

THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE PEASANTS IN THE  
RUSSIAN EMPIRE.

BY VICOMTE COMBES DE LESTRADE.

The emancipation of the Russian serfs by the Emperor Alexander II. was an act which filled Europe with admiration and his people with gratitude. But while no one doubts the liberality and beneficence of the Emperor's intentions, the so-called emancipation has proved only a delusion. True, the seigneurs were stripped of their authority, but, by the terms of the edict of 1861, the authority formerly vested in them was formally transferred to the *Mir*. This *Mir* is a village commune—an assemblage of families holding a certain quantity of land in common, bound to pay certain annual revenues on account of it, and in order to satisfy these obligations, invested in its collective capacity with powers over the individual equal to, if not transcending, those exercised by the seigneurs.

Under the old seigniorial system the serfs had to render certain services to the seigneur, who was, of course, responsible for their support. To this end each serf had a certain portion of land allotted to him to be cultivated at his discretion. Under the Act of Emancipation the Government stepped between the seigneurs and serfs, paid the former an indemnity to compensate them for lost services, and transferred from them an area of land equal to what had been allotted for the maintenance of their serfs under the old system. The land thus allotted to the serfs was not allotted in severalty, but given in the lump to the *Mir*, which in its collective capacity exercises a despotic control over its several members, assigning to each family, according to its numbers, the land which it is bound to cultivate, and which may consist of several parcels far removed from each other. The Government having indemnified the landlords for the loss entailed by the emancipation, arranged to recoup itself by a land tax, which, covering principal and interest, should extend over seventy-nine years. This tribute is exacted from the *Mir* in a lump, and the *Mir* apportions it among its several members, according to the extent and value of their several holdings. This division of the land has no permanency. Periodical redistribution was made the rule to provide for allotments to new-comers.

The cultivation of the village lands under the communal system for the equal benefit of all might have its advantages under certain social conditions, but the system of individual holdings, which ordinarily change hands every five years, can only be disastrous. There is no encouragement for the peasant to improve his land, and, excepting in those few districts in which the land yields a revenue over and above its burden of taxation, the peasants resort to a thousand artifices, and even to supplication, that less land be given them. The *Mir*, however, enforces its behests rigorously, since lightening the burden on one man's shoulders could only be effected by adding to the burden of others.