



# **Bankrupts and Usurers of Imperial Russia: Debt, Property, and the Law in the Age of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy (Harvard Historical Studies)**

*Sergei Antonov*

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As readers of classic Russian literature know, the nineteenth century was a time of pervasive financial anxiety. With incomes erratic and banks inadequate, Russians of all social castes were deeply enmeshed in networks of credit and debt. The necessity of borrowing and lending shaped perceptions of material and moral worth, as well as notions of social respectability and personal responsibility. Credit and debt were defining features of imperial Russia's culture of property ownership. Sergei Antonov recreates this vanished world of borrowers, bankrupts, lenders, and loan sharks in imperial Russia from the reign of Nicholas I to the period of great social and political reforms of the 1860s.

Poring over a trove of previously unexamined records, Antonov gleans insights into the experiences of ordinary Russians, rich and poor, and shows how Russia's informal but sprawling credit system helped cement connections among property owners across socioeconomic lines. Individuals of varying rank and wealth commonly borrowed from one another. Without a firm legal basis for formalizing debt relationships, obtaining a loan often hinged on subjective perceptions of trustworthiness and reputation. Even after joint-stock banks appeared in Russia in the 1860s, credit continued to operate through vast networks linked by word of mouth, as well as ties of kinship and community. Disputes over debt were common, and *Bankrupts and Usurers of Imperial Russia* offers close readings of legal cases to argue that Russian courts—usually thought to be underdeveloped in this era—provided an effective forum for defining and protecting private property interests.

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