Proletarian Peasants

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Proletarian Peasants: The Revolution of 1905 in Russia's Southwest.

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Preface

This book examines the actions of peasants during the Russian Revolution of 1905. It concentrates on the right-bank Ukraine, an agriculturally advanced region known before 1917 as the southwestern borderland of the Russian Empire,¹ and is based on research conducted in regional Soviet archives little used by western historians. The work deals at the same time with the larger issues of rural revolution and peasant politics which activists and scholars throughout the world have debated for the last century and a half. Even today the majority of humanity is still peasant, and the difficulties of the developing world undermine global stability in such a way as to give these debates and issues continuing vitality.

The Russian experience is particularly germane to the understanding and resolution of these problems. At the time of the Revolution of 1917, three-quarters of the Russian population was rural. Events in the cities may have been decisive for the Bolshevik victory, but the revolution could not have succeeded without the mas-

¹Throughout the text I have used “right-bank Ukraine” and “southwest” interchangeably simply in order to avoid repetition. Given the Ukraine’s historical subjection to Russia, this rhetorical convenience might be taken to mask real differences in significance which are not intended here. To say “southwest” rather than “right-bank” could be construed as an acceptance of the idea of Russian domination, but such an impression of my position would be mistaken.
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sive upheaval that swept the villages. Since then many historians of other nations have sought to understand the peasant world through theoretical approaches developed by Russian thinkers who survived the years of profound change in the countryside.

Because peasant revolution continues to be a matter for current concern, I have tried to make this investigation accessible to general readers as well as specialists. This choice has required that I write a work of manageable length, using nontechnical language. When two or three examples sufficiently demonstrate a phenomenon, I have restrained myself from including another eight. The first two chapters situate the case study in terms of the issues of rural revolution and peasant politics. Specialists will find original material primarily in chapters 3 and 4, which deal with the events of 1905.

The title of this work may seem an oxymoron. Proletarians and peasants have been, after all, very different kinds of laboring people. Rarely have they shared geography, economic activity, or cultural attitudes. More often than not, their political allegiances have diverged. My first concern is with the rural world. Peasants are my primary subject. “Proletarian,” used as a modifier, merely describes certain characteristics of people who are otherwise fundamentally peasant.

This choice of words is deliberate. When a socialist revolution took place in Russia in 1917, it did so with the support of a politically conscious and militant revolutionary urban working class. Recent scholarship has located Bolshevik support among the most skilled and educated segments of the proletariat. This experience was unlike that of contemporary western Europe, where workers who had spent many years in the city took reformist rather than revolutionary paths. Scholars of Russia long sought to explain these differences by identifying the special characteristics of the Russian working class. Concentrating on Russia’s backwardness, many emigré historians, representing the views of defeated candidates for power, argued that Russian workers were closer to their rural roots than their counterparts in the West. Illiterate Russian peasants were assumed to be unconsciously angry, rebellious, anarchic, and violent. Rebellious proletarians were then presumed to be peasants in worker disguise. The violence of the Russian worker could, in this fashion, be explained away.
Despite the new wave of scholarship, this theme remains alive, and there is still disagreement concerning the degree to which the Russian urban proletariat retained its rural roots.

In this book, I want to turn the tables and ask the opposite question: Under what circumstances might rural cultivators display the kind of rational, goal-directed behavior often ascribed to workers during strikes and revolutionary crises? Peasants acted in backward ways because they confronted conditions of backwardness. But was this phenomenon universal? In regions with modern, capitalistically organized agriculture, could one reasonably expect peasants also to react rationally and consciously at moments of political stress? The Ukrainian provinces of Kiev, Podol'e, and Volynia on the right bank of the Dniepr river comprised just such a modern region. During the revolutionary turmoil that began in 1905, these provinces witnessed thousands of strikes and disorders involving several million peasants and agricultural workers. Right-bank peasants demonstrated a capacity to formulate reasonable and realizable demands and to choose tactics and methods likely to achieve their goals. They were not especially violent, and their actions represented far more than the expression of elemental rage.

I am also attempting here to draw western scholars of Russia away from their search for the general and the typical. Those who have examined the history of other nations have produced a wide array of local and regional studies. Soviet specialists have done the same thing for the prerevolutionary Empire. Western historians of Russia, however, have not paid sufficient attention to the sharp regional variations in a vast territory. When they have focused on specific locales, they have until recently limited themselves to Moscow and Petersburg. Studies of rural Russia, when they have been focused at all, have tended to concentrate on the backward, but supposedly “typical,” Central Black Earth and Mid-Volga regions. Assumptions about events and processes in significant peripheries have then been based on the picture of the center. Would a scholar of American agriculture claim that the findings of a work on farming in Iowa are typical for the rest of the United States? To gain a picture of what was truly universal, it is necessary to look outside the center of Russia.

For this reason, I have not sought to produce an account of the
Revolution of 1905 throughout rural Russia. In the course of broader works, Geroid T. Robinson, Teodor Shanin, Maureen Pere­rie, and Roberta Manning have provided clear and consistent pictures of rural Russia at that time. The highly empirical accounts of 1905 written by Soviet scholars in their own way support the approach of western historians. I have little quarrel with this prevailing view. My purpose, instead, has been to look closely at one analytically significant region, using local archival material to test concepts and theories relevant to the study not only of the Russian peasantry but of peasant revolution in general.

The reference to archives raises several thorny methodological points involved in research on the Russian peasantry. To paraphrase Marx, human beings write history but they do not write it under conditions of their own making. Ultimately historians are at the mercy of the sources available to them. Only Soviet scholars have produced detailed statistical treatments of the Russian peasant movement because only Soviet specialists have the unlimited access to archives and research time to produce such findings. Western scholars are granted limited stays in the Soviet Union. Once they are in the archives, they cannot see everything they wish to see. Catalogues can only rarely be consulted, and modern methods of photoreproduction have not been available. One may be shown but a portion of a large body of extant material. Extreme caution is required in the assessment of the typicality of those documents one does get to read.

Western scholars can make use of published statistical information available in Soviet and western libraries. Yet it is difficult if not impossible to correlate one’s own archival data with Soviet statistics on peasant disturbances. Soviet and western analytical categories do not always correspond, and Soviet scholars are divided on the meaning of their own categories. I had hoped to correlate harvest statistics, available in the West, with archival information on strikes and disorders, but it proved impossible to obtain data that could be used alongside the published material. One is often limited to reproducing the work of Soviet historians. This information can then be combined with the more qualitative material found in the archives and elsewhere.

I make no claim to have resolved this methodological dilemma. I
have sought to combine all sources, while pushing no claim beyond the limits of the available material. At times this method has required caution when boldness would be more satisfying to reader and author alike. Because of the difficulty of obtaining direct evidence, much western scholarship on rural Russia has concentrated on outsiders’ perceptions of peasants. We know a great deal less about the peasants’ own actions. Although I have paid attention to the rich Russian intellectual tradition concerning the peasant, my primary aim has been to describe what the peasants themselves actually did. Given the elusiveness of the peasant world, this has not always been an act of simple empiricism.

All dates in this work are in the Old Style Gregorian calendar used before the Revolution of 1917. The old calendar was thirteen days behind the new Julian calendar. This fact explains why, for example, the Revolution of October 25 is now celebrated on November 7.

There is no universally accepted system of transliteration used to render the Cyrillic alphabet into Latin letters. I have chosen to use the system known as Library of Congress, Type II.

This is a book about struggle, and it was written during several difficult years of professional and personal struggle. But though the period may have been a trial, it certainly was not a lonely one. I received much love, support, criticism, and comradeship during the years I was working on this book. My name may be on the cover, but the enterprise was truly a social one. For this, I am profoundly grateful.

David Macey and Maureen Perrie were my first mentors when I sought job retraining as a peasant specialist. They have read various drafts of the manuscript and have been constant sources of wisdom. Steve Hahn, Tom Dublin, and Esther Kingston-Mann carefully read the final product. Terry Emmons and Daniel Field criticized an earlier version. I have learned much from discussions with Tim Mixter, John Channon, Eric Van Young, Steve Wheatcroft, Bob Brenner, Judith Pallot, Bob Moeller, Frank Sysyn, and Rose Glickman. Ron Suny, Hans Rogger, Alexander Rabinowich, William Rosenberg, Reginald Zelnik, Loren Graham, Arno May-
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