

13 The Peasant Commune and the Stolypin Reforms: Peasant Attitudes, 1906–14

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It has usually been argued that the Stolypin Reforms represented the old regime's, and specifically the landed nobility's, final attempt to save itself from revolutionary destruction.¹ As such, the Reforms have been seen primarily as defending the sacred and holy right of private (that is, noble) property by extending that right to the peasantry. As one report filed by three members of the central administration who had returned from a preliminary trip inspecting the land-organisation commissions candidly noted, at least one of the 'red threads' guiding the government's activity was that 'a transfer of noble [*kul'turnyi*] land to the peasants on the same principles as 1861 would be equivalent to the destruction of the state'.² As a consequence, when the Reforms were first adopted most commentators, whether of the Left or Right, tended to denounce them as an act of political coercion.³ This opposition continued throughout the Reforms' implementation as critics pointed to the peasant disorders associated with the Reforms and the government's use of 'influence', mandatory procedures, and even 'force' to implement them.⁴ In addition, critics cited Stolypin's famous statement about a 'wager on the strong' (which was intended primarily as propaganda to win legislative support for the Reforms) and claimed that the Reforms favoured rich peasants at the expense of the poor.⁵ Thus, it was widely concluded, and historians have tended to support this judgement, the Reforms were a failure, in large measure because the peasants themselves clearly opposed them.⁶ For many, the final proof of this thesis came with the resurgence of the commune during and after 1917, which, it is often argued, demonstrated the peasantry's ultimate preference for the communal system of organisation and way of life.⁷

In order to prove the use of force and the government's commitment to a 'wager on the strong', critics have traditionally assembled statistical evidence that purports either to measure the scale of peasant resistance or to identify which socio-economic groups separated from the commune, formed compact plots, bought and sold allotment land, and migrated to the city or to Siberia, and the reasons behind their choice, with the goal of

demonstrating that both the landless and the land-rich were growing at the expense of the average peasant.⁸ In addition, such 'hard' data are usually supplemented by individual examples culled from the press, from the police archives, or from the various local studies of the reforms.⁹

Such approaches are, however, misleading. On the one hand, both quantitative analyses and 'illustrative' examples can be used to prove almost any argument the investigator chooses to develop; on the other, neither serves to enlighten us as to the real processes and issues involved. The reason for this is quite simple: neither approach either defines or examines the nature of administrative coercion or force. Nor do they study the nature of peasant resistance. Indeed, as yet, no serious attempt has been made to establish a practical basis for determining who is a land-hungry or prosperous peasant. Lenin's strictures about 'averaging' are very much to the point here, for the statistics commonly assembled to demonstrate either land-hunger or land concentration are quite misleading. Not only do they almost always fail to take account of differences in family size, they totally ignore the often vast inequalities that existed between villages in the same district (*uezd*), not to mention between districts, provinces and regions as well as between different nationalities, religious groups and legal categories of peasants. Moreover, as Anfimov has recently pointed out,¹⁰ the role of non-agricultural earnings had become so important by the end of the nineteenth century that neither the area of land sown nor the number of working animals per household can be considered an adequate measure of peasant well-being, as has traditionally been assumed – a fact that the reformers were already well aware of.

To avoid these pitfalls, I have therefore chosen to make more systematic use of the qualitative materials describing the process of land reform and the peasant disturbances that accompanied it, including reports by both the government's inspectors and independent observers (whether of the Left or Right)¹¹; the few personal accounts by men who actually applied the reform legislation, such as permanent members, land captains and surveyors (not all of whom were necessarily pro-reform or even pro-government)¹²; and the few peasant accounts and petitions.¹³ My goal is to develop a deeper understanding of peasant responses to the Stolypin Reforms and specifically to determine whether the peasants were opposed to them in principle or whether there were other factors provoking their hostility. Indirectly, this will also enable me to make some observations concerning peasant attitudes toward the commune itself. First, however, it is necessary to place the Reforms in context and examine the nature of the relationship that developed between government and peasant during the reform process.

What was the juridical condition of the Russian countryside prior to 1906? The simplest and most accurate answer to that question seems to be that it was in a state of complete chaos. Accustomed as we are to dividing Russian landed property into various legal categories, the reality was that,

despite the emancipation's attempt to separate peasant land from the nobility's, the state's, and the royal family's properties, these efforts had failed dismally. Of all peasant lands, only some 13 per cent were ever delimited in nature – the rest being as undifferentiated in 1906 as they had been prior to emancipation. In just 36 provinces of Great Russia, nearly 75 million *desiatiny* of noble land remained undelimited. At the same time, well over 150 million *desiatiny* continued to be held in open-field tenure with lands held by other owners. And in the western provinces, which are not included in this calculation, not only did open fields predominate as well, there were other forms of collective rights to land, known as *servituty*, which affected more than one-third of all properties.¹⁴ Finally, as has frequently been pointed out, even though a rental market in land developed after the emancipation, land peasants rented was most often land they had cultivated for their former owners under serfdom.¹⁵

Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that the peasantry failed to make any absolute distinction between their own land and that of their non-peasant and even peasant neighbours, as was required by the government, or that they failed to develop a modern conception of property rights. More important, the government's failure to transform the concept of private property rights into reality by demarcating boundaries led to a situation of almost permanent conflict which set individual peasants and peasant communities against both nobles and other peasant communities in what amounted to a permanent state of guerrilla warfare over property boundaries. This picture is only further complicated by the huge variety of special property rights that existed, including those of non-Slavic peoples, Cossacks, colonists such as the Armenians, Greeks, and Mennonites, Old Believers and other religious dissenters, Polish nobles, holders of beggarly allotments, peasants who had bought private land, and private peasant partnerships. No wonder then that prior to 1906 the courts were clogged with law suits over property rights, for it was virtually impossible to prove whose land was whose, since there were rarely any written documents and no surveying markers to support the claim of either party to a dispute. Possession, indeed, was nine-tenths of the law.

The Stolypin Reforms' most immediate and practical goal was thus the reorganisation of peasant landownership and the replacement of peasant customary law in the area of property rights with educated society's very different conception of 'law'.¹⁶ Needless to say, the attempts of the Reforms' local executors to impose their version of 'law' on peasant society only served to revive all the unresolved conflicts of past generations and exacerbate existing conflicts, thereby immeasurably complicating the task of reforming patterns of landholding and land use. Nor were there any easy solutions. In one such case, for example, claims were based on an agreement dating from 1820; in a second, on a grant from Tsar Alexis – a mere 250 years earlier.¹⁷

Confused as such property relations were, they were made still more complicated by the presence of the peasant commune, both repartitional and non-repartitional.¹⁸ As we know, the commune discouraged the development of individualistic and absolute notions of property rights in a variety of ways. Thus, while each peasant family knew the exact size and location of its strips at any given moment, open-field farming, compulsory systems of crop rotation, communal grazing and servitude effectively modified peasant individualism and superimposed at least a limited form of collective right. In addition, in those communes that repartitioned their land periodically, peasants cultivated only a share of the community's property on a temporary basis. At the next repartition, not only could their share be reduced (or increased) but the location of their strips might also be changed. Together, it is usually argued, these circumstances combined to prevent the development of a private property consciousness among the peasantry.¹⁹

This is not to say that peasants had no conception of property rights. On the contrary, the commune was the locus of a major conflict over landed rights such that repartitioning was one of the most difficult and contentious periods in the commune's life-cycle.²⁰ Indeed, this was so much the case that the post-emancipation repartitional commune seems to have been the embodiment *not* of some innate peasant egalitarianism but rather of a deep-rooted peasant egoism.²¹ That is to say, in the face of the extreme competitiveness, individualism and self-interestedness of the commune's members, the primary function of the periodical repartition, and thus of the commune, seems to have been to serve as a conflict-resolution mechanism.²² Only by dividing the land up into different fields according to location, soil type, water supply, topography and so on, and then repartitioning it periodically in conformity to the changing family composition of its members, could the jealousies and conflicts within the village be resolved in anything like an amicable way.

There is, of course, a plethora of evidence concerning the functioning of the commune during the half-century prior to 1905, much of which testifies to the nature of the conflicts that existed within it and that it was forced to resolve. These included conflicts between rich and poor, young and old, members and outsiders, as well as between peasants and their officials.²³ Moreover, while often idealised, the commune was increasingly seen as a captive of rich peasants (kulaks) who used their political and economic influence and the influence of vodka to exploit their co-villagers and subvert its supposed egalitarianism.²⁴ Indeed, the situation had become so bad that rather than serving as a primitive form of welfare institution protecting peasants from landlessness, the commune was actually creating growing numbers of rural proletarians.²⁵

Now, into this state of endemic conflict and legal chaos, let us introduce, first, the external forces of the government land-reformers – not only the

permanent members of the land-organisation commissions, and the land captains, but also the surveyors who were usually the people charged with carrying any given reform project into practice and who therefore bore the brunt of peasant ire when disputes arose; and second, their revolutionary opponents. The first group, of course, sought to change the traditional and customary structure of rural life – though ‘capitalism’, the market economy, and competitive individualism were also contributing to the disruption of traditional relationships. Meanwhile the revolutionaries, though weaker, actively sought to disrupt the Reforms’ implementation by playing on traditional peasant hostilities to outside, especially government, intervention. Clearly, the situation in the countryside was extremely sensitive and volatile.

The government, of course, was not unaware of these problems and made every effort to resolve them.²⁶ In the light of past failures to impose the government’s ‘law’ on the countryside,²⁷ the new reformers based their proposals on a broad and progressive conception of both human psychology and the juridical realities of the Russian countryside that recognised the inevitability of conflicts between competing and vested interests and the impossibility of determining where in fact ‘truth’ or ‘right’ lay.²⁸ Thus, the instructions that were drawn up to guide the local land-organisation commissions effectively established a set of collective bargaining procedures designed to resolve such conflicts on the basis of negotiation and compromise.²⁹ At the same time, rather than imposing their own preconceived solution to the agrarian problem from above, the reformers tried to determine the actual direction in which ‘history’ was moving. Along with many other economic analysts in Europe and Russia, they concluded that this direction was towards the development of individual forms of property ownership and cultivation.³⁰ Thus, they hoped that by creating individualistic forms of property ownership and especially cultivation, they could stimulate individual initiative and creativity, increase the productivity of both land and labour, and thereby offer the peasants an escape from what they saw as the apathy, hopelessness, and routine of traditional communal life.

Of course, the key to the peasants’ reception of the Stolypin Reforms lay in the social realm – in the relationship that developed between the Reforms’ executors and the peasants themselves. Two factors are important here: first, the personality of the local government official and his conduct during the various stages of the process³¹; second, the peasants’ understanding of the process, its economic content and goals, and, of course, the degree of trust they were able to develop toward such officials.³²