

**UNFREE LABOR:
American Slavery
and Russian Serfdom**
by Peter Kolchin
Harvard, 1987
517 pp. \$25

Russian serfdom and North American slavery—roughly similar systems of enforced labor—flourished at the same time in radically different societies. Both developed gradually over the 16th and 17th centuries, to be abolished abruptly in the 1860s. Like American slaves, Russian serfs had no legal right to own property and could be sold.

But the two systems differed significantly, as Kolchin, professor of history at the University of Delaware, shows in an illuminating comparative study. First and foremost, Russian serfs—unlike Afro-American slaves—worked their native soil under masters of the same culture and race. Thus Kolchin was able to divide questions of race from questions of class—impossibly intertwined in American slavery—and to pinpoint how cultural discontinuity affected slaves transplanted from Africa. Unlike historian Eugene Genovese, Kolchin sees communal values among North American slaves as weak, and the culture they recreated in the New World as derived, in the main, from that of their white masters.

American slaves, living on small plantations in a predominantly white world, were in daily contact with their owners. Serfs, the majority of Russia's population, lived on large estates whose absentee owners left them often to their own devices. Closeness between master and bondsman in America made slaveholders paternalistic and emotionally committed to the "peculiar institution." In the United States, the master class resisted the demise of slavery. Russian owners, however, "offered little resistance" to the abolition of serfdom, secure in the knowledge that "peasants were still peasants, and noblemen still noblemen"—a condition not much changed by Tsar Alexander II's emancipation decree.

In the eyes of society in both America and Russia, the unfree laborers were lazy, stupid, and immoral. Like free laborers on small farms and in factories, they were more often than not exploited and overworked. Slaves suffered more punishment, sexual abuse, and family separation than did serfs, but, by contemporary standards, were well fed and healthy.

It was the Russian *mir*, or peasant commune, that gave Russian serfs a degree of autonomy unheard of among slaves. Isolated and without communal institutions, American slaves were rarely able to join together and to resist.