Peasant Life by the Numbers

**Births**:

* Birth rate for peasants from 1850-1900 was fifty per thousand (twice the European average)
* In 1900 1 in 4 peasant babies died before the age of one

**Population:**

* The peasant population grew from 50 to 79 million between 1861-1897
* 65% of the rural population was under the again of 30 in 1897
* The Russian urban population increased from 7 to 28 million in the 19th century as a result of peasants looking for work

**Education:**

* The literacy rate in Russia rose from 21% in 1897 to 40% in 1914
* The number of primary schools went from 25,000 to 100,000 between 1878 and 1911
* By 1911, more than half of all peasant children were attending primary school

**Military:**

* In 1890, 60% of peasant draftees were rejected for army service for medical and physical reasons
* By 1940, 9 out of 10 peasant recruits in the army were considered literate

**Household:**

* 2 out of 3 household were unable to feed themselves without going into debt
* until 1906, peasants did not have the right to own their allotments of land
* in 1900, 7% of the households in Russia had no land at all

**Peasant Response Questions**

1. Based on each of the five categories, predict how each category could cause unrest among Russian peasants. Explain why and be prepared to share
   1. **Births:**
   2. **Population:**
   3. **Military:**
   4. **Education:**
   5. **Household:**
2. Which two statistics do you think are most likely to cause social unrest in Russia? Explain your answer.

**Peasants in Literature**

*Instructions:* Below are short excerpts from two of the great writers of Russian literature: Anton Chekov and Leo Tolstoy. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian artists and intellectuals struggled to understand and portray the role of the peasant in Russia. Read the two excerpts carefully and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to report back to your classmates.

***From The Death of Ivan Ilych***

By Leo Tolstoy, 1886 [In these excerpts from Tolstoy’s short story, Ivan Ilych is a terminally ill judge who is being cared for by his servant, a peasant named Gerasim.]

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| “But just through this most unpleasant matter, Ivan Ilych obtained comfort. Gerasim, the butler’s young assistant, always came in to carry things out. Gerasim was a clean, fresh peasant lad, grown overweight on town food and always cheerful and bright....   “Gerasim with a firm light walk, his heavy boots smell of tar and fresh winter air, came in wearing a clean Hessian apron, the sleeves of his print shirt tucked up over his strong bare young arms; and trying not to look at his sick master out of respect for his feelings, and limiting the joy of life that beamed from his face....   “Gerasim did it all easily, willingly, simply and with a good nature that touched Ivan Ilych. Health, strength, and energy in other people were offensive to him, but Gerasim’s strength and energy did not embarrass but soothed him....   “His mental sufferings were due to the fact that at night, as he looked at Gerasim’s sleepy, good-natured face, the question suddenly occurred to him: ‘What if my whole life has really been wrong?’” |

***From Peasants***

by Anton Chekov, 1897

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| “In the course of the summer and winter there had been hours and days when it had seemed that these people live worse than cattle, when it had been terrible to live with them; they were vulgar, not honest; filthy, not thoughtful; they lived in conflict, fighting constantly, because they did not respect but feared and suspected one another. Who keeps the tavern and makes the people drunkards? A peasant. Who steals and drinks up the common school and church funds? A peasant. Who has stolen from his neighbor, committed arson [fire-starting], given false evidence in court for a bottle of vodka? Who at zemstvo [local government] and other meetings is the first to speak against the peasants? A peasant. Yes, to live with them was terrible, yet all the same they were people; they suffered and cried as people do; and in their lives there was nothing for which excuses might not be found.” |

**Questions:**

1.) List five characteristics that Tolstoy uses to describe the peasant Gerasim.

2.) List five characteristics that Chekov uses to describe peasants.

3.) What conclusions can you make about peasants after reading these two excerpts from Russian literature?