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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

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Soviet and East European Studies

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A STUDY OF
COMMUNE AND GATHERING
1925-1930

BY
D. J. MALE



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PREFACE

The commune was the institution through which the majority of Russian peasants held land until mass collectivisation in 1930. In pre-revolutionary years it had also been responsible for the administration of local affairs and distribution of taxation. After the revolution these latter functions were nominally transferred to 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 late 1920s, is the subject of this study.

The commune is seen as an institution based on equalising redistribution of member households' land. There is a scarcity of basic quantitative data about the commune, as well as qualitative descriptions of its working. Once the general physical nature of commune land holding has been described, the book attempts to demonstrate that communes differed very considerably in physical layout in different areas of European Russia. Thus while we talk of 'the commune' for lack of adequate area studies, generalisations should be received with great caution. Moreover, there was probably not a hard and fast line between commune membership and holding land individually. In the light of these warnings, the book goes on to look at the organisation of the commune for both land holding and local administration.

External pressures for change from the government are seen in the attempt to develop a system of rural administration in the rural soviets, and in the attempt to change forms of land holding, in the end by collectivisation. The attempts to strengthen rural soviets are briefly described, and the relationship between them and the communes is viewed from the points of view of physical area covered, functions envisaged in legislation, actual relationships and finance. The debate on land holding before the decision to collectivise is reviewed in so far as it touched on economic performance and social

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differentiation within the commune. Up to 1929, reforms in land holding were largely in land use measures designed to alleviate the more inefficient aspects of communal holding. The collectivisation campaign cut across existing institutions, including the communes.

This can be seen as a particular case in the general problem of land reform in a developing country. It expresses in institutional form the Soviet problem of an industrially-oriented party holding power in an agrarian country, and reflects the continuity of Russian themes in Soviet times.

My interest in these themes was originally aroused by the late Professor Alexander Baykov, who supervised in its early stages the Birmingham University Master of Commerce thesis on which this study is based. My thanks are due to Professor I. S. Kuvshinov of the Timiryazev Agricultural Academy, Moscow, for permitting me to study in his department when I was a British Council exchange research student. Most of the work on early drafts was done at the Department of Soviet Institutions, Glasgow University, where Mr J. Miller spent much time in giving extremely helpful and patient guidance. Professor Alec Nove was kind enough to make suggestions on rewriting the typescript. My greatest debt is to Professor R. E. F. Smith of Birmingham University, who took over supervision after Professor Baykov's death. His wide knowledge of the Russian peasantry and feeling for the essential problems involved have made me conscious of the inadequacies of this work, but his patience and stimulation have encouraged me to continue the work to this point. Finally, I thank Miss Jean Fyfe of 'Soviet Studies' for typing the bulk of the original manuscript under difficult conditions, and those who have helped in the preparation of the later stages.

Lichfield, March 1970

D.J.M.