

Peasant Views on Land Reforms and Governance, Autumn 1917

“The land [we share] is our mother; she feeds us; she gives us shelter.”¹ A peasant appeal to a local newspaper in August 1917 contemplated on the relationship of Russian peasants to the land. If one looks back in Russian history, it is immediately clear that the issue of land had been at the forefront of debate for peasants stemming all the way to the Emancipation of Serfs by Alexander II. Historically, the land had been the source of peasant livelihood for centuries, and there was no other party in Russian society that understood and knew the land as well as the peasants themselves. The situation took on an interesting turn in the year 1917, as the unstable Provisional Government headed by Kerensky began to show signs of disintegration. Sensing that the winds of reform are imminent, peasants began to rally their efforts to impress the central government on the importance of land reform. The peasant letters collected immediately before the October Revolution provide valuable glimpses into peasant concerns during the beginnings of the tumultuous leadership change of this period.

To fully appreciate the concerns of the peasants in 1917, it is necessary to take a step back and evaluate the consequences of land reform prior to 1917. Peasant land rights were governed in the period prior to 1917 by the Stolypin Land Reforms, a series of decrees passed from 1905 to 1917. The decrees were a relic of the tsardom of Nicholas II, and were hastily designed in 1905 to head off a potential peasant revolution, although the tsardom had been considering tackling the issue of land reform since 1880.² The aim of the Stolypin Reforms was primarily to modernize the Russian farmer, and in the process enact a “social revolution”

1 Semyon Martynov, “Man and the Land, August 1917,” in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution, 1917*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 242.

2 George L. Yaney, “The Concept of the Stolypin Land Reform,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jun., 1964), p. 278.

within the Russian social structure.³ The cornerstone (and radical proposal) of the Stolypin Reforms was the proposal for peasants to leave their communes (*mir*) and establish private ownership through land allotted by the central government. In the words of the original *ukaz* of 9 November 1906, the law reads, “any householder who holds allotment land by communal right may at any time demand that the parts of this land accredited to him be deeded to him as personal property.”⁴ The innovation in this reform is the “personal property” aspect, which had never been in the vocabulary of Russian peasants prior to this time. The intention of the 9 November *ukaz* was initially to encourage peasant leaders in each village to begin to acquire personal land, and through the departure of these peasants to private tracts, the rest of the peasants remaining in the archaic commune system would eventually follow in their footsteps. Eventually, the backward *mir* system would slowly begin to disintegrate and a reordering of Russian social structure would be achieved.⁵ However, as the project progressed, the government found itself involved in reordering and redistributing land to all the peasants in the village, rather than just to the peasant leaders (termed “village consolidation”). Unintentionally, this process only served to consolidate the communes further, essentially reversing the original reform.⁶ At this point, peasants became largely indifferent in the convoluted progression of the reform, and after the tsarist government's collapse with the ensuing lack of governmental coercion on village consolidation, peasants reverted to collective farming once more by the summer and fall of 1917.⁷

Coming out of the shadow of the perceived failure of the Stolypin Land Reforms, it is not surprising that peasants continued to express hostility and suspicion at the notion of

3 George L. Yaney, “The Concept,” p. 282.

4 Ukaz of 9 November 1906, as quoted in Geoffrey A. Hosking, The Russian Constitutional Experiment: Government and the Duma, 1907-1914, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 65.

5 George L. Yaney, “The Concept,” p. 284.

6 Ibid., pp. 286-87.

7 Ibid., pp. 291-92.

private land ownership. In peasant accounts of the fall of 1917, this concern strikes a common chord: in a resolution by a meeting of peasants in Petrograd province, the collective body urged the Soviet to, “immediately declare all the land public and hand it over for disposal by the volost land committees.”⁸ The idea that the land should be communal was deeply rooted in commune tradition, so it is not surprising that the peasants were reacting against the hereditary land occupation by landlords at this point and demanding a return to the communal land system – “Land is the *common and equal legacy of all people* and so cannot be the object of private ownership by individual persons...ownership of land, as property, is one of the most unnatural of crimes.”⁹

However, mere philosophical ruminations by the peasantry were inadequate at this point in 1917, and they were seeking action: “while the confusion over land mounts, impatience over our landlessness mounts, too. We insist before the Provisional Government that it not slow it down but immediately issue the already completed Draft Provisional Land Law.”¹⁰ Throughout most of 1917, the Provisional Government had already recognized this “confusion over land,” and prioritized the drafting of a land reform program proposal in view of the Constituent Assembly in November 1917. At the same time, the government also went as far to install a Minister of Agriculture, Viktor Chernov, to oversee the reforms.¹¹ Yet, it seems that the reforms may have come somewhat too late, as peasants began to take matters into their own hands as they had in 1905. Perpetual food shortages due to government stockpiling of grain and reports of military failure on the front agitated the peasants, resulting in raids on government grain stores and the seizure of land and manors of wealthy private

8 “Resolution by a General Meeting of Peasants, Petrograd Province, 17 October 1917,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 247.

9 Semyon Martynov, “Man and the Land,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 242.

10 “Declaration to the Provisional Government from a Village Assembly, Tambov Province, 21 August 1917,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 241.

11 Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 180.

landowners by rogue hordes.¹² Deserters from the front added fuel to the flame by participating in these riots - “in the provinces there is total collapse...there are masses of runaway soldiers and deserters...[you must] instruct military commanders to take measures immediately to arrest deserters and remove them from the countryside for introducing degeneracy and decay.”¹³

Despite all the unrest and discontent that are clearly evident from the letters and the petitions, it appears that the peasants began to have conflicting views of who really had the power to help Russia. Supporters of the Provisional Government exclaimed, “Long live the great citizen of the Russian land A. F. Kerensky,”¹⁴ and others implored in rambling prose, “Our confidence is in you [Kerensky] and Comrade Agriculture Minister Chernov...You are our friend[s,] you are our saviors[,] and we trust you and our hope is in you for the salvation of the working population of Russia and our confidence is in you...You and us, together and united.”¹⁵ The same supporters denounced the rising Bolsheviks as “traitors and betrayers of the homeland” and “we send our curse...and upon their return to the homeland...will meet with our contempt.”¹⁶ Others resolved, “Lenin and his agents must be punished by the people's justice.”¹⁷

At the same time, we begin to see the emergence of peasants who are pledging their support to Lenin and Bolshevik ideas. One peasant assembly in Petrograd resolved: “The bourgeois Provisional Government has proven itself utterly incapable of carrying out the people's will...we henceforth will not trust an authority that is not responsible to the people,

¹² Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 181.

¹³ “Letter to Kerensky from Ivan Shabrov, Ryazan Province, 13 July 1917,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 237-38.

¹⁴ “Resolution of Gagarin Volost Assembly of Peasants, Kostroma Province, 9 July 1917,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 236.

¹⁵ “Report Addressed to Kerensky From Peasants in Valdaisk Uezd, Novgorod Province, 19 August 1917,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 239.

¹⁶ “Resolution of Gagarin Volost Assembly of Peasants” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 236.

¹⁷ “Report Addressed to Kerensky From Peasants in Valdaisk Uezd” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 240.

and we demand that the All-Russian Congress of Soviets...take power into its own hands.”¹⁸ A disgruntled soldier on leave due to injury wrote to the Bolshevik newspaper, asking for effective leadership to seek an end to the war.¹⁹ Above all else, Bolshevik support appeared to be united in ending “bourgeois” rule in Russia - in the words of a peasant calling for the Soviet to take greater action, “It is time to end this bloody work [Russia's engagement in World War I] because now we also have to fight our own enemy in Russia – the bourgeoisie.”²⁰ The primary reason for this stems back to the issue of private land ownership, as the “bourgeoisie” were perceived as wealthy landowners whose land ought to be returned to the peasants.

Followers of Bolshevik ideas and supporters of the Soviets may have emerged at this time due to disillusionment with Provisional Government policies, especially regarding the lengthy, unending war on the European Front. In pro-Bolshevik peasant letters, many called for the immediate enactment of a truce to stop the conflict, which was increasingly seen as the underlying cause of the nation's social struggles. Conscription was depriving the countryside of able-bodied men who could farm, and the lack of farming was causing famines in the rural regions.²¹

After having examined the different viewpoints put forth through peasant appeals, it is clear, however, that the majority of peasants by the fall of 1917 called for the end of the privatization of land and the redistribution of all land to the peasants. From there, according to their political viewpoint, peasants either appealed to the Provisional Government or the Bolshevik Party, all under the banner of the “revolution.” It appears that to the peasants, the right thing to do was to support “the revolution,” although the peasants themselves seemed to

18 “Resolution by a General Meeting of Peasants, Petrograd Province” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 246-47.

19 “Letter to the Bolshevik newspaper *Rabochii i soldat*,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 238.

20 “Letter to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets From the Peasant Ivan Pastukhov, Vologda Province,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 235.

21 “Resolution by a General Meeting of Peasants, Petrograd Province” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 234, 247.

have different interpretations on the meaning of the phrase. Both Kerensky's and Lenin's followers included the term liberally in their political rhetoric – Kerensky supporters pledged to “rise up as one united host under the banner of revolution,”²² while Lenin's followers styled themselves as the “revolutionary people.”²³

From a broader perspective, it appears that it was not of primary consequence to the peasants in regards to the precise leaders of the government. As long as they were able to petition for and obtain what they wanted, the peasants were ready to pledge their support to anyone who would safeguard that right. From the evidence already presented, we see that the peasants were chiefly concerned about three things: the distribution of land to the peasants (by far the most important), the end to the war (which was leaving the countryside desolate and short of able-bodied men), and adequate food supplies for all. In order to obtain these three primary objectives, the peasantry was open to conceding to new leadership that emerged. It is also not too difficult to see why: the Stolypin reforms at the end of the rule of Nicholas II offered the first glimmers of hope in resolving land reform. However, incompetent administrators and excessive bureaucracy essentially reversed the system, leaving the peasants at square one and largely pessimistic about the possibility of reform. Following the abdication of Nicholas II, the dismantling of the tsarist cabinet, and the chaotic government in 1917, Kerensky, with his charismatic presence, may have appeared in many peasant minds as the leader that they had been waiting for. The promise of the Draft Land Reform law that was being moved through the Provisional Government bolstered that confidence, and peasants were also eager to see the end to a drawn-out war. To this end, many peasants committed their fullest support to Kerensky during this transitional period of government, arguably

22 “Telegram to Kerensky From the “Working Peasantry” of Botsmanovo-Ivanovsk Volost, 2 September 1917,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 246.

23 “Resolution by a General Meeting of Peasants, Petrograd Province,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 246.

mainly because of their hopes for rapid reform.

However, during the October Revolution, the Provisional Government was quickly dismantled and Kerensky forced into hiding. The Bolsheviks eventually emerged as the dominant force in the Constituent Assembly that the peasants had been waiting for, which meant yet another new era in governance was at hand. The sentiments of the peasantry as they continued to bide their time with unrequited dreams and hopes after a succession of ineffective governments can be best captured by the beginning lines from a peasant poem published in January 1918. It describes the disappointments and the setbacks that the peasants have endured, yet offers a spirit of resilience to continue the struggle. Although current prospects are bleak, it seems as if the sunrise is always around the next corner – this captures faithfully the outlook of the Russian peasants, and their fortitude in the face of inefficient governments and empty promises.

Thorny the path, the cliffs high –
We have lit the flame in summons
Glowing is the dawning scarlet,
Fading is death's silhouette
 Night's cover
 We tear
 So the workers
 Will hear.²⁴

²⁴ Ilya Ivanovich Sadofiev, "We Go On," in Steinberg, Voices, p. 307-08.

Works Cited

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(ten peasant primary documents, see citations)

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