

## Decree on Single Inheritance, March 23, 1714

We, Peter I, Tsar and Autocrat of All Russia, etc., issue this *ukaz* for all the subjects of Our state, of whatever rank or status:

The division of estates upon the death of fathers causes great harm to Our state and state interests and brings ruin to our subjects and to the families concerned; for example:

1. Concerning Taxes. Suppose a man had 1000 [serf] households and five sons, had a fine manor, a good table, and a sound relationship with people; if after his death this property is divided among his children, each would receive 200 households; those children, remembering the fame of their father and the honor of their line [*rod*] would not wish to live the life of an orphan; everyone can see that the poor subjects [serfs](1) will have to supply five tables instead of one and that 200 households cannot bear the burden (including state taxes) previously borne by 1000. Does not this practice bring ruin to the people and harm to state interest? Because 200 households cannot make payments as reliably to the state and to the nobleman as 1000 households could, because (as noted above) one lord will be satisfied with [revenues from] 1000 [households] (but not from 200) and will moderate the situation of the peasants, who will be able to pay taxes punctually to both the state and to the lord. Consequently, division of estates brings great harm to the government treasury and ruin base people.

2. Concerning Families. And should each of those five sons have two sons, each of them son will receive 100 households, and should they further multiply, they will be so impoverished that they may turn into one-household owners, with the result that [the descendants of] a glorious line, in place of fame, will turn into villagers; there are already many examples of this among the Russian people [*rossiiskii narod*].

3. On Indolence: On top of these two harms, there is yet another. Anyone who receives his bread gratuitously, even if it is not much, will neither serve the state without compulsion nor try to improve himself; on the contrary, each will seek any excuse to live in idleness, which (according to Holy Scripture) is the mother of all evil.

In contrast to Item 1: If all real estate were to be handed down to one son and the others were to inherit only movable property, then state revenues would be sounder; the nobleman would be better off even if he should collect small

amounts from a larger number [of serfs]; there will be only one manor [*dom*] instead of five (as stated above); and he can show favor to his subjects [serfs]. As for Item 2: Families will not decline, but will remain stable in all their glory and their manors shall remain famous and renowned. Regarding Item 3: The remaining [members of the family] will not be idle because they will be forced to earn their bread through service, teaching, trade, and so forth. And whatever they do for their own living will also benefit the state.

Because this [new system] is intended to bring benefit, the following is proclaimed:

(a) All real estate, i.e. hereditary, service, and purchased estates, as well as homes and stores, should neither be sold nor mortgaged but retained in the [family] line in the following manner:

(b) Whoever has sons must bequeath his real estate to one, who will inherit all; other children of both sexes, however many there are, will be awarded movable property which either the father or mother will divide for both sons and daughters in the amount they wish, except that the one who inherits the real estate [will be excluded]. If someone does not have sons, but daughters only, he should then designate one in the same manner. If someone fails to assign [his property], a government decree will assign the real estate to the eldest son as his inheritance, while movable property will be divided equally among the others; obviously, the same procedure is to apply to daughters.

(c) Whoever is childless is free to leave his real estate to one of the members of his family, whomever he wishes, and the movable [property] to his kin or even to outsiders. And if he fails to do this, both forms of property will then be divided by a decree among the members of the line, real estate to the closest relative and the rest to all others equally...

Translated by Daniel Field

(1) The decree uses the same word, *podannye*, for subjects of the sovereign (as in the first sentence) as for “subjects” of a squire, i.e. serfs.