right next to Courland, the Lithuanian peasants did not join in the revolt, indicating their contentment with their servile status.[158]

Where von Fircks focused on the economy, Tiebe's arguments were much more diverse. Since Tiebe was a pastor, he grounded his arguments using ancient texts and religion. Tiebe suggests to Merkel that he should live in ancient Greece or Rome, not Livland, because in Livland, there is a monarchy and his ideas undermine the power of the tsar.[159] Furthermore, Tiebe points to the fact that the Christian religion allows the nobility a certain amount of power

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[155] Fircks, *Die Letten in Kurland oder Verttheidigung meines Vaterlands gegen die Angriffe von G. Merkel in dessen Letten*, 137.
[156] Ibid., 137-39.
[157] Ibid., 140.
[158] Ibid., 79-80.
[159] Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands Ehrenrettung Gegen Herrn Merkel und Petri,* 8.

over the serfs.[160] For Tiebe, there was no moral issue with the institution of unfree labor because it was allowed for in the Christian faith. However, Tiebe did not limit himself to arguments about religion. Tiebe himself had an estate with serfs on it.[161] Because he was a landowner, Tiebe benefited economically from serfdom by not needing to pay for labor and having hegemony over the land. Both Petri and von Fircks acknowledge that the clergy works closely with the nobility and profit off of serfdom.[162] Tiebe thus was concerned with the economic implications of abolition. Finally, unlike von Fircks, Tiebe was concerned about the possibility of an uprising. He saw the other revolts happening around Europe as something to take not of, but not something to warrant emancipation.[163] Thus, Tiebe's myriad rationales vary from von Fircks, largely in his religious and revolution-based arguments.

Both von Fircks and Tiebe likely engaged with similar groups of intellectuals. Both thinkers were educated at German universities and were landowners. Further, both thinkers had connections to the powerful baron Konrad von Brasch.[164] Despite being engaged in Enlightenment era thought, they both arrived at conclusions that went against popular narratives of the Enlightenment. In popular discourse, abolitionism is often seen as an inalienable part of the Enlightenment.[165] However, the examples of von Fircks and Tiebe demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the Enlightenment not as a singular body of ideas, but of a diverse array of theories that over time worked into what we now know as "The Enlightenment".

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[160] Ibid., 9.
[161] Kruusmaa, "Baltic-German pro-serfdom Thought in the Russian Baltic Provinces from a Comparative Perspective," 347.
[162] Petri, *Briefe über Reval nebst Nochrichten von Esth- und Liefland,* 35.; Fircks,*Die Letten in Kurland oder Vertheidigung meines Vaterlands gegen die Angriffe von G. Merkel in dessen Letten*, 106-107.
[163] Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands Ehrenrettung Gegen Herrn Merkel und Petri*, 22.
[164] Kruusmaa, "Baltic-German pro-serfdom Thought in the Russian Baltic Provinces from a Comparative Perspective," 347.
[165] Anthony Page, "Rational dissent, Enlightenment, and Abolition of the British Salve Trade," *The Historical Journal*, 54, no. 3 (2011): 742. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000227.

We now know that serfdom would eventually be abolished in the Baltics between 1816-1818. Leading up to this time, pro-serfdom arguments slowly vanished from the public conversation about serfdom.[166] So why consider the views of people such as von Fircks and Tiebe within this paper? After all, proponents of serfdom did not need to make humanitarian arguments for the perpetuation of unfree labor. Further, even though both von Fircks and Tiebe were prominent thinkers, they would gradually lose favor as Merkel and Petri's arguments gained traction throughout the Russian empire.[167] However, it is not like Baltic-German nobles who believed in serfdom just disappeared. Up until the emancipation of the Baltic serfs, the opinions of the Baltic-Germans were always considered by the Russians in discourses on reform in the Baltics.[168] After all, the Russians largely ruled areas which they had conquered by incorporating the upper strata of society.[169] This discussion will feature heavily in the next section in which I will discuss the considerations and consequences of the emancipation of the serfs in the Baltics.

Alexander I and Abolition

Following Catherine's visit to the Livonian *Landtag*, the noble representatives felt a need to react to Catherine's concerns about their treatment of the serfs. This led to two laws that would be passed in 1765 which assured the serfs of their ability to own their own tools and possessions, along with a law that limited punishment.[170] While a good place to start, these actions fell short of the mark. As demonstrated by writers such as Garlieb Merkel and Johann Cristoph Petri, the conditions of the serfs were still destitute at the beginning of the 19th century.

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[166] Ibid., 355.
[167] Ibid., 355.
[168] Bartlett, "The Russian and the Baltic German nobility in the eighteenth century," 241.
[169] Farah, Anti-Slavery Campaigns in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, 97.
[170] Bruns, "Privilege and Freedom: The Emancipation Debate in Livland, 226.

With the ascension of the liberally minded Alexander I in 1801, the topic of abolition was shifted back to the forefront.[171] In 1804, the Livonian *Landtag* would pass agrarian reforms targeting serfdom. Because Livland had been the center of the debate on serfdom in the Baltics since Garlieb Merkel had published his controversial *Die Letten,* members of the Livonian *Landtag* worked with Alexander I to find a solution for abolition. Multiple times, these members went back and forth with Alexander, unable to agree to a reform until Alexander I finally asserted power and suggested a reform which would give peasants the ability to buy, possess, and sell all kinds of property, including land.[172] This reform indicated Alexander I's commitment to finding a solution to serfdom, something that had not been shown by his predecessors.

Despite his gradual shift to conservatism as a product of the Napoleonic wars,[173] Alexander's wish to improve the state of the peasantry persisted. In fact, his desire to emancipate the serfs would only strengthen. At the end of the Napoleonic wars, Alexander I made his abolitionist sentiments once again clear.[174] One such instance of this was Alexander I's correspondence with both the *Landtags* of Estland and Courland. From 1811-1816, the Estonian *Landtag* worked with Alexander I on a plan for the emancipation of the serfs. This culminated in a landless emancipation in which the landowners retained full property rights over their estates and the peasants could lease the land. Amidst this emancipation, the emperor made it clear to Courland that he expected the *Landtag* to follow. Thus, another landless emancipation would occur in Courland in 1817 that was very similar to the Estonian one.[175] Overall, these landless

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[171] Rey, Marrie-Pierre, *Alexander I: The Tsar who Defeated Russia* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2012). Trns. Susan Emanuel. 322.
[172] Bruns, "Privilege and Freedom: The Emancipation Debate in Livland, 228.
[173] Rey, *Alexander I: The Tsar who Defeated Russia*, 300-1
[174] Ibid., 297.
[175] Bruns, "Privilege and Freedom: The Emancipation Debate in Livland, 229.

emancipations served to empower the landlords, giving them more control over the land while the peasants lost hereditary tenure to the land.[176]

The case of Livland played out differently. Since it was the place where serfdom was most contested, debate would ensue for quite a while. The nobility was adamant about keeping rights over the land. Regardless of whether an abolitionist supported either instant or gradual emancipation, all noblemen could agree that landowners must keep control of the land.[177] These debates reflected the want of the nobility to stay in power. All noblemen realized that a landed emancipation in which the peasants came into direct control of the land would mean that phasing out of the nobility from power. Thus, the nobility in Livonia would advocate against hereditary tenure of a peasant to the land, citing humanitarian concerns of the peasant still being a serf if they had hereditary rights to the land.[178] Interestingly enough, this debate occurring in the 1810s reflects abolitionist views purported by Merkel and Petri. Both Merkel and Petri discussed the need of the nobility to stay in control of their lands. Furthermore, we see abolitionists shrouding their real concern of noble power using humanitarian arguments. Furthermore, we also see the contention in the Livonian *Landtag* that was present in both Merkel and Petri's pieces about revolution. Where some saw revolution as a possibility worth doing everything to avoid, other saw it as impossible. Regardless of view, all members of the *Landtag* could agree on the fact that staying within Russia was the only way that abolition could occur successfully.[179]

The Livonian emancipation of 1819 would end up being slightly different than those in Estland and Courland. Instead of being fully landless, the serfs would have a lifelong claim to the

[176] Ibid., 243.
[177] Ibid., 230-1.
[178] Ibid., 232.
[179] Ibid., 245.

land on which they worked. This differs from the hereditary tenure as once the serf who had the claim to the land died, the family would no longer be able to work the land without a new contract. Thus, the serf went from hereditary labor to corvée labor, which could be argued as just another form of unfree labor. Furthermore, the serfs had most of their debts erased.[180] Initially, this emancipation worked very well. However, this is largely because of the surge in grain prices due to famine in the proceeding years. This led many farmers to gain wealth. After the price of grain settled, the issues with the emancipation became evident. The nobility began to exert their new power over the peasants as full landlords, pricing some peasant families out of the land once the person with the lifelong claim died. This led to some peasant families becoming landless, cutting off their income supply and making them vulnerable to homelessness.[181]

Alexander I had mixed feelings about the emancipations in the Baltics. On the one hand, he was happy to see his emancipation project finally begin, particularly as Prussia's emancipation in 1807 had made him feel the pressure to move forward with emancipation in the Russian Empire.[182] As mentioned previously, Russia was in a hurry to modernize throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Alexander likely wanted to continue Russia's modernization by staying consistent with European trends. Perhaps because of this, Alexander felt that the Baltics, a place run by Germans and in constant contact with the Enlightenment, would be a good place to test emancipation.

Before becoming tsar, Alexander I had already shown an understanding of the concept of moral capital. In a letter to his childhood tutor Frédéric-César de la Harpe, he expressed discontent with his father, Paul I's, actions against the nobility. Specifically, he expressed that

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[180] Ibid., 241.
[181] Ibid., 243-4.
[182] Rey, *Alexander I: The Tsar who Defeated Russia*, 322.

Paul's actions were not working because of his antagonism toward the nobles.[183] His understanding of moral capital led to him making concessions when it came to serfdom and other issues.[184] Negotiating with the Baltic-German nobles on a plan for emancipation that would at the ensure the loyalty of the Baltic-Germans while still accomplishing his goal of emancipation is a clear use of moral capital from Alexander I. It is likely that Alexander did genuinely feel for the peasants and that his actions were guided in part by humanitarianism.[185] Furthermore, the dissent of people such as von Fircks and Tiebe likely played into Alexander I's emancipation calculations. After all, people such as von Fircks and Tiebe possessed power in the Baltics. Upsetting these noblemen through a landed emancipation would only serve to antagonize the pro-serfdom crowd, something that Alexander I had learned from his father Paul not to do. However, the mounting pressure from the European community to emancipate paired with the Baltic-Germans stringent demands to land rights likely lead him to make the choice to go ahead with an emancipation that left the peasants vulnerable.

Alexander I's emancipations in the Baltics reflect earlier discussions on serfdom. In his decisions, he considered the abolitionist perspectives of people such as Garlieb Merkel and Johann Cristoph Petri by attempting to provide freedom to the native people. While this freedom came with hardship, it did allow for the people to become independent of the landowners in the sense that they were no longer property. Eventually, the peasants were even allowed free movement throughout their province,[186] allowing for meetings that could spark nationalistic sentiments in the eyes of Merkel. Furthermore, Alexander was aware of the powerful pro-

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[183] "Alexander's Letter to La Harpse, September 27, 1797, in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 477.
[184] Rey, *Alexander I: The Tsar who Defeated Russia*, 323.
[185] "The Memoirs of Prince Adam Czartoryski, Concerning 1796 and 1801-1802," 479.
[186] Bruns, "Privilege and Freedom: The Emancipation Debate in Livland, 244.

serfdom faction. The emancipation of the Baltic serfs ensured that the nobility would have full control over the land, securing economic and gubernatorial stability on the side of the nobility. The emancipation of the Baltic serfs would serve as a vital lesson and starting point for future attempts at emancipation in the Russian empire. Understanding the influences on these Baltic thinkers and how this impacted Russian policy is vital in understanding the inevitable emancipations to come in Russian history.

Conclusion

Through this thesis, I explored the social, intellectual, and political aspects of unfree labor discussions occurring in the Baltics during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in relation to the emancipation of the serfs in the Baltics from 1816-1819. To understand the basis of unfree labor questions in Russia, I began with a discussion of Russian rulers' actions concerning serfdom throughout the eighteenth century. These actions reflected a preference for serfdom, despite some rulers ideologically preferring abolition. In order to understand the Baltic situation, I analyzed works from four Baltic German thinkers as they related to humanitarian narratives of emancipation and intellectual/social influences. Garlieb Merkel, a more radical thinker, focused on the possibility of increasing nationalism of the Latvian peasants as a result of emancipation. Johann Cristoph Petri was a more moderate abolitionist, advocating abolition on religious and economic grounds. The baron Georg Friedrich von Fircks and pastor Hermann Friedrich Tiebe would provide counterarguments for the pro-serfdom side, focusing on how the loss of the serfs would become devastating to the economy of the Baltics and decreases in religiosity among peasants. Considering all sides of the serfdom argument, Alexander I would work with the Baltic German nobility to push through legislation in

the *Landtags* that would abolish serfdom. While emancipation would provide peasants with the ability to move throughout their province and get rid of ties to the land, it would leave the peasantry landless and vulnerable to the whims of the emboldened nobility.

The Emancipation of the Baltic Serfs would have wide ranging effects moving forward. Alexander I would attempt to have another emancipation in Ukraine in 1818. However, this emancipation never occurred due to concerns from the nobility about the rate of emancipation.[187] Alexander I would not attempt emacnipation after this and would eventually die in 1825, passing the crown on to his younger brother, Nicholas I.

Nicholas I's reign (r. 1825-1855) would begin with the ill-fated Decembrist Revolution (1825). The revolutionaries were a group of young officers and noblemen from around the Russian Empire who were disaffected by the late actions of Alexander I. Furthermore, they had believed that Nicholas I's older brother, Constantine, would ascend to the throne. Unbeknownst to the Decembrists, Constantine had abdicated. The Decembrists were by no means a unified group, with many different sects coming together to form one group with competing motives.[188] However, their underlying goal was the introduction of western liberalism into the seat of power in Russia.[189] Among other ideas, the Decembrists demanded that all people be able to own property and choose their own profession.[190] For Nicholas I, the Decembrists' attempt to overthrow his government chilled him to the bone and likely played a role in his conservatism.[191] This conservatism would manifest itself in myriad ways, such as Nicholas' brutal response to the

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[187] Rey, *Alexander I: The Tsar who Defeated Russia*, 322.
[188] Emily Wang, *Pushkin, the Decembrists, and Civic Sentimentalism* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2023), 5.
[189] Ibid., 3-4.
[190] "The Decemberist Manifesto of December 13, 1825, in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917: Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, ed. Veransky & Pushkarev, 518.
[191] Wang, *Pushkin, the Decembrists, and Civic Sentimentalism*, 138.

Polish Uprising in 1830 that stripped the Polish of their autonomy.[192] Perhaps most notably, Nicholas I would incorporate the ideas of germanophiole S.S. Uvarov, culminating in Uvarov's "Orthodoxy – Autocracy – Nationality" idea that focused on increasing nationalism among the population in support of Nicholas I's government through state-favored education systems.[193]

By the time that Nicholas I's son, Alexander II (r. 1855-1881) came to power, the issue of serfdom in the Russian empire had come to a head. Upon ascension, Alexander II attempted to assure the nobility that he would not abolish serfdom.[194] With Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean War in 1856, Alexander II's tone would quickly change. Defeat had left the Russians humiliated on the world stage. This had been Russia's first major loss in decades, making the position of the Alexander II's new regime unstable. To regain the trust of the Russian people, Alexander II committed to abolish serfdom in 1857. In 1861, he issued the Emancipation Manifesto, beginning the process of abolition in the majority of the Russian Empire.[195]

Alexander II's Emancipation Manifesto shows that the Russian government had learned from their emancipation of the Baltic serfs. First, Alexander II worked closely with the nobility of each province. Emancipation looked slightly different by province based on the demands of the local nobility and the condition of the peasants.[196] Second, the emancipation was much more gradual rather than instant. In the Baltics, emancipation had occurred quickly,[197] leaving peasants with little time to adapt. However, Alexander II's emancipation was gradual and learned from

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[192] Andrei Zorin, "The Cherished Triad: S. S. Uvarov's Memorandum of 1832 and the Development of the Doctrine 'Orthodoxy – Autocracy – Nationalist," in *By Fables Alone: Literature and State Ideology in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth- Century Russia* (Academic Studies Press, 2014), 326.
[193] Ibid., 327.
[194] Gary Marker, "The Westernization of the Elite, 1725-1800," In *A Companion to Russian History,* ed. Abbott Gleason (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 198.
[195] Ibid., 199.
[196] Ibid., 201.
[197] Bruns, "Privilege and Freedom: The Emancipation Debate in Livland, 243.

itself. When the state peasants were emancipated in 1866, their needs were weighed more heavily than the serfs emancipated in 1861, leading to better outcomes for these peasants and the Russian government. For example, the landowners no longer controlled where the serfs could go. That right was now controlled by the village commune, a group of elders who would make local policy decisions in line with empire-wide law.[198] Finally, the Emancipation of 1861 was a landed emancipation. Learning from Alexander I's tumultuous landless emancipations, Alexander II made sure that each peasant would have land allotted to them by the village commune.[199] Taken together, these changes were positive and showed improvement as compared to the previous emancipation in the Baltics.

However, the emancipation of 1861 left much to be desired. The economy plummeted. Further, the nobility still served as landowners over the peasants. Peasants were often allotted inarable land.[200] The nobility additionally still exacted control over the peasants. The peasants had to buy the land their allotted land from the nobility. Many peasants could not afford to buy their land outright. Thus, the peasantry were kept indebted to the local nobility for decades, keeping the power among the nobility.[201]

Understanding why emancipation occurred in the Russian Empire is crucial to understanding the Russian Empire itself. By no means was emancipation a strictly humanitarian endeavor. In the eighteenth century, Russia primarily strengthened serfdom. In the nineteenth century, Alexander I understood that emancipation would increase his own standing among the peasantry. Additionally, Alexander believed that emancipation would bring the serfs greater

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[198] Marker, "The Westernization of the Elite, 1725-1800," In *A Companion to Russian History*, 202.
[199] Ibid., 202.
[200] Ibid., 202.
[201] Ibid., 203.

economic power. Even though he did display genuine empathy for the peasants, this does not mean that he had purely humanitarian intentions. Further, Alexander II only moved to emancipate after Russia's loss in the Crimean War. For Alexander II, emancipation was a move to regain the trust of the Russian population following his humiliating defeat, not something that he felt compelled to do because of genuine concern for the serfs. Emancipation was but one part of Alexander II's "Great Reforms", which would also include reforms of the education system, the institution of an increasingly, but not entirely, free press, and the judiciary system among other institutions.[202] Emancipation can be seen as a catalyst for these reforms, which had been under discussion for years in the Russian empire prior to Alexander II.

The Baltic-German writers presented in this thesis demonstrate narratives of unfree labor that would manifest themselves in these later discussions on abolitionism. The conservative von Fircks and Tiebe would articulate a narrative that lead to the nobility continuing to have power over the land, leading to economic insecurity among the peasantry following emancipation. Further, the moderate ideas of Johann Cristoph Petri are evident in the emancipation of the Baltic serfs, primarily in regards to hopes (that were not entirely fulfilled due to pro-serfdom arguments) that emancipation would increase the economic output of the serfs, lifting themselves up. Finally, Garlieb Merkel's arguments about increases in nationalism would be later used by Alexander II,[203] indicating the longevity and importance of Merkel. Understanding how the narratives used by these writers influenced later policy helps us to situate the unfree labor discussion in Russia in relation to the rest of the world. Indeed, like in other areas,[204] Russian abolitionism was by no means humanitarian. By challenging the script of benevolent abolition,

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[202] Ibid., 204-205.
[203] Ibid., 201.
[204] Brown, *Moral Capital: The Foundations of British Abolitionism,* 13.

we can uncover hidden reasons that political actors have supported the positive endeavor of emancipation. In doing so, we challenge a whitewashed history that frames the impact of the Enlightenment on global abolitionism as one that lead powerful people to favor emancipation.

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