

Turner Bohlen

A Landowners' Desperate Appeal to Peasant Sympathies

During the late summer and fall of 1917 class conflict, land seizures, estate burnings, and general worry over the state of the Russian nation increased substantially.

Peasant pogroms were destroying the holdings of many private landowners, inducing a sense of panic within the landed classes. In Tambov province, seeing the government's actions to prevent seizures as too little too late, the landowners composed a letter to the peasants in an attempt to convince them to stop their destructive assaults on private farms and estates. While the letter begins convincingly, the final paragraphs dissolve into a despondent and admonishing explanation of their coming doom. This, along with the language used throughout the letter, suggests this is the landowners' final hope and they see little chance of it succeeding. Indeed, their argument was flawed and, we now know, had little effect on the peasants of the province.

Initially, the landowners attempted to change the peasants' minds by arguing that the two groups had far fewer differences than the peasants thought. Rather than wealthy, uncaring aristocrats, "the new landowners who come from all social strata, are sober and thrifty people, lovers of the land who know how to organize and improve our farms," wrote the landowners.¹ Although partially true – Stolypin's reforms had allowed a number of peasants to create their own private farms

¹ "Peasant Unrest in Tambov Province in August-September 1917" (August 1917), in Michael Hickey, *Competing Voices from the Russian Revolution* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2011), p. 332.

external to the mir – this was likely a political white lie. If the landowners could remove the association between private land ownership and class, the peasants might not see the landowners as a natural enemy. Next, the private landowners claimed that they, too, saw the need for change: “We have lived very badly in our careless and disorderly state.”² This, too, was likely a white lie. Numerous landowners were nobles who lived quite well under the tsars and were very sad to see the old order go.

In a second somewhat construed argument, the landowners addressed the socialist’s complete lack of fitness for government power. They would do anything for power: “Already they are busy trying to save their own skins... which became wretched when they seized power.”³ They had no respect for the people: “To them, the people are weak, poor, faded, and cowardly.”⁴ They had no understanding of international politics: “Using absurd expressions, they dictate lessons and make demands to the great cultured nations of Western Europe.”⁵ Why, though, would expelling the socialists reduce land seizures? Again, this likely was an attempt to reduce the class warfare. The landowners hoped that, without socialist ideals, the peasants would no longer see them as enemies. No longer would private farms be targets. This, though, is a profoundly flawed approach, as land seizures were occurring long before the socialists had any power at all, much less control over half the government.

² *Ibid.*, p.332.

³ *Ibid.*, p.332.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.332.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.332.

Possibly recognizing the falsehoods and flaws strewn within the first two-thirds of their letter, the landowners' tone became scolding, rather than logical, in the last paragraphs. "We can find no place for ourselves in our reckless state, just as the socialists previously could not,"⁶ write the landowners, but it is clear the peasants would like nothing more than to completely rid themselves of private landowners. If anything, the peasants would have found this only encouraging, and sentences such as, "The people ... are themselves introduced another crime into law – criminal seizure – as the foundation of their lazy prosperity,"⁷ only provocative. Such angry, frustrated writing implies panic on the part of the landowners.

Although they tried their best to convince the peasants of their mistake, the landowners recognized that, "This is inevitable, although it is bitter and terrible: from among hundreds of thousands of impoverished landowners, a tenth will have their property taken permanently."⁸ Indeed, the landowners end the letter with "We face this horror alone, but there will be consolation in God's fiery vengeance," implying a lack of hope for the future in this world.⁹ Doubting that even this letter will help, the landowners felt they could only rely on the judgment of the supernatural to even the score.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.333.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.332.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.333.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.333.