



# For the Common Good and Their Own Well-Being: Social Estates in Imperial Russia

*Alison K. Smith*

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Every subject of the Russian Empire had an official, legal place in society marked by his or her social estate, or *soslovie*. These *sosloviia* (noble, peasant, merchant, and many others) were usually inherited, and defined the rights, opportunities, and duties of those who possessed them. They were also usually associated with membership in a specific geographically defined society in a particular town or village. Moreover, although laws increasingly insisted that every subject of the empire possess a *soslovie* "for the common good and their own well-being," they also allowed individuals to change their *soslovie* by following a particular bureaucratic procedure. The process of changing *soslovie* brought together three sets of actors: the individuals who wished to change their opportunities or duties, or who at times had change forced upon them; local societies, which wished to control who belonged to them; and the central, imperial state, which wished above all to ensure that every one of its subjects had a place, and therefore a status. This book looks at the many ways that *soslovie* could affect individual lives and have meaning, then traces the legislation and administration of *soslovie* from the early eighteenth through to the early twentieth century. This period saw a shift from *soslovie* as above all a means of extracting duties or taxes, to an understanding of *soslovie* as instead a means of providing services and ensuring security. The book ends with an examination of the way that a change in *soslovie* could affect not just an individual's biography, but the future of his or her entire family. The result is a new image of *soslovie* as both a general and a very specific identity, and as one that had persistent meaning, for the Imperial state, for local authorities, or for individual subjects, even through 1917.

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