

Catherine II's Charter of the Nobility (1785)

This charter was issued by Russian empress Catherine II on April 21, 1785. Essentially, it formally recognized a series of rights and privileges that the Russian nobility already held, but by codifying these rights, Catherine pledged herself to honoring them, thereby securing the support of Russia's ruling class. Below is an excerpt of the charter.

. . . As a result of new gains and the expansion of our Empire, when we everywhere enjoy every kind of internal and external peace, we direct our great deed more and more toward an uninterrupted occupation with delivering to our faithful subjects in all vital branches of internal state administration durable and lasting decrees aimed at the increase of happiness and order for future times; toward that aim we find it appropriate to extend our solicitude to our loyal Russian *dворянство* [nobility], in view of the services, zeal, attention, and undeviating faith to All-Russian autocrats—to ourselves as well as to our throne—which it [the nobility] has shown during troublesome times, in war as well as peace. And following God's examples of justice, mercy, and grace, which have beautified the Russian throne and glorified our ancestors, and being moved by our own motherly love and distinct gratitude to the Russian nobility, our imperial judiciousness and will orders, decrees, announces, and approves undeviatingly from eternity, for the benefit of Russian nobility, in our and imperial service, the following articles:

1. The title of the nobility is hereditary and stems from the quality and virtue of leading men of antiquity who distinguished themselves by their service—which they turned into merit and acquired for their posterity the title of the nobility.
2. It is to the advantage of both the Empire and the Crown, as it is also just, that the respectful title of the nobility be maintained and approved firmly and inviolably; and therefore, as formerly, now and in the future the title of the nobility is irrevocable, hereditary, and belongs to those honorable families who use it; and accordingly:
3. A nobleman transmits his noble title to his wife;
4. A nobleman transmits his noble title to his children hereditarily;
5. Neither a nobleman nor a noblewoman can be deprived of the title of the nobility unless they forfeit it themselves by an act contrary to the standards of noble dignity.
6. The following acts are contrary to the standards of noble dignity and can deprive one of the title: (a) violation of an oath; (b) treason; (c) robbery; (d) thefts of all sorts; (e) deceitful acts; (f) violations which call for either corporal punishment or a deprivation of honor; (g) incitement of others to commit violations—if this be established.
7. But since the title of the nobility cannot be revoked except as a result of violation, and marriage is an honest [institution] set up by divine law, when a noblewoman marries a non-noble man she does not forfeit her title; but she cannot pass on her nobility to her husband or her children.
8. A nobleman cannot be deprived of his title without due process of law.
9. A nobleman cannot be deprived of his honor without due process of law.

10. A nobleman cannot be deprived of his life without due process of law.
11. A nobleman cannot be deprived of his property without due process of law.
12. A nobleman can be judged by his peers only.
13. A nobleman who has committed a crime and is legally liable to be deprived either of his title, honor, or life, cannot be punished without his case being presented before the Senate and then approved by his Imperial Majesty.
14. All criminal acts of a nobleman which for ten years went either unnoticed or had no action taken on them we decree be henceforth forgotten forever. . . .
15. A nobleman cannot be subjected to corporal punishment.
16. Noblemen who serve as junior officers in our armed forces should be punished according to regulations applicable to senior officers.
17. We confirm freedom and liberty to the Russian nobility on an hereditary basis for eternity.
18. We confirm the right of the nobles now in service to continue their service or to ask freedom from service on the basis of the regulations established for that purpose.
19. We confirm the right of the nobles to enter the service of other European countries friendly to us and to travel abroad.
20. Since the title and privileges of the nobility in the past, present, and future are acquired by service and work useful to the Empire and the throne, and since the very existence of Russian nobility depends on the security of the country and the throne, whenever Russian autocracy needs the service of the nobility for the general well being, every nobleman is then obligated, the moment the autocratic government calls him, to perform fully his duty and sacrifice his life, if need be, to government service.
21. A nobleman has the right to sign his name not only as lord of his *pomestie* estate, granted to him by the state, but also as owner of his *votchina* estate, inherited from his ancestors or granted through grace.
22. A nobleman has the power and the authority to give away to whomever he wishes the property which he acquired legally as first owner, to bequeath this property in his will, to confer it as dowry, or to sell or give it away for his livelihood. He may, however, dispose of inherited property only in conformity with the provisions of the law.
23. The inheritable property of a nobleman who may be convicted of a serious crime should pass on to his legal heirs.
24. No one should attempt to seize or damage arbitrarily a nobleman's property without due process of law or the legal judgment of the appropriate court of justice.
25. If a nobleman has a claim against another nobleman he should bring it before the appropriate court of justice.

26. The nobles have the right to purchase villages.
27. The nobles have the right to sell wholesale whatever their villages grown or their handicrafts produce.
28. The nobles may have factories and mills in their villages.
29. The nobles may build small towns on their estates on which they may organize trade and annual fairs. [This activity must not be] contrary to state laws, must be done with the full knowledge of governor generals and *gubernia* administrations, and must be arranged in such a way as not to conflict with fairs of other local cities.
30. The nobles have the right to have, to build, or to buy homes in cities and to have handicrafts there.
31. In case a nobleman prefers to make use of the municipal code of civil rights, he may subordinate himself to it.
32. The nobles are hereby permitted to sell abroad wholesale the products harvested or made on their property, or to have them exported from the designated harbors.
33. The nobles have the right granted to them by the gracious *ukaz* of June 28, 1782 to ownership of not only the fruits of the land belonging to them, but also all resources found beneath the surface and in waters, and all of their products, as is fully stated in that *ukaz*.
34. The nobles have the right of ownership of forests which grow on their property and of their free utilization as is fully explained in the gracious *ukaz* of September 22, 1782.
35. The homes of the nobility in villages are to be free from quartering of soldiers. . . .

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