

Rural Russia

Under the Old Regime

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This is yet another of those forgotten books I find in my library. It was once picked up because it was marked half-price (\$ 1.33) for quick sale at the Harvard Coop, and, judging from the bookmark inside, bought in the mid seventies. The author Geroid Tanquary Robinson seems now to be a forgotten name, although he was the founder and first director of the Russian Institute of Columbia University, holding a series of prestigious appointments and a recipient of honors. Posterity is cruel, ultimately we will all be forgotten, and for the great majority of people irrelevance, if not being the case before, certainly becomes the case soon after death.

The book was written in the 1920's just after the Revolution and before its Stalinist consolidation, during which the author spent some time in the rural and still very much backwards parts of the newly emerged Soviet Union. For all intents and purposes this seems to be a doctoral dissertation, and as such, except for the occasional private remark, unenlightened by any illuminating observation or frivolous remark to offer relief from the tedium of the presentation. In short the text is more or less unreadable. This is clearly the as unfortunate as inevitable consequence of an anxious ambition to present a scientifically correct text to establish the credentials of an upcoming scholar and scientist. One has the impression that the author writes as if somebody is looking over his shoulder, which prevents any kind of spontaneity be it to fanciful survey or indulging in pursuit of an intriguing detail. Instead we have a relentless piling of detail upon detail, the significance of each being smoldered by uniformity of such. You read on and find yourself having trouble keeping up your attention and preventing your mind from wandering. It is like reading a bunch of big numbers thrown at you, never understanding what they are meant to signify or illustrate. To make something out of the text is indeed a challenge which I address by marking patches of it by a pencil stroke at the margins, hoping that out of those disjointed fragments, some kind of story could be constructed. It is far from certain that such an approach would prove successful, but let me nevertheless give some sort of survey drawn upon a general drift I have imagined myself to be present.

In most societies, up to the modern age, peasants form the bulk of the population, and in fact the life of a peasant and its vicissitudes have throughout history remained fairly uniform all over the world. The peasantry only becomes economically and hence politically significant when it can produce a surplus beyond that needed to fend off starvation. For most of human history that surplus has not been very big, and frequently it has been negative rather than positive with deadly famines as a result. Russian agriculture up to the beginning of the 18th century had been on a Medieval level. But what does that mean? The author talks about small settlements consisting of a relatively small number of households, where some plots are tended individually, others, predominantly grazing ground for cattle

and other domesticated animals, collectively. Individual plots are typically inherited, and as a result they are subdivided and dispersed within the extended holdings of the village. This is not conducive to a rational use of land requiring a concerted cooperation which normally does not spontaneously form, so the most inefficient and tardy of the users sets the level. This is of course not only typical of Russia but can be seen all over Scandinavia, which presents the most relevant comparisons. Now the nature of agriculture depends on soils and climates. Russia splits into three parts. The poor forested areas, the northern ones formerly inhabited by Finnish speaking tribes, replaced in prehistoric times by Slavic intruders¹ presents a scenario closest to that of Scandinavian neighbors. Then we have the fertile regions in the south, and finally Siberia, which provided a reservoir for surplus populations, being just as the American West sparsely populated by nomads. The issue of nomads do not only involve Siberia, which is but a marginal one, but also Cossacks and Tartars in southern Russia, which complicates the picture. Furthermore Central Asia, on which Russia only recently got a tenuous hold only to lose it after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, has provided the cradle for a succession of successful nomadic conquests. I am of course talking about Turks invading present day Turkey forming the Ottoman empire on the ruins of the Arab empire, or Moguls (another Turkish tribe) passing through Persia and forming an empire on the Indian peninsula². And of course Russia was as late as the 13th century overrun by a Mongol invasion, that penetrated even further west into Poland and Hungary. Although those invasions were of relatively brief duration and did not really involve a large occupying force, nevertheless some effect it must have had on Russian life if only to conserve its primitivity. No mention of that is made, maybe it is too insignificant.

Now peasant life was never egalitarian, it is inevitable that some may do better than others, and as a consequence acquire more land, and thus reinforce the process. The result is that they can hire other peasants, and in fact oblige them to do work for them, so called *barschina* (барщина), often to the detriment of their own obligations to their own lands. How this came about is not explained at all in the book. In most of Europe this was a result of feudalism, a more primitive form of which must have been present also in Russia. Maybe it is assumed as common knowledge by the readers, who may be assumed to be professional historians. Anyway without at least a recapitulation of the basic facts, much remain incomprehensible. It seems to be the case that actual serfdom did not develop on Russia until the 16th and 17th century, way after it had been developed on the European continent. Serfdom was never established in Sweden, although a large fraction of the peasants were bound to larger estates, being saddled with high taxes and to do 'dagsverke' (i.e. *barschina*). Large estates formed in Sweden during its great power period of the 17th century, in which the gifting of crown lands to successful generals and their ilk became legion and led to an increased power of the nobility. Yet it did not wipe out an independent peasantry, the members of which exercised some political power, being represented at parliamentary bodies (Riksdag). However, in Denmark, peasants

¹ It is usually assumed that languages surf on waves of migrating emigrants, but this is not the whole story, culture can move on its own through a medium of geographically stationary populations, just as moving waves on a sea do not express moving water.

² the Qing dynasty which replaced the Han dynasty of Ming in the 17th century, was of extra-Chinese origin, specifically Manchurian, but not apparently of nomadic provenance.

were turned into serfs, and serfs existed in many lands held by Sweden, such as its German provinces and in the Baltic States. One explanation is that most of Sweden and Finland, along with Norway were poor countries with no productive agriculture, just as in the northern forested parts of Russia, where serfdom also was slow in being established.

Peter I brutally forced Russia into the Modern Age. Although abolishing slavery as such, the lot of the nobility improved at the expense of the peasantry. This meant that Russia consisted of a thin economical, cultural and intellectual elite spread over a primitive mass of peasants, often the subject of sentimental concern of intellectuals, reaping the benefits of a division out of which they prospered. But the seed of emancipation was nevertheless sown during the century. Peter III ended mandatory military service for the nobility, the pillar of a feudal society, and turned much of church lands to the state. Those measures were taken in 1762 and weakened the rationale for serfdom. Of course the Napoleonic invasion showed its benefits, as Russia was able to muster a very large conscripted army. Yet after the war serfdom was abolished in the Russian borderlines, such as Estonia, as it just had been done a few years earlier in Prussia. The idea of emancipation was in the air, one strong argument was to forestall large peasants revolts, which had occurred before not only in Russia but also on the continent, one big important one taking place in Germany after the Reformation and which Luther took an exception to. One relatively recent one (1773-75) being led by the Cossack Pugachev claiming to be the late husband Peter III of the Empress Catherine the Great must have been in fresh memory. His rebellion had initial success and it took more than a year to finally quench it. Supposedly it killed the Empress intentions to free the serfs.

The serfs were finally emancipated in 1861 under Alexander II, subsequently killed in a terrorist attack. However, the actual emancipation was a far more complicated affair as the former owners needed re-compensation, some of which was footed by the State, but much of it was the responsibility of the serfs. They were given allotments so as to be able to feed themselves, but with those allotments came obligations in form of taxes and dues, which in many ways necessitated more barschina. The book gives a very detailed account of all the various conditions and amendments made over the next half-century, details which are hard to follow, and even harder to retain. There was also a marked increase in population up to the events of 1905 which made the problem of feeding more acute and led to famines all over the country. Serfdom had never made for efficient farming. The proprietor, usually an absentee nobleman living in Moscow or St.Petersburg had very little incentive to improve, as long as his material needs were satisfied; while the serfs had even less. To that was added a general ignorance of modern farming techniques, and the dire condition on which the freed serfs subsisted did not allow them to invest in the necessary machinery, not even in the knowledge of them. Fertilization, deep plowing, rotation of corps, were beyond them. Thus although the average size of allotments were superior to those in France (almost 20 ha versus 12 ha) the yields were much less.

The disastrous war against Japan in 1905 and the subsequent revolution it provoked also affected the peasants. It was of course the peasant who had been drafted into the army and navy and who had suffered the loss of life. There were many spontaneous uprisings involving the burning of landowner's properties and their killings along with their families. However, the regime was able to ride out the storm eventually, and the period from 1906

to 1917 was rife with many agrarian reforms that improved the lot (and lots) of peasants. Being tied to the land, the ties of which went deeper than mere serfdom, but was tied up with the old tradition of belonging to a village community with all the collective obligations which went with it, but those ties were loosened beginning with the end of the revolution of 1905. Also there was a land reform, consolidating fragmented plots of lands strewn out over the village community. This was a necessary process in order to modernize and make farming much more efficient but fraught with technical and legal issues, after all how to achieve maximal fairness in the redistribution? Prior to this the laws that restricted the trading in peasant lands were being relaxed, freeing some of the peasant population to form the basis of an industrial proletariat, and making agriculture more capitalistic. Such a process which had taken about a century in Sweden, starting with the reforms of Gustav IV Adolf, initially known as 'storskifte' (consolidating the holdings in just a few units) and then stepped up to 'enskifte' (unifying holdings to just one), and are still to this day over two hundred years later, not fully completed. In Sweden they transformed the countryside fundamentally, doing away with country villages, turning them into collections of isolated farms, freeing a large part of the population for industrial work. In Russia this took hardly three decades, including the aftermath of the proletarian revolution of 1917 after which even greater and more brutal changes took place in the country side.

The Russian Revolution was not an agrarian revolution but focused on the rather still small industrial proletariat, maybe because the intellectual underpinnings of it existed in the literature but not that of an agrarian revolution. Lenin and his cohorts did not exclude the peasants but of course welcomed them as valuable allies in the struggle, yet did not focus on them. And even if the interests overlapped there were also a divergence as to their ultimate interests. When the author personally visited the Soviet Union in the 20's those must have been obvious but as his subject was Rural Russia before 1917 he does not dwell on them explicitly but you have to read between the lines. One thing is clear, the period between the two revolutions in Russia, was not a stagnant one, even if the old regime seemed to have won, but one in which great changes took place and Russia took great strides becoming a more modern state with a capitalist economy, the evolution of which was still allowed to run its course, be it reluctantly and under restrictions liable to pervert the process, during the first critical years of the Bolshevik rule.

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