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978-0-521-07775-0 - Russian Peasant Organisation Before Collectivisation: A Study of Commune and Gathering, 1925-1930

D. J. Male

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I THE SETTING

The commune was the institution through which the majority of Russian peasants held land until mass collectivisation in 1930. In Tsarist times, it had also been the lowest level in local administration, distributing taxation and other obligations between member households. After the revolution, these latter functions were nominally transferred to the newly-formed rural soviets. In the event, many communes remained the effective organs of local government until their dissolution with collectivisation. The two-fold nature of the commune, as land holding organ, and unit of local administration, and its response to the pressures for change in the later 1920s, is the subject of our study.

In pre-revolutionary times, the commune had been a far from static institution. The method of redemption payment after the abolition of serfdom in 1861 had reinforced communal tenure, with its equalising redistribution of land between member households. In the immediate pre-revolutionary years, government policy favoured industrial expansion, and encouraged peasants to break away from the inefficiency of the commune and consolidate their land into individual farms. How far this process had gone by the revolution is a matter for debate, but by the beginning of our period most peasants in European Russia were once more in communes.

We start in 1925, because by then the policy of exhorting the peasantry to 'enrich yourselves', and of attempting to encourage peasant production by a great measure of freedom, was well-established. It also marks the beginning of serious concern about the local soviet network, and of attempts to enliven the rural soviets. Our study covers the commune from a time when the peasantry was virtually unfettered by the government, through increasing pressure for change in the countryside as a result of both economic and political decision, to the end of the commune under mass collectivisation.

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Such a study may be viewed in several perspectives. In the most general, we are dealing with one aspect of a problem common to all industrialising countries. The question of land reform, and of adapting peasant institutions based on subsistence, or near-subsistence, farming to the demands of an industrialising economy is a pressing one in many countries. The problem of integrating the peasantry, forming the vast bulk of the population, into an economy committed by its leaders to industrialisation lies at the root of this study. Viewed in the perspective of peculiarly Russian conditions, we see a concrete example of the influence of specifically Russian conditions on the Soviet revolution. The commune not only survived, but gained in strength in the face of the system of rural soviets, developed by a government whose long-term aims could not be reconciled with the existing organisation of the peasant economy. The conflict reached its crisis with the decision of the government to abandon attempts to stimulate peasant production by economic means, with their potentially anti-socialist consequences in the development of prosperous 'farmer' peasants, and to achieve the necessary conditions for rapid economic growth by 'running the countryside'. The conflict between the commune and the soviet network expressed in institutional form the problems of an industrial party holding power in an agrarian country.

The focus of our study is on the commune as a unit of local administration, functionally based on a particular system of land holding. The emphasis is thus that of a political scientist, rather than of a sociologist or social anthropologist, if labels have to be affixed. Our choice of focus has been largely governed by the materials available. At this time there was much work on studying other problems related to the peasantry, especially social stratification. The continuing existence of the commune was admitted by all commentators, yet very few serious studies were published. In part this may have been due to the risk of being accused of Social Revolutionary influence if one studied the commune. There is a dearth of basic quantitative data, and such statistics as there are need to be treated with caution. The dynamics of social interaction within the commune is a field where there is practically no reliable material. In this study, we use materials which go some way to

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clarifying the pattern of communal land holding, and also materials which illuminate somewhat the local government functions of the commune at this time. However, generalisations made in this study are not based on a rich fund of knowledge of particular local situations, but on what were seen as problems by those who wrote and spoke at the centre. This will be tested as far as possible against what we have been able to discover of the local situation.

In the second part of our introduction we will describe the general features of communal land holding. This is a preliminary to an attempt to give some precision to the concept of the commune in our first chapter. There is a great need for study of the commune to be firmly rooted in a geographical context. The variety of economic and natural conditions under which 'the commune' existed suggests that there were great local variations. It is possible to show this in terms of physical layout, as our review of land holding by area will show. Lack of materials make it impossible to extend this to deal with the commune's social organisation by area, but enough evidence is available to sound a warning note against generalisation. In the light of the subsequent political discussion, it is worth emphasising that a peasant household was not necessarily either a commune member, or an individual peasant completely hived off from the commune. While the commune was basically an institution for arranging communal holding of arable land, there was not a hard and fast line between those who were and were not members of the commune when it came to fulfilling other functions.

When we consider the internal organisation of the commune, it will be evident that there were internal pressures for change. There were those who wanted to leave the commune entirely, probably for economic reasons. The commune was not geared to production for the market. There was a greater number of households who wanted the communal holding to be rationalised. The fragmentation of large households into smaller units, and the return of young men from the war, led to conflict between the older heads of households and the younger members who had traditionally no part in the work of the commune gathering. These internal pressures for change in the commune were reflected in the external pressures from the government.

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The nature of these external pressures is the theme of our third chapter. Here we first of all turn to the work of local administration performed by the commune, and the resulting conflict between the rural soviet and the commune, reflecting a broader conflict of values and aims. There was comparative consistency in the aims of the government here. The need was to strengthen the rural soviet so that it could take over all governmental functions from the communes. This end was encouraged by an increasingly hard line towards the commune as an agricultural institution. In the second section of this chapter we trace this process from the arguments based on ideology to the actual land use measures which were undertaken. Here the question of social differentiation within the commune was seen as crucial at the centre and we must question the reality of the approach used. We finally try to examine what happened to the commune during the collectivisation campaign, and find that it was largely ignored by those conducting the campaign, who imposed a completely new system of agricultural organisation in the collective farms.

Before setting out on these tasks, we may sound a warning against two dangers. We talk here about the commune and local administration. The word 'administration' has connotations of officialdom, of a certain order and formality in the conduct of affairs. We must remember that at this time the points of contact between the peasantry and central government were largely confined to collection of taxes and grain. The commune was probably freer than under the Tsarist regime, where the attempt was made to turn it into a formal unit of administration. The setting up of the rural soviet network meant the commune was absolved from being the point of contact between central government and the peasantry. The soviets became the executors of unpopular policy, thus absolving the commune from one of its, to the peasantry, least liked functions. This may well have been a factor strengthening the peasant outlook. Organisation of the commune's affairs was usually informal in the extreme. From accounts in the twenties, it seems that the atmosphere had changed little from the time when Korovin painted his picture 'At the mir' in 1893 (hung in the Tretyakov Gallery). The men of the village are not gathered in a hall with carefully laid-out benches facing a plat-

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form with table and decanter of water. They are in a loose group in the middle of the village street. The older men sit on a log, the elder stands in the middle, mopping his forehead, whilst a man who addresses him is addressed simultaneously by two other peasants. The rest of the group argue among themselves. The ideas of orderliness and discipline which the Bolsheviks brought to the revolution and tried to instill into the administrative apparatus of the country would obviously be difficult to transplant from town to country.

Another danger is to talk of 'the peasantry' as a homogeneous group; it is more dangerous still to talk of 'peasant demands'. Just how far peasants were socially stratified is a difficult question to resolve, and lies outside the scope of the present work. It would seem that, in the face of government pressure, a certain community of interest was found. The wishes of the peasantry did not find any formulation in articulate demands, which is hardly surprising. Rather these are to be inferred from the reaction of the peasantry to demands made upon them. Once the Bolsheviks embraced the Social Revolutionary policy of granting the peasantry land held by the former land-owners, they received a large measure of support. In fact the Bolsheviks were only making law what had been accomplished in any case during 1917. While this aspect of government policy was accepted by the peasantry, it was clear they did not accept the political and social context in which it had been made. For those at the centre, the 1918 law on land was the beginning of the building of a socialist state. For the peasant, it was an end in itself. It meant that he was given more land, and that he was freed of the obligation to the landlord. Families could afford to divide up their holdings now that they had more land. Economically, the implication for the government was that the peasantry would support the government by increasing output. The peasant probably saw this as an opportunity to produce for his own needs, with no landlord to bother him. In the event neither compulsion nor adjusting prices provided sufficient incentive for the peasantry to increase output to the extent required. Socially, the central government looked for an alliance with the peasantry, who would gradually learn the advantages of such co-operation. For the peasantry, the implication was that the land had been transferred to his possession. Social responsibility in

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land holding had never been very clear in the commune, where holding of a particular piece of land tended to be for a brief period, and was not seen as extending beyond the constraints of fellow villagers. Politically, the peasantry saw the new system of local soviets as an irrelevance. The rural soviet received papers from the centre couched in a language and spirit alien to the peasant. The questions discussed were either remote from the peasant, or, where they concerned the village, involved unpleasant matters such as taxation. The administration and peasantry were worlds apart, and it is with this problem that we are concerned here, at the 'grass roots' level. Maurice Hindus quoted a Russian peasant remarking to a party agitator: 'This world revolution's got stuck in the mud of our Russian roads.'¹ This study sets out to give a little more light on the way this happened.

2 DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF COMMUNE LAND HOLDING

In its layout of fields, the commune resembled the pre-enclosure English village with its open field system. A map of a Russian commune and an English village would show a similar arrangement of strips and fields, with each household having a number of strips in the various courses of the rotation. The three-field system seems to have predominated in areas of redistributable land holding in Russia. However, while the physical configuration was similar, the distinctive feature of the Russian commune was periodic redistribution of these strips to adjust for changes in size of household. This probably originated in the eighteenth century in response to the system of *per capita* taxation, and was reinforced by the system of redemption payments after the ending of serfdom in 1861. The commune was essentially concerned with the holding of land rather than with the working of the land. Work was done largely by individual households on their own allotted land, although there were occasional obligations to work for the commune, such as in scything meadows. While there were other important functions connected

¹ Maurice Hindus, *Red bread* (Jonathan Cape, London and New York 1931), p. 38. Hindus's books are invaluable for conveying the atmosphere in a central black earth village. See also *Humanity uprooted* (1929) and *Broken earth* (1926).

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with local administration, such as allocations of taxation, as far as the land was concerned, the commune basically arranged the equalisation of holding, and rotation of crops. Redistribution was on the basis of a number of strips allocated to each household in each of the rotations.

The main features of communal holding may now be outlined. While the basic field system was of three crops, winter, spring and fallow, each field was not always divided immediately into strips. While I have no direct description of a field-pattern in this period, Danilov has provided the following general description.

Each of the fields [*polei*] of the rotation was divided into *yarusy*, according to the distance of this piece of land from the settlement. *Yarusy* in their turn were divided into *kony* [or *gony*] – pieces of land equal in fertility. In each *kon* the member [household—D.J.M.] received his share – the strip [*polosa*]. In very large communes with many households the fields were first divided between tens, or hundreds, of households, then by separate households.¹

Thus, each area given over to a specific crop was subdivided according to distance from the village and this subdivision was in its turn divided into areas of equal fertility. On this division the pattern of strips was imposed. The rarity of descriptions of this complicated process is noteworthy. Perhaps it was not practised in this manner, or, equally likely, urban observers noted only the obvious small plots without enquiring as to the subtle processes which led to them.²

Excessive intermingling of strips, with each household having a large number of strips, was the major problem in areas of dense agricultural population in relation to the land available. This was especially so in the north west and north and, to a rather lesser extent, in the Black Earth regions. A report of the People's Commis-

¹ Danilov, *Istoriya SSSR* (1958), no. 3, p. 104. Danilov's is the most important Soviet work on problems of land holding in the 1920s, and contains much archival material and reference to sources not readily obtainable in this country. While it came to the present writer's notice after the bulk of material had been collected, quotation is made from it where it would not otherwise have been possible to elaborate a point.

² The English terms for subdivision of a field, into furlongs (block system), and selions, or acres (strips) were similar, but it would be misleading to equate exactly with Russian terms as the means of deciding the subdivision differed.

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sariat of Agriculture summarised the position thus: 'In non-black earth regions, there are 50-80 strips per household. In the black earth regions and wooded steppe, 20-30 strips per household. The problem is minimal in steppe regions.'¹ A similar conclusion was reached by a sample survey in 1925, which suggested that the proportion of households having land in 40 to over 100 separate places was 52.7% in the north west, 81% in the north, and 15% in central guberniyas.² By contrast, in the south eastern areas not more than 5-10% of households had more than 25 strips in 1925.³

An excessive number of strips per household gave rise to a number of problems. One of these was the narrowness of the strips. In Ivanovo-Voznesensk guberniya strips were between 7 and 14 ft wide, and 70 and 1400 ft long.⁴ In Vyatka guberniya strips were scarcely as wide as this. They were so narrow in parts of Kostroma guberniya that it was difficult for a harrow to pass along them, and it was said to be impossible in Gvodsk uezd of Leningrad guberniya. There were similar complaints in the Central Black Earth and Ural oblasts.⁵

This multitude of small strips meant that a substantial area of agricultural land was lost to cultivation. In 1925 this was estimated as high as 7% of arable land.⁶ The closeness of strips was a disincentive to use improved techniques, for apart from the temporary nature of tenure, weeds were easily blown from one strip to the next.

Little is known precisely of the economic effect of the large number of strips per household. There is some indication in the figures for the production of flax in the Smolensk and Tver areas given in Table 1; we have no comparable figures for a grain area.

Under conditions of farming with a large number of strips, the smallest households at times had to decline using their share of land

¹ Narodnyi Kommissariat Zemledeliya, *Materialy po perspektivnomu planu razvitiya sel'skogo khozyaistva RSFSR* (Moscow, 1928), p. 157.

² Yakovlev, *K voprosu sotsialisticheskogo pereustroystva sel'skogo khozyaistva* (based on Worker-Peasant Inspectorate research of 1925, published by them in 1928), p. 87.

³ Gurov 'Predvaritel'nye itogi zemleustroystva', *Na agrarnom fronte* (1925), no. 10, p. 77.

⁴ See below, p. 37.

⁵ Danilov, *Istoriya SSSR* (1958), no. 3, p. 104, quoting Ts GAOR i SS, f 478, op 59, d 559, ll 7, 47.

⁶ Gurov, *loc. cit.*

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Strips per household	Costs of production (izderzhki proizvodstva) per hectare of sown area (rubles)	Yield (centner per hectare)	Cost (sebestoimost') per centner	Difference between price (45 r. per centner) and cost (sebestoimost')
1-10	135.9	3.3	29.1	+15.9
11-25	164.9	2.6	41.6	+3.6
25+	198.0	2.7	49.0	-4.0
	160.8	2.9	37.7	+7.3

a Danilov, *loc. cit.* p. 104. Source: Ts SU SSSR, *Sel'skoe khozyaistvo SSSR, 1925-8* (Moscow, 1929), pp. 454-5. There is a problem with this table, for the second column, divided by the third, should come to the figure in the fourth column. Apart from a possible error, the explanation may be that the costs in the second and fourth columns have a different basis - different Russian words are used - not apparent in Danilov's quotation.

as it was uneconomically small; they had either to rent it out to those with neighbouring plots, or themselves rent additional land.

Distance from house to plots and between plots was a problem which was more prevalent in the south, where villages tended to be large, centred on sources of water. As we have seen, number of plots per household was not great in this area, but distances between house and plot of 10-15 km were not uncommon. In Samara guberniya, 12% of households in a sample of hamlets had land at a distance of less than 3 km, 33% at over 10 km, and a significant number at 45-55 km.¹ Even on land where land use measures had been undertaken, it was estimated that distance remained a problem over 70% of the area.²

For the economic effect of distance, we must again turn to Danilov's research in archival materials. He quotes research in three volosts of Balashovsk uezd, Saratov guberniya, by the Guberniya Land Board on the eve of land use measures being undertaken in 1927.³ This showed that costs of fieldwork doubled when the dis-

¹ Yakovlev, *K voprosu*, p. 88. Sample of 329 hamlets.

² Gurov, *Na agrarnom fronte* (1925), no. 10.

³ Danilov, *Istoriya SSSR* (1958), no. 3, pp. 107-8. Ts GAOR i SS, f 3983, op 1, d 45, ll 157, 162, 163, 165.

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tance to carry loads increased from 1.4 to 9.2 km. Sown area fell, so that of peasants with an allocation of equal size, those with plots 9-10 km distant could only sow half the area of those with a distance to plot of 1.4 km. Amounts of fixed and working capital of the more distant households was one third less than the nearer ones, due to high costs. Investment in agriculture was 28.6% of expenditure on production for the further away, 44.1% for the nearer. Earlier research had shown that land use measures in 323 households in Samara guberniya between 1920 and 1924 had, by decreasing distance alone, saved 20.4 working days per household, allowing an increase of sown area of 4.9 acres per household.¹ Distance of land from home could depress the position of a peasant in a large commune, compared with a peasant with an equivalent holding in a smaller commune. Thus, in these volosts of Saratov guberniya, the position was as follows:

Area of commune	Percentage of 'poor peasants'
2,700 acres	25
2,700-27,000 acres	35.8
27,000+ acres	49.8

This obviously assumes some definition of the land of a poor peasant external to the commune, and does not necessarily suggest increased polarisation in the larger communes, although fuller evidence might well suggest that this was so. A curious example of a reversal of this process was shown in a so-called 'class-oriented' approach to distribution in Bashkiria. In one village, the poor peasants received land up to 5 km away, and the richest the land furthest away.²

The sum of evidence on distance between home and plot suggests that Maynard's estimate that 'a man had to walk on average 1260 miles in the agricultural season to get round his own strips'³ might well have been a conservative one.

¹ Danilov, *loc. cit.* p. 113, quoting Spektor, *5 let zemleustroistva v Samarskoi gubernii* (Samara, 1925), p. 11.

² Speaker at Central Executive Committee of the USSR. Ts IK SSSR, 4-yi sozyv, 4-ya sessiya Dec. 1928, Bulletin 16, p. 7.

³ Maynard, *The Russian peasant and other studies*, p. 182.