

Ineffectual Peasant Petitions for Democracy Fall on Deaf Ears

Since the Emancipation of the serfs by Alexander II in 1861, peasants across all of the Russian provinces could think only of their freedom from the rule of others. According to the account of one peasant from the Nizhegorod Province, the “peasants were waiting for “Volia.”¹ The concept of “Volia” to the Russian people represents “absolute autonomy and freedom.”² Despite their emancipation decades earlier, the descendants of former serfs still had to pay rent and they lacked control of the land they considered to be rightfully theirs. Throughout the revolutionary year of 1917, the common theme of land and freedom can be seen as foremost in the minds of Russian peasants, beginning immediately after the February revolution. The account of F.D. Sorokin, a Russian peasant serving as a sailor, clearly outlines the concerns and contributions of Russian peasants in the Tambov province regarding the arrival of social and political change. As the months of 1917 wore on, the strength of the Bolshevik party grew progressively greater. However, despite the growing influence of the far left, Russian peasants maintained their opinions regarding political organization, a sentiment marked by the tone of their increased contribution to political life in the late summer and fall of that year. The desire for complete personal and political freedom evident in Sorokin’s report on the peasants appears to have been the motivation for peasant actions and loyalties in the period between the months of February and November of 1917.

When Sorokin first arrived in Tambov province to bring news of the February Revolution towards the end of March 1917, he found that the peasants “knew that Nicholas was no longer on

¹ Russian peasant, “Recollections of a Peasant” (early 20th c.), in Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922*, Doc. 32, p. 79.

² Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922*, Footnote, p. 79.

the throne but had absolutely no idea about who was ruling Russia in his place.”³ The exclusion of the peasants from the revolutionary fervor in Petrograd at this time was common in many Russian provinces. Nikolai Burakov, a peasant from Perm Province, entreated the Provisional Government, within days of Sorokin’s encounters, for change in favor of peasant autonomy in the rural provinces. He pointed out that, while “the peasant village waits impatiently, . . . nothing has changed at all. Brutal force is still used, just as always.”⁴ The peasants’ demand for a freedom achieved through liberation of public lands from those loyal to the old regime marked the beginning of their efforts to convince the Provisional Government to grant them further liberties. The limited amount of information available concerning peasants’ reactions to the early days of the Provisional Government can be attributed to what Sorokin calls “spring labors,” when the peasants committed themselves to plowing and sowing. Once these duties were concluded, he asserted that peasants “began to devote more time to political and social issues.”⁵

The months of April and May 1917 saw an increased peasant concern for the new way in which the Provisional Government proposed they would be represented in Petrograd. However, their main concerns remained the same. The first peasant question that Sorokin cited was “what if [they were to] elect a person to the Constituent Assembly who fails to defend [their] interests . . . ?”⁶ Sorokin specifically mentioned this one concern out of the many that he receives that day in order to emphasize the focusing of the Russian peasants on the issue of their own well-being and their own freedom. When voicing their opinions as to how the new government should serve the people, the peasants told Sorokin they preferred a nation in which there was no

³ Sorokin, F.D. (peasant-sailor), “Setting up Local Soviets in Tambov Province” (March-May 1917), in Daly and Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution*, Doc. 30, p. 75.

⁴ Burakov, Nikolai (peasant), “Letter to *Izvestiia*” (March 30, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, Doc. 38, p. 128.

⁵ Sorokin, “Local Soviets,” in Daly and Trofimov, *Russia*, p. 75.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 76.

proposed organizational structure, where “everything belongs to the people and the people should decided everything.”⁷ This unequivocal assertion by the Russian peasants entails the people gaining all of the rights and the land that they deserve, and harkens back to the concept of “Volia.” The Russian masses once again proved that their idea of complete independence entails self-government, and the ability to choose a new social order. However, more than proposals were needed to elicit change in a government as new as the one instituted in Petrograd the early summer of 1917. Peasants from Novgorod Province took action in order to preserve the popularly elected Provisional Government, which they believed to be the key in protecting the fair representation of the common people of Russia. The peasants declared themselves “indignant that Revolutionary Petrograd is permitting overt and covert insults at the men the people have chosen to take Power.”⁸ By this statement, a large group of peasants asserted themselves as capable of defending their right to elect a representative government, as well as demonstrating to the revolutionaries in Petrograd that the people of Russia were no longer ignorant in the ways of politics and the rights due to them as Russian citizens. These peasants further declared that “the necessary fullness of power” lay only in cooperation between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet.⁹ The core of the peasant argument for the defense of the Provisional Government’s power was that the people were the ones who put this government into existence. In order to ensure that they maintained the right to elect government officials, these peasants decided that they must act by publicly announcing their support for the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Peasants and Workers of Novgorod Province, “General Meeting Protocol” (May 21, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, Doc. 15, p. 99.

⁹ Ibid.

Provisional Government and berating the radical revolutionaries “who have not been authorized” by the people.¹⁰

As the summer of 1917 progressed, the Provisional Government continuously left its promises to the people unfulfilled. However, given the alternative of the Bolsheviks on one end of the spectrum, or the bourgeois capitalists on the other, the peasants remained loyal to their belief that their freedom relied on the government that they placed in control. Even with the influence of Lenin’s followers and the increase in his popularity among certain groups of citizens, the peasants reaffirmed their loyalty to the Provisional Government in an example of what Sorokin characterizes as “unity of action.”¹¹ The peasants of the Russian provinces desired for all peasants in Russia and around the world to act according to a universal set of standards, not for the government officials, but for the true “people of Russia.”¹² Their consensus is most evident in their encouragement of the Provisional Government from June all the way until September: “...Soon the country will hear the voice of firm authority which will put an end to all the counterrevolutionary actions and statements of both the right and extreme left and bring us closer to peace.”¹³ The peasants repeatedly placed their full trust in the Provisional Government for the sake of achieving “Volia” for all Russian people. With these praises, the peasants did not mention any specific policies which the Provisional Government could use to the benefit of the people. Instead, the common thread in all of their declarations of loyalty seems to be the fact that the Provisional Government was the first act of the peasants as independent citizens. They behaved in this way to preserve what they believed to be the only route to a fairly balanced

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sorokin, “Local Soviets,” in Daly and Trofimov, *Russia*, p. 76.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Peasants of the Kuban Region, “Telegram to the Provisional Government and Congress of Soviets” (June 18, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, Doc. 19, p. 104.

Constituent Assembly. The Provisional Government was to rule “on the basis of the self-determination of peoples and will lead the country up to the Constituent Assembly.”¹⁴

Following the disaster of the July Days, Russia was in a complete upheaval because of the failure of the Provisional Government, in the opinions of citizens such as General Kornilov, to provide a truly revolutionary political order for Russia. In early September, in the days leading up to the attempted military coup and the subsequent request for the Bolsheviks to use arms to stifle Kornilov’s revolt, peasants of Botsmanovo-Ivanovsk Volost write to Kerensky to reinforce their loyalty to the popularly elected government. Even “in this ominous hour, . . . the working peasantry hastens to declare that it will be with [Kerensky] to the end.”¹⁵ The precepts of the revolution that the peasants hold in such high regard, liberty, equality, and fraternity, would be threatened should the Provisional Government fall. However, instead of taking action to defend the Provisional Government, the peasants declare that they “will die for freedom.”¹⁶ Just as the peasants professed their “faith in the victory of revolutionary democracy over all . . . dark forces,”¹⁷ the peasants pledged to Kerensky their verbal and spiritual support, but refrained from taking definitive action. Subsequently, the Provisional Government, devoid of any powerful force to support its interests, began to weaken.

By October 1917, the peasants finally began to question the authority of the Provisional Government. However, they did so in a way that confirmed the peasants’ belief in “unity of action,” according to Sorokin. These protests arose, not in the form of violent outbursts and revolts against the government, but through detailed petitions outlining the exact concessions

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Working peasantry, “Telegram to Kerensky” (September 2, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, Doc. 99, p. 246.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Peasant of Kuban Region, “Telegram to the Provisional Government” (June 18, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, p. 104.

that the peasants desired to be given them by the government in Petrograd. A meeting of peasants from Petrograd Province produced a Resolution that denounced the Provisional Government as “bourgeois,” and demanded that the Petrograd Soviet “immediately exercise all its powers to carry out the will of the revolutionary people.”¹⁸ Interestingly enough, the peasants still avoided support of the Bolshevik belief system. They cited Bolsheviks as the “counterrevolutionary forces” that the Provisional Government “released.”¹⁹ Instead of taking up the Bolshevik cause in response to the failure of the Provisional Government, they reiterated the rights and freedoms for which they had elected the Provisional Government, using the word “immediately” multiple times to demonstrate that the people still demanded their freedom. In addition, they described the actions of the Provisional Government as “[bringing] shame upon Revolutionary Russia before the revolutionary democracy of the entire world.”²⁰ This statement contradicts the entire argument the Russian people had previously made for the Soviet claiming power in Petrograd. The peasants still believed that the revolution is a democratic one, even though the actions of the socialist revolutionaries have proven to be of the opposite nature. They still appealed to whatever power they could, encouraged by the promise of a Constituent Assembly that would incorporate what they saw as their rights to civil liberties and complete autonomy into the political structure of Russia.

Following the Bolshevik takeover, peasants remained loyal to their united cause across Russia. In a completely different province, the Voronezh Province, a consolidated peasant organization proposed the new policies of the Constituent Assembly. Even in late November of 1917, when the Bolsheviks were already in power, peasants still believed in “the future Russian

¹⁸ Peasants of the Petrograd Province, “Resolution” (October 17, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, Doc. 100, p. 247.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Democratic Republic,” and requested at the conclusion of their petition that the Constituent Assembly simply “Satisf[y]...the peasants’ basic needs.”²¹ The election of a representative assembly only further encouraged the peasants to believe in such a Revolutionary Democracy, despite everything that the Bolsheviks professed in their party line. The action that the peasants took by submitting this petition was not one of an educated political assessment, but one of ignorance. They did not present their petition in order to outline obvious flaws in the Bolshevik government and their potential solutions. The peasants considered their petition a reminder to the government of its promise to provide freedom to the people of Russia, and they failed to identify the glaring inconsistencies between their political beliefs and those of the Bolsheviks. These inconsistencies would have prevented, in any situation, the satisfaction of the peasants regarding their freedom, a fact they could not see. However, the lifelong belief in freedom harbored by every Russian peasant caused them to maintain a steady course of political action amid the revolutionary rapids churning around them.

By the start of 1918, the peasants finally realized that they were not going to achieve “Volia,” even with the government that they thought they had put in power. In May 1917, Sorokin observes that, rather than try to understand the political situation, the peasants inquire as to the state of *their* rights, and how the new government could provide them with the land and freedom that they cannot live without. This obsessive desire to reclaim the land declared their decades before defeated any possibility of a decisive peasant revolt that would prevent the Bolsheviks from taking power. They placed their trust in their own electorate regardless of the fact that in the new government of Russia, no such representation was even taken into account. Their petitions, letters, and resolutions could not divert the Bolshevik party from its course

²¹ Peasant Organization, Voronezh Province, “Instruction to the Constituent Assembly” (November 17, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, Doc. 125, p. 294-295.

towards a dictatorship of the few. The reason why peasant entreaties did not achieve change was that the peasants acted within the bounds of a democratic government, and, due to either their ignorance or their single-mindedness, they could not see that democracy did not have a foothold in Russian politics at the time of the February Revolution, and that it never would as long as the Bolshevik regime retained power. When the peasants finally began to express feelings for the Bolshevik party that they had maintained but never voiced, it was too late. They called Lenin a “criminal” to his face and warned him to “beware...[the peasants] get[ting] out of [their] peasant coats.”²² The passion underlying this accusation was exactly the tone that the peasants failed to convey in all their protests and petitions throughout 1917. Russian peasants allowed their actions to be guided by the belief that only a popularly elected government could grant them freedom. For all of their strengths, namely their “unity of action” and belief, the Russian people exhibited weakness in failing to unite against the Bolshevik party. By doing so, they successfully defeated the possibility of ever achieving “Volia.”

²² Peasants from Moscow Province, “Letter to Lenin” (January 7, 1918), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, Doc. 127, p. 301.

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