Peasant Frustration with Stagnation of Provisional Government

The question of land reform was naturally an important issue of Russian peasants whose concerns revolved around the desire to work sufficiently sized plots of land effectively. Russian peasants maintained the underlying philosophy that land should be in the hands of those who work it. Peasants demanded access to land, but were primarily not interested in the conception of land ownership.¹ In the revolutionary atmosphere of 1917, the implementation of land reforms to address peasant demands finally seemed within the realm of possibilities, though much to the peasants’ dismay, the Provisional Government stagnated over the question of land reform and did not act to place land in the hands of peasants.² Impatience with the inaction of the Provisional Government regarding the land question motivated many peasants at the Provincial Congress of Peasants’ Deputies in Samara from 25-29 March 1917 to pass temporary measures of land reform which immediately addressed their concerns, but were subject to revision by the Constituent Assembly once it convened.³

I argue that despite the peasantry’s apparent respect for Petrograd governing bodies, S. Volkov’s description of this provincial peasant congress in the Petrograd socialist revolutionary (SR) newspaper, The People’s Cause, on 5 May 1917 shows the erosion of the Provisional Government’s influence in the countryside through the creation of a frustrated, revolutionary peasant soviet that took land reform powers into their own hands.

S. Volkov, the author of the document “On the Samara Provincial Peasant Congress (Regarding the Land Question),” was an SR activist who stated that “a list of the congress’s

² Ibid., 247.
reports, which included discussions and resolutions, is in itself enough to characterize this congress as successful.” ⁴ Most likely, Volkov had a personal interest in the success of this peasant congress as an SR, a political group dedicated to addressing peasant concerns. Volkov not only found the reforms implemented during this congress to be successes for the peasantry, but also felt it achieved a more fundamental goal “to organize and unify the peasantry and give the village peasantry a voice in this revolutionary period.” ⁵ Volkov goes further to defend the degree of representation of the common peasantry in this congress by rebutting a statement by Mr. Kondrushkin, a military correspondent, who stated “the Congress was composed predominately of townsmen.” ⁶ In disagreement, S. Volkov states definitively that “the protocols of participants’ speeches show that these were predominately ordinary peasants, not the wealthy peasants or kulaks that Mr. Kondrushkin evidently observed.” ⁷ This rebuttal asserts the authenticity of the resolutions reached during this peasant congress, and of the subsequently established Provisional Provincial Soviet of Peasants’ Deputies, as solutions made by ordinary peasants, for ordinary peasants.

Volkov’s newspaper article cites the first five points of General Regulations formed during this peasant congress, with the first point establishing the foundation of peasant philosophy described earlier, “Land must be in the hands of the toiling population.” ⁸ In addition, the first point of the general regulations states that “a final decision about the form of landownership awaits the Constituent Assembly and those law-based institutions that it will create.” ⁹ The subsequent points involve forbidding the sale or purchase of privately owned lands, and that tools, machinery, and land that is unused by private landowners must be given to the people’s

⁴ Ibid, 154. ⁵ Ibid. ⁶ Ibid. ⁷ Ibid. ⁸ Ibid, 155. ⁹ Ibid.
government’s township committees for redistribution. As historians have shown, the Provisional Government did not act on land reform, yet insisted that the peasants do not take the law into their own hands and wait for reforms implemented by the Constituent Assembly. Though these peasants implemented reforms counter the Provisional Government’s wishes, it is interesting that these peasants conveyed their respect in these resolutions for the Petrograd governing bodies by stating they would await a final decision on land ownership from the Constituent Assembly. Thus, these resolutions were cleverly designed to minimize the likelihood of punishment by the Provisional Government by affirming the peasantry’s respect for representative, governing bodies while implementing the reforms peasants deem necessary to achieve their goal of immediately increasing the land sown to provide the motherland with more grain and to prevent civil war.

The implementation of these new reforms during this peasant congress illustrates the peasantry’s frustration with the Provisional Government’s indecisiveness concerning the land question, and their urgency to implement provisional provincial land reforms immediately. To express peasant exasperation, Volkov states in his article that “Doing [our own reforms] is necessary. The villages cannot wait for the Petrograd government offices.” The peasant vexation was also stated not to be localized to the Samara province, but rather that “peasants in every village in the land are inventing guidelines and laws...” This widespread peasant impatience with the Provisional Government coupled with their immediacy to implement land reforms in some regions shows the power of the Petrograd government waning in the countryside at the expense of

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10 Ibid.
13 Ibid
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
the waxing power of emerging peasant soviets. This revolutionary agrarian movement and the formation of peasant soviets was precisely what Vladimir Lenin wanted to occur as described in his famous April Theses (April 4, 1917).\textsuperscript{16} Interestingly, in Order No. 1 from the Petrograd Soviet (March 1, 1917) only a month earlier, there was no mention of desired formation of peasant soviets.\textsuperscript{17} Lenin seemed to be in tune with the revolutionary agrarian movement of emerging peasant soviets during March 1917, while the Provisional Government was stagnating over the question of land reform and further irritating the peasantry by telling them to wait for the Constituent Assembly. Thus, this example in the Samara province of the formation of a provincial peasantry soviet shows the erosion of the power of the Provisional Government in the countryside, precisely as Lenin intended according to his April Theses.

\textbf{Works Cited}


