

### Bolsheviks’ “Decree on the Land” Quells Peasant Unrest

The Russian Revolution of 1917 affected the peasants as much as it affected any other class of people. Just as workers wanted more rights and fairness in the factories, peasants wanted egalitarian reform for the land. This had been on the top of the peasants’ agenda ever since Alexander II’s Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861, which freed peasants from their landlords but still tied them to their villages by making it extremely difficult to relocate and to pay for any land that they wanted to purchase from the landlords.<sup>1</sup> By summer of 1917, landowners’ fear grew as peasants began to plunder and burn landowners’ houses and take land for their own use. The Provisional Government was aware of these land seizures, but they thought it would be best to wait until a Constituent Assembly was elected to fully deal with the issue.<sup>2</sup> However, when the Bolsheviks seized power at the time of the Second All-Russian Congress on October 26, 1917, they moved decisively to publish the “Decree on the Land.” Analyzing the influences that led to the creation of this document illuminates the purpose of many clauses in the decree and helps explain how the decree provided the land reform that the peasants desired, ultimately allowing the Bolsheviks to gain crucial peasant support.

In April 1917 Socialist Revolutionaries, whose land program emphasized the equal distribution of land and the banning of paid labor, established committees that were supposed to help satisfy peasants’ land demands. For the remainder of its time in power in 1917, the Provisional Government chose not to fully implement the SRs’ plan because of their fear that even more peasant soldiers would desert the army in the hopes of obtaining redistributed land. In hindsight this was a fatal decision, one which kept the Provisional Government from receiving

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1 Michael Lynch, “The Emancipation of the Russian Serfs, 1861: A Charter of Freedom or an Act of Betrayal?”, *History Review* 47 (December 2003), p. 28-32, (<http://www.historytoday.com>).

2 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 55-57.

the support of the peasantry, who continued to seize land for themselves.<sup>3</sup> This left the land question still unanswered and the peasants not consistently supporting any political party except the SRs.

In May 1917 in response to the peasants' seizure of land and from his knowledge of the land seizures in 1905, Vladimir Lenin had proposed that private ownership of land be abolished. As for who should then possess the land, Lenin asserted that it should be given to the local peasants to determine the distribution of land in an organized way.<sup>4</sup> Lenin's statements appeared to agree with the SR land program, although he still believed that the SRs and the Mensheviks were specifically to blame for Russia's agrarian dilemma.<sup>5</sup> Although not issued until many months later, the first two clauses in the "Decree on the Land" originated from these pro-reform thoughts of Lenin. It was Lenin himself who wrote the decree on October 25, the same night that the Bolsheviks seized the Winter Palace.<sup>6</sup>

The second clause of the decree appears to have been designed to directly facilitate the peasants' ambition of being able to distribute the land as they pleased: "The landed estates, as also all crown, monastery and church lands, with all their livestock, implements, buildings and everything pertaining thereto, shall be placed at the disposal of the volost Land Committees and the uyezd Soviets of Peasants' Deputies pending the convocation of the Constituent Assembly."<sup>7</sup>

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3 Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, 1917 – 1991* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 38.

4 V.I. Lenin, "On the 'Unauthorised Seizure' of Land: Flimsy Arguments of the Socialist Revolutionaries" (May 20, 1917) in *Lenin Collected Works* 24 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 449-454 (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/may/20b.htm>).

5 Esther Kingston-Mann, "Lenin and the Beginnings of Marxist Peasant Revolution: The Burden of Political Opportunity, July-October 1917," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 50 (October 1972), p. 574 (<http://www.jstor.org>).

6 Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, "How Vladimir Ilyich Wrote the Decree on the Land," *Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich Speaks on Lenin* (N.D.), [http://marxism.halkcephesi.net/Lenin/Lenin%20Bio/bonch-bruevich\\_e.htm](http://marxism.halkcephesi.net/Lenin/Lenin%20Bio/bonch-bruevich_e.htm), (accessed on March 2, 2013).

7 Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, "Decree on the Land." (October 26, 1917) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26d.htm>.

The decree as a whole introduces reforms that peasants, and most likely Lenin himself, believed would improve the equality of land use. In addition to another clause that protected land already owned by peasants and Cossacks from being redistributed, the remainder of the decree is mostly the “Peasant Mandate on the Land,” a summary of 242 mandates submitted in May at the All-Russian Congress of Peasants’ Deputies.<sup>8</sup> Including rules such as the banning of wage labor and the periodic redistribution of the land, the “Peasant Mandate on the Land” is an earnest list of guidelines that peasants considered beneficial to Russian agriculture and essential to ensuring fairness in land use.

It is also worth noting what happened to the land program when the Constituent Assembly finally met for the first time on January 19, 1918. The SRs, who had a majority of seats in the Assembly, presented the Fundamental Agrarian Law, which contained points similar to those of the decree, and the Assembly promptly adopted it. However, the Bolsheviks dismissed the Assembly and its new law almost immediately. A month later, on February 19, the Soviets’ Central Executive Committee (made up mostly of Bolsheviks) issued the “Basic Law on the Socialization of the Land,” which was, nonetheless, primarily a reproduction of the earlier SR law. Lenin attributed peasant support for the new law to the fact that “we adopted an agrarian program that was not our own but that of the Socialist-Revolutionaries.”<sup>9</sup> This may not be the exact truth, however, because the peasants arguably would have supported any political party or government that gave them the land and civil liberties that they had desired for decades.<sup>10</sup> Although Lenin borrowed many ideas in the “Decree on the Land” from the SRs’ land program, the decree was successful in answering the peasants’ land question, which in turn

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Siegelbaum, “The Peasant Revolution,” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <http://www.soviethistory.org> (accessed on March 3, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Will Lissner, “Land Socialization in Soviet Agriculture, 1917-1949,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 9:1 (October 1949), p. 147 (<http://www.jstor.org>).

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Sless, “Ineffectual Peasant Petitions for Democracy Fall on Deaf Ears,” *The Deepening of the Russian Revolution: 1917*, (<http://www.mit.edu/russia1917/papers>).

helped the Bolsheviks acquire peasant support in the winter of 1917-1918.