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978-0-521-89689-4 - Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922

Aaron B. Retish

Excerpt

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## Introduction: Peasants and revolutionary power

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There is nothing in Russian history darker than the fate of Viatka and her land. – Nikolai Ivanovich Kostomarov, nineteenth-century historian.<sup>1</sup>

In successive waves, world war, revolution, and civil war swept away and remade the Russian countryside in eight calamitous years from 1914 to 1922. The First World War and Civil War conscripted over fifteen million young male peasants first into the tsarist, and then the Red and anti-Bolshevik armies, before placing the hardened survivors back in the village. Revolution destroyed the centuries-old peasant–landlord relationship, redistributed land, democratized the countryside, and allowed villages to install new governing bodies. War and social turmoil also brought massive famine and government requisitioning of grain and possessions, killing millions of peasants and destroying their means of existence. The Bolshevik victory, a defining event of the twentieth century, was ultimately determined by the support of peasants, the vast majority of Russia's population.

*Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War* is a study of how peasants experienced and helped guide the course of Russia's war and revolution, and why in the end most agreed to live as part of the Bolshevik regime. This fateful decision by individuals to join the Soviet experiment or to accommodate their lifestyle within it gave the Bolsheviks the resources and philosophical foundation on which to build the Soviet experiment and reshape international politics. Taking the First World War to the end of the Civil War as a unified era of revolution, this book shows how peasant society and peasants' conceptions of themselves as citizens in the nation evolved in a period of total war, mass revolutionary politics, and the violence and devastation of civil breakdown.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in B. V. Gnedovskii and E. D. Dobrovol'skaia, *Dorogami zemli Viatskoi* (Moscow, 1971), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Holquist astutely terms this period a continuum of crisis. *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 1–8.

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## 2 Introduction

Wartime mobilization and the destruction of the tsarist system created an ideal environment for many of the rural populations to break free from traditional roles. For peasants like Khadyi Diuniashev, a landless Tatar from southern Viatka province, war disrupted life and revolution gave it meaning. Diuniashev's youth was spent going to school and then working in the factories. His life would probably have followed the path of millions of other peasants – labouring as a seasonal worker and bringing back money and urban culture to his village each spring. Instead, like close to half of all other male peasants in Russia, Diuniashev was called to colours to fight in the First World War. Demobilized in 1917, he returned home politically radicalized and got caught up in the revolution. He found his future in the Soviet state, joining a food brigade in August 1918, then serving as the military commissar for his *volost* until the Soviet state, eager to co-opt national minorities into its system, appointed him to head the district administration. Four years after joining the Imperial Army, the formerly destitute peasant was a new member of the Bolshevik Party and one of the most powerful people in the province.<sup>3</sup> While his life changed much more than most, the kind of experiences and politicalization of his life happened to much of rural Russia.

To understand how Russia's turmoil shaped peasant support for the Soviet state, I analyse the interaction between peasants and political and cultural elites as the modern revolutionary state developed in the countryside. I do so through a study of peasant responses to tsarist, Provisional Government, Soviet and anti-Soviet schemes of mass mobilization and social intervention and the violence that often accompanied these projects. I highlight the complex diversity of peasant populations' reactions to the establishment of local administrations, as well as their participation in nation-building events. In examining peasants' interaction with the various states, I show that the population adopted, rejected, and helped to shape government power, just as it shaped them.

This book challenges the basic assumption that peasants dreamt of autonomy and held only limited political visions in war and revolution. Observers of the countryside in the early twentieth century, and most commentators since, believed that peasants dreamt of closing themselves off from the outside world. Peasants, in their eyes, held two political goals – to redistribute the land and resources as they saw fit and to achieve a mythical freedom (*volia*). Peasants' deep sense of collectivism

<sup>3</sup> Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii Kirovskoi Oblasti (hereafter GASPI KO), f. 1, op. 1, d. 211, ll. 19–19ob.

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and communal solidarity, according to this view, shaped defensive responses to Russia's modernizing economy and interfering state officials and administration.<sup>4</sup> This picture has largely held intact despite social historians' rich analysis of the relationship between social groups and revolutionary power in the revolution, and recent studies of the village that have revealed acrimony and fissures within the village, the complexity of rural social networks, and the political morality of peasants' relationships with the outside world.<sup>5</sup> Such assumptions have deep implications for the critical issues of how peasants viewed and understood their political relationship with the state and nation, as well as what they wanted out of revolution and the revolutionary state.

Despite the thousands of works written on the Russian Revolution, there are remarkably few western studies on the peasants in revolution and none that examine the evolution of rural politics through the whole of the revolutionary era.<sup>6</sup> This work seeks to fill this great lacuna in the scholarship. If, as Orlando Figes writes of the Civil War, the key to understanding the social changes in the countryside and Bolshevik attempts to draw the peasants into the Soviet regime lies in a broad range of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional relations, then an analysis of the revolutionary environment already in place is crucial.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution (1917–1921)* (Oxford, 1989); Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> For discussion on the impact of social history, see Ronald Grigor Suny, 'Toward a Social History of the October Revolution', *The American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 31–52; a recent addition is Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and their Revolution, 1917–21* (Oxford, 1996). On village life, see Esther Kingston-Mann and Timothy Mixter, eds, *Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics of European Russia, 1800–1921* (Princeton, 1991); David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry, 1600–1930: The World the Peasants Made* (London, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> On provincial Russia in general during the revolutionary era, see, for example, Donald Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917–1922* (Princeton, 2002); Michael Hickey, 'Local Government and State Authority in the Provinces: Smolensk, February–June, 1917', *Slavic Review* 55 (1996): 863–81; Sarah Badcock, *Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia: A Provincial History* (Cambridge, 2007); Peter Holquist, *Making War*; and Igor' V. Narskii, *Zhizn' v katastrofe. Budni naseleniia Urala v 1917–1922 gg.* (Moscow, 2001). Only Holquist studies the revolutionary era as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia*. For similar analyses, see V. V. Kabanov, *Krest'ianskoe khoziaistvo v usloviakh 'voennogo kommunizma'* (Moscow, 1988); V. P. Danilov, *Sovetskaia dokolkhoznaia derevnia: sotsial'naia struktura, sotsial'nye otnosheniia* (Moscow, 1979); Graeme Gill, *Peasants and Government in the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1979). The term revolutionary ecology comes from Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 1–28.

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Tremendous changes in the countryside in the pre-war era allowed peasants to begin to dream beyond their village. The First World War interrupted a dynamic transformation of peasant life and the villages in which they lived. As in other countries, a complex combination of economic modernization, political reform and revolution, and the growth of agencies of change such as schools, administrative organs, transportation networks, and universal conscription in the armed forces unsettled traditions of rural society and laid the foundation for many peasants to identify with the greater culture. These changes threatened the traditional, agriculturally based society where custom dominated and the commune had hegemony over its members.

Traditional forms of power had emanated from a variety of sources in the village. Elderly male leaders of the commune, village and *volost* officials such as policemen, scribes, and tax collectors, and economically strong families dominated village politics and sought to uphold the status quo in their favour. Within the household, elders, married folk, and those able to work, traditionally held more sway over family matters than the young, elderly, feeble, or widowed. Power also came from popular coercion to uphold traditions.<sup>8</sup> Culturally embedded misogyny dictated gender relations. Women maintained and ensured the physical needs of the household but because females were not considered as able labourers as men, peasant heads of households saw them in the long term as a weight on the economic viability of the family unit. Nevertheless, as Christine Worobec has shown, women carved out a position for themselves within this patriarchal system.<sup>9</sup> The economic standing of the peasant household within the village was fluid and based on a generational cycle of the household's number of labourers, but economic hostilities between wealthier and poorer peasants existed within the village.<sup>10</sup>

By 1914, economic change and contact with urban culture put traditional village culture on the defensive and altered everyday life in the

<sup>8</sup> Stephen P. Frank, 'Popular Justice, Community, and Culture among the Russian Peasantry, 1870-1900', in Ben Eklof and Stephen Frank, eds. *The World of the Russian Peasant: Post-Emancipation Culture and Society* (Boston, 1990), 133-53.

<sup>9</sup> Christine Worobec, *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period* (DeKalb, 1991), 177-8.

<sup>10</sup> A. V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. Daniel Thrøner et al. (Madison, 1986); Teodor Shanin, *Russia as a 'Developing Society'*. *The Roots of Otherness: Russia's Turn of Century*, vol. I (New Haven, 1985).

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Plate 1. Peasants at harvest, Glazov district, early twentieth century.  
Courtesy GASPI KO

villages. Peasant families enjoyed new products such as factory-made clothing, metal roofs, and printed literature, showing, as Jeffrey Burds argues, the development of a conspicuous consumer culture in the countryside.<sup>11</sup> Contact with urban life also provided immaterial opportunities for the exchange of ideas, ways of life, and political organizing between peasant migrants and urban dwellers. The mostly young peasant migrants took these notions back to the village, which increased tensions between younger and older generations and threatened the power of the commune. These links to the urban culture and economy and generational tensions would continue during war and revolution. Peasant factory workers returned to the village with news, ideas, and networks with political groups, serving as mediators of the larger political changes and winning especially young fellow villagers to revolutionary parties such as the Bolsheviks.

Arenas of elite and popular intercourse necessary for nation building existed before 1914, even if Russia did not enjoy the civil society and public sphere free from state intervention of western European countries. The countryside had already begun to blend into the national economy and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century by participating

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861–1905* (Pittsburgh, 1998), ch. 6.

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in the legal system, industrialization and urban migration, the growth of cash crops and the market-driven handicraft (*kustar*) trade, greater schooling, and reading the commercial press.<sup>12</sup> Although peasant communities engaged these modernizing institutions, they resisted their transformative power and often ‘peasantized’ them. As Ben Eklof shows, primary schools were ineffective, rural literacy hovered around fifty per cent, and parents pulled children out of schools after they had learned just enough to help them deal with the outside print-based world.<sup>13</sup> However, by 1914, the effects of the interaction between town and country had profoundly altered the village community. Literacy was much higher for youths and allowed peasants to read the popular press and recognize national symbols – points that would be vital during war and revolution.

Traditional gender relations were slowly breaking down by the eve of the First World War as growing literacy rates and urban migratory labour gave young men and women new ideas about less misogynistic gender relations and provided them with opportunities to rise up the social ladder or escape village life entirely.<sup>14</sup> Peasants also found ties to the imagined community in several other arenas of contact such as religious pilgrimages, military conscription, theatre, and artwork. Simultaneously, peasants asserted political rights within the late-Imperial regime, even if they were not grounded in law. Peasants turned to the rural administration, courtroom, and the zemstvo to solve internal village quarrels and improve their social condition.<sup>15</sup> From the 1905 Revolution they also gained experience forging alliances with non-peasants, organizing political groups, and airing their grievances on both local and political issues to the highest authorities.<sup>16</sup> Taken as a whole, these modernizing changes put the village on the threshold of a transformation of political imagination.

Mass politics from war and revolution, patriotic sentiment, total warfare, and state mobilization pushed peasants remaining in the village

<sup>12</sup> S. A. Smith remarks that these economic and political transformations built upon a long-held ‘protonational identity’ to create at least the foundation for national sentiment, ‘Citizenship and the Russian Nation during World War I: A Comment’, *Slavic Review* 59 (2000): 316–29.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools: Officialdom, Village Culture, and Popular Pedagogy, 1864–1914* (Berkeley, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861–1914* (Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> See Corinne Gaudin, *Ruling Peasants: Village and State in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 2007); Jane Burbank, *Russian Peasants Go to Court: Legal Culture in the Countryside, 1905–1917* (Bloomington, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Scott Seregny, *Russian Teachers and Peasant Revolution: The Politics of Education in 1905* (Bloomington, 1989); Andrew Verner, ‘Discursive Strategies in the 1905 Revolution: Peasant Petitions from Vladimir Province’, *Russian Review* 54 (1995): 65–90.



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Plate 2. Peasant handicraft production, early twentieth century.  
Courtesy GASPI KO

to embrace the national polity.<sup>17</sup> As in other warring powers, the First World War gave birth to a broader participatory regime in Russia that in turn reinvented what made up the Russian nation. Nation building and

<sup>17</sup> For an argument contra, see David Moon, 'Late Imperial Peasants', in Ian D. Thatcher, ed., *Late Imperial Russia: Problems and Prospects. Essays in Honour of R. B. McKean* (Manchester, 2005), 120–45. On nationalism as modernization, see Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1993).

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revolution in 1917 were not only top-down projects to create invented traditions by political and cultural elites. As Florencia Mallon argues for Mexico and Peru, nationalism is a 'broad vision for organizing society, a project for collective identity based on the premise of citizenship'. There is much room for disagreement and competing discourses within this vision. This view of nationalism applies equally to revolutionary Russia.<sup>18</sup> For Russia's peasants, revolution meant political participation, equality, new political languages, and new economic relationships, and they at first embraced their rights and responsibilities as citizens in the national polity.

Members of educated society were not so sure about giving 'backward' peasants the keys to their revolution so soon and instead preached duty and the need for patient cultural advancement. Russia's cultural elite in the early-twentieth century described the peasants as a homogenous, isolated, and culturally backward people. Fearing social breakdown from a period of rapid industrial modernization, commentators created a rural 'other' that expressed their own societal and cultural dreams and anxieties. They saw the idyllic, autarkic village increasingly corrupted by the dangers of a modern world – endemic crime, disease, and poverty.

While the balance between rights and duties revealed one of the tears in citizenship, the boundaries and very definition of membership in the polity constantly shifted and were contested throughout the revolutionary era.<sup>19</sup> The Soviet state adopted both discourses, drawing the peasantry into the national polity and asserting the need for state direction in creating Soviet citizens. The Bolsheviks were quick to resort to violence and coercion to foster class warfare and political power, but their ability to understand, connect to, and incorporate the various rural populations was central to their ultimate success in establishing power in the countryside. The Soviet state's willingness both to serve as a point of

<sup>18</sup> Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley, 1995), 4; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1991). On the give and take of nationalism, see James Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1995); Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914* (Ithaca, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> T. H. Marshall's liberal view of increasing rights to all members of society equally has shaped current scholarly approaches to the subject. *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950). On a pessimistic view of the possibility of citizenship bestowing emancipatory rights in Russia, see Yanni Kotsonis, 'Face-to-Face': The State, the Individual, and the Citizen in Russian Taxation, 1863–1917', *Slavic Review* 63 (2004): 221–46; for a more optimistic view, see Eric Lohr, 'The Ideal Citizen and Real Subject in Late Imperial Russia', *Kritika* 7 (2006): 173–94.



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mediation and to expand the social rights of citizenship helped it to survive the Civil War. Russia, and indeed the world, came into the modern age through the active participation in and accommodation of national politics by those living in the fields.<sup>20</sup>

As war and revolution gave new rights and opportunities for peasants to participate as members in the polity, wartime mobilization began a period that witnessed a more interventionist state. The revolutionary state officials mobilized, intervened, and tried to transform society to fit their rational ideals, the essence of a modern state.<sup>21</sup> The village became a laboratory for these state agents to test their methods and ideologies. Political and cultural elites' imagination of the peasantry as backward in this way shaped state policies during this era. Even though mass mobilization and modern politics created the worrying dilemma that educated society and state officials had to rely on active participation by the still-backward peasant to survive, war and revolution also presented them with the opportunity to transform and incorporate the 'helpless' rural other into the political system without tsarist autocratic interference.<sup>22</sup>

Peasants engaged, adopted, and resisted interventionist and transformative projects. For example, peasants in 1917 who sought educational opportunities eagerly proclaimed their ignorance and hope that education would make them 'enlightened citizens'. Simultaneously, peasants resisted elites' political tutelage and voted for their own candidates over the educated society's parties. Peasants later adopted the Soviet state's language of class to present themselves as poor peasants to gain access to grain and political organizations, while resisting the state's military conscription policies. At several points, individuals reinvented themselves and had to express publicly who they were and fit this persona into given categories. A complex web of political and social networks constructed public social identities during Russia's revolutionary age. How people placed themselves in a social category, and how other people and political bodies constructed and placed them in this category, not only created the popular experience of political change but also moulded the state and elite political discourse.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> On popular political culture's influence on the state, see George Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture: State-Formation After the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> See David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, 2003), 7-10.

<sup>22</sup> Yanni Kotsonis, *Making Peasants Backward: Agricultural Cooperatives and the Agrarian Question in Russia, 1861-1914* (New York, 1999). On the state's influence on popular political identity, see Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds, *Bringing the State Back In* (New York, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, 2005), 9; David L. Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in*

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Like all studies of revolution, this book is also a discourse on power: how state power affected village politics, how peasant elites dominated their societies, how peasants understood their subaltern or subordinate position in society, how peasants influenced state power, how the power relationships altered Russian society and its polity, and how Russia's turmoil tore the power system asunder. It thereby examines the interconnections of power and identity between peasant and non-peasant society during a time of great social and political upheaval. The wartime Imperial state, the short-lived democratic Provisional Government, and the Soviet and anti-Soviet states all relied on coercion to maintain power over the peasantry, but they also tried to build support for their respective regimes through official persuasion and popular complicity: the hegemonic process.<sup>24</sup> The relationship between peasants and political power was more complicated than one with two distinct groups and a clear aggressor and victim. The peasantry influenced the state and its politics, breaking down the barriers between the dominated and the dominator. Moreover, rural populations did not always act as a cohesive unit. Different peasant populations moved in and out of the local state administration and villagers experienced war and revolution differently. The way in which power affected state and peasant identity and how peasants in turn shaped and affected power is the overarching theme of this work. Below it laid interwoven discursive ribbons of citizenship, ritual, and the myth of popular political participation.

The era's emancipatory politics cannot be understood outside the everyday struggle to survive in a society violently ripping apart.<sup>25</sup> Russian society was already out of joint before the First World War and the crescendo of destruction beginning in war, and culminating with the ruin from the Civil War, undercut the possibility of stable political relationships between social groups.<sup>26</sup> State sponsored violence, often directed at its own population, hastened and extended social breakdown. If years of death numbed both state actors and the population to the horrors of famine, endemic disease, and murder, then it also sharpened their sense that politics needed to transform society so this

*Moscow, 1929–1941* (Ithaca, 1994). Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2005) shows the complexity of social identities in revolution.

<sup>24</sup> For a theoretical discursus on the hegemonic process and its failures, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds and tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1992); Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 100–51.

<sup>25</sup> Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War*; Narskii, *Zhizn' v katastrofe*.

<sup>26</sup> Leopold Haimson, 'Civil War and the Problem of Social Identities in Early Twentieth-Century Russia', in Diane P. Koenker et al., eds., *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History* (Bloomington, 1989), 24–47.