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Agrarian Reform in Imperial Russia

Agrarian land reform has been a central and recurring feature of human history, from the Greek and Roman eras, right through to medieval Europe and is a part of the current landscape in many developing third world countries. History is filled with the violent struggles of landowners and the landless. Peasant revolts over land can be found in the histories of most of the developed countries of the world. Russian scholar, Carol S. Leonard, writes in her book, *Agrarian Reform in Russia The Road from Serfdom*, “When successful in the developing world, by redistributing the land and granting autonomy to producers, reform relieves producer debt and improves production. Historically, agrarian reform has failed more often than it has succeeded” (20).

Russia is a country that has struggled with land reform for the past several hundred years. The most celebrated name in Russia regarding land reforms is attributed to Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin, who was in power during the last Imperial Tsars’ reign. A Russian national poll in 2008 that looked to its citizens to rank the country’s “greatest Russians,” ranked Stolypin in second place (Parfitt, *Medieval Warrior*). According to the Russian Information Center website, Prime Minister Stolypin “...is famous chiefly for his agricultural reforms and the draconian methods he used to deal with his opponents” (Alieva). And yet, “Stolypin’s agrarian reform continues to be a point of controversy among Russian scholars” (Tokmakoff 124). One of the main points of controversy, and

what this paper attempts to answer is, whether Stolypin's agrarian reforms were successful within the context of Stolypin's goals for the reform and whether or not the peasantry benefited through the reforms with respect to improved living conditions.

In order to effectively evaluate Stolypin's agrarian reforms, it is important to understand what the peasantry's status was regarding land and freedoms prior to 1905, as these would directly affect any attempts at agrarian reform. The peasants Stolypin were dealing with in 1905 lived within Russian communes and lived with their own sets of rules and customs, varying greatly among each village. Although there are many sources regarding Russian history, with regards to Russian peasantry prior to the Stolypin reforms, Carol S. Leonard will be cited extensively, as the scope of her research regarding serfdom and the peasantry provides a good background for the Russian peasantry prior to Stolypin's reforms and Leonard's work had not been contested by other scholars. According to Leonard:

Custom was adapted to the servile order, was given formal attributes in 1649, when separate decrees from a much earlier era were bundled and confirmed, binding peasants to villages in which they resided. The law code of 1649 formally recognized the servile order in Russia. Household production was governed by the gathering of village heads (*skhod*), informally the commune (*mir*), or *obshchina*, by which custom and the tsar's laws were enforced. The "age of serfdom," as E. Wortschafter (2008) calls it, was one in which the commune, represented by the *skhod*, became the mediator between the serfs and the landlord or government. (129)

Historical rights attributed to the serfs by the tsars gave them the right of usufruct in allotment land strips on the lands of nobles and the state. This allotment land (*nadel*) was a specific strip of land among the demense that belonged to a serf household by custom. These community-held parcels of land would be redistributed as needed to accommodate work capacity and population growth within the village. The commune practiced common ownership of assets within the village and also developed their own rules, injunctions and bans. It was the job of the elders or skhods to monitor and control the peasants' resources and obligations. The skhod was in fact a type of autonomous polity. The commune provided mutual liability and protections for its inhabitants (28-132). Regarding the duties of the skhod, Leonard writes:

... [They] regulated use of collective pastures, the cultivations of the demsesne (under serfdom), and of the *nadel*, which was the basis of tax payments owed collectively to the state... Serf revenues from the *nadel* covered their labor, seed, fodder, horses, and implements to meet the planting and harvesting needs. (133)

Regardless of the efforts made within the commune, serfs suffered terrible conditions and were under threat of famine on a regular basis due to crop failures. After Nicholas I witnessed European revolutions during 1848, he attempted to appease his own peasants by allowing them to acquire immovable property in their own name, but only if the landlord agreed. This did nothing to ease threats of revolt, as land owners were not interested in decreasing their own holdings. Peasant conditions continued to worsen, as did the threat of revolt. After Nicholas died in 1855, Alexander II inherited the throne and with it, the Crimean War. The war caused a bank crisis and inflation in Russia,

hitting particularly hard, Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russia lost the Crimean War and suffered political set backs as a result of the Peace of Paris treaty. In the manifesto, Alexander "...spoke of the importance that law be 'equally just for all and equally protective of all'" (31). Within this same manifesto, Alexander also stated that he was against freeing the serfs. However, the blow to Russia in its defeat of the war emphasized the inadequacies of the country; militarily, politically and economically. This along with the banking crisis and increasing fear of peasant revolts led Alexander to announce in December 1858 that a decision had been made to abolish serfdom in Russia. Another important contributing factor was the need to acquire a larger army. The solution to this issue would be universal conscription, however, this would require that the peasants be on somewhat equal standing (28-133).

It took Alexander until 1861 to abolish serfdom. He did this by bundling several of his reforms. Although serfs were granted immediate personal freedom, the issues regarding land for peasants was dealt with in stages. One of the terms of the reform required peasants to make a choice. If a peasant wanted to retain their strips of allotment land in whole, they would have to wait for two years. During these two years, they would be required to continue in their obligation to their former landlord. For those peasants who did not want to wait the required two years, they could opt to take a quarter of the minimum allowed allotment and not be indebted for any further payments. Only 3% of the serf population chose to receive a quarter of their allotment and be free of payments, however, these people essentially chose relative poverty in order to be completely and immediately free (39).

The reform was to be played out in two drawn out phases. In the first phase, landlords were required to draw up charters with the commune so that allotment land could be allocated to each household. Landlords were allowed up to two years to complete this process. Within the local courts, institutions of peasant governance were set up to facilitate the reforms. According to Leonard, “The nadel [allotment] consisted of a subsistence minimum amount of arable, pasture and hay meadows, and the homestead, including the garden plot, for the household’s perpetual use” (40). The sizes of the nadel varied throughout Russia and were dependent on regional customs and “soil zone” where the village was located. The soil zones were black earth, non-black earth and steppe.

The second phase of the reform consisted of the long-term peasant redemption payments. Peasants would make payments for 49 years, at which time both principle and interest were paid in full (41). Although peasants were free people and were purchasing their allotment land, there were strict restrictions regarding moving away from the commune. The commune retained power over assets and out-migration. The repartition of land occurred when household divisions multiplied, with the growth in population. This affected the issues of welfare within the commune and tax payments. Regular meetings were held to determine if and when repartition or reallocations of plots were needed. This caused conflict within the social confines of the commune, especially as the population of the village grew (134-35). Leonard writes:

Peasants were not allowed to leave the repartitional communes for nine years following abolition unless the allotment was entirely redeemed or the landlord gave permission and transferred its redemption to the commune; in Ukraine, with nonrepartional communes, the peasant who wished to leave for

another village had to be landless or living in a household that would pick up payments on the parcel abandoned. After nine years, a peasant might leave for another village under the following conditions: that the entire family give up a claim to allotment land and that those left behind were, nevertheless, assured an income, that all debts and dues were paid up to January 1 of the next year, that a contractual approval was presented from the commune to which the peasant was moving and that a land parcel had been purchased not more than 15 versts [~15.1 km] from the commune of resettlement. 135

The main reason that communes did not allow for peasants to move out of the commune was due to taxes and the redemption payment. If a peasant were to leave, the rest of the villagers would have take on the allotment and tax payment of the leaving peasant.

The population of peasants at the time of abolition was about 59.33 million living in the 49 provinces in Russia. The number of peasant serfs living on private lands were approximately 21.16 million, about 37.5% of the population in Euro Russia. The remaining serfs lived on state or imperial lands (36-37). The abolition of the serfs strengthened the village commune. When the abolition occurred, the authority of the commune was institutionalized and this gave the commune the following civil and criminal court powers; guarantor of redemption payments, public service/welfare, road maintenance, apportioning and collecting fees and taxes that were owed to the state or local governments, conduct investigations, tried criminal cases (with the exception of murder and arson), controlled passport registration and restricted or allowed movement, policed the village, provisioned village in times of famine, conducted relations with state authorities. Civil and criminal proceedings and verdicts were according to local customs

and not according to the state laws, which affected Russian citizens (non peasant) (128-135). Accordingly, Scholar George Yaney states, “[peasants] In their mutual civil relations they were, for the most part, neither subject to nor protected by the laws of the tsarist government” (279).

Conditions for peasants continued to deteriorate, in part due to overpopulation and lack of land and crop failure, which equaled famine. The Russian revolution of 1905 was a catalyst for peasant land reform. Stolypin was a Tsarist and looked for ways to keep Nicholas II in power. By averting peasant revolts using agrarian reforms, the government believed this would bring about peasant support for the tsar and quell any further revolt. Scholar B.D. Wolfe said, “Lenin saw the matter as a race with time between Stolypin’s reforms and the next upheaval. Should the upheaval be postponed for a couple of decades, the new land measures would so transform the countryside that it would no longer be a revolutionary force...” (Wolfe, “Three who” 360).

Scholar George Yaney contends that the Stolypin land reforms developed as a continuing experiment, he states:

The Reform’s enactors were aware in 1906 that they were experimenting. A.V. Krivoshein, who was the minister of agriculture and executive director of the Reform from 1908 to 1915 and also the author of the decree that set up the Reform organization, freely admitted that he did not know what the Reform’s main programs would be. In a memorandum of February 1906, to Nicholas II, he said: “It is important to act; we must begin and our very acting will show us the best ways to accomplish our purpose.” 275-76

Although the land reforms of 1906 are referred to as the “Stolypin Land Reform,” he did not author or instigate the reforms. What is of importance is that Stolypin was able to manipulate Nicholas II to enact the reforms. It is historical knowledge that Nicholas was indecisive and unable to govern effectively on his own. It was Sergei Witte who, prior to 1905 “...had been the government’s leading advocate of agrarian reform...” (Yaney 277) In 1902 Witte was the minister of Finance and at that time, he “conducted a massive investigation of the peasantry in 1902-04” (277). Witte also sent Nicholas a letter in 1906 expressing concern that peasant violence would get much worse in the summer and the government should act quickly to get ahead of the problem. During the time frame that Witte was conducting his investigations during 1902-04, V.I. Gurko was in the process of drafting a plan for reform. Gurko is the actual author of the November 1906 decree, allowing the head of households to claim their allotment in the commune as personal property. The land reforms are a reaction by the government to stave off peasant riots, along with trying to improve the peasants lot in life. Donald Treagold writes, “The political results of such a policy, he thought [Stolypin], would be to strengthen constitutional monarchy against revolution, and his revolutionary enemies, both Socialist Revolutionaries and Social Democrats, agreed with him” (7). Stolypin’s reforms were intended to create a new class of peasants by allowing them to own land individually and to prosper as individual farmers. Contrary to this opinion, Judith Pallot in her book, *Land Reform in Russia 1906-1917*, she states:

Although it aimed at creating a new type of peasant farmer, the Stolypin Land Reform was not really about people at all. The Reform consisted of a number of rather narrowly drawn technical and legal measures which were

necessary in order to effect a change in the manner in which peasants held the land...The Stolypin peasant would be more hardworking and sober than the ordinary village peasant and more inclined to want to innovate. 115

George Yaney comments regarding the peasants position regarding land reform:

Before 1907 the peasants gave no sign that they desired any of the programs the Reform decrees proposed. The peasant congresses of 1905 voiced no desire for agrarian reform beyond the distribution of free land, and the peasant representatives in the First and Second Dumas actively opposed the Reform decrees themselves. 277-79

In reading numerous scholarly articles, it appears that Stolypin's land reform is controversial. Many scholars assert that Stolypin's reforms were not successful; some state that the reforms were a success and others have come to the determination that no conclusion can be affirmed. Navigating through the information contained within the journals and books can be daunting, as each scholar uses different types of statistics to shape their conclusions. Some use the number of householders consolidating land, others use the amount of acreage that was sold or titled, while others use the numbers of bank loans, rubles, and grain production and fertilizer usage. Bertram Wolfe came to the conclusion that from the time of the reforms, between 1907-1918, two million peasant households "seceded" from the communes, becoming individual proprietors. He goes on to state that by January 1916, out of 16,000,000 eligible, 6,200,000 had made applications for separation (Wolfe, "Lenin, Stolypin" 46). Although Wolfe states that 6,200,000 householders made an application to "secede", his article does not state the

actual number of land titles that were officially transferred into individual personal holdings. W. E. Mosse also provides numerous statistical numbers, stating by May 1913, about 1,800,000 heads of households had individual land titles transferred to their names. He goes on to write, "...By the end of 1915, some 2,750,000 had applied for the appropriation of their land as private property" (263) Mosse also postulates that by January 1915, "...roughly one and a quarter million farm-steads [khutors] had come into existence" (263). Mosse does acquiesce in a footnote that "some statistics...fail to distinguish between the number of consolidated holdings created under the Stolypin legislation and the total number of such holdings... Consolidated holdings in certain parts of the empire, were far from unknown... (263).

Scholars A.M. Anfimov and Greta Bucher point out that there needs to be some clarity regarding what constitutes "departure" and "separation" from a commune. They state:

The Free Economic Society, which conducted a survey of this process, got these concepts mixed up, thereby, confusing not only its own correspondents, but the author of a work that was based on the published results of the survey, namely, I.V. Chernysheve. A few historians were also confused. If you read in S.I. Dubrovskii's work that "by 1 January 1916, 2,008,798 desiatins separated from the commune,' don't believe it. The two million householders did not "separate out (*vydelilis* ') but simply left the commune (*vyshli*); that is, each householder received a document affirming his *right* to private ownership of an available piece of land, which he still held in common until the household actually separated. Separations (*vydely*) consisted of allocating to separating households

quantity of land in one piece in the form of a holding (*otrub*)(without resettling from the village [and with use of common lands-ed.] or a homestead (*khutor*)(with the transfer of his dwellings and out-buildings [away from the village and without use of common lands-ed.]). Returning to departure from the commune, we will show that the wave of departures increased for only 2 years (1908 and 1909), when more than half (54%) of all consolidated plots were transferred from communal to private ownership, after which a sharp and steady decline of the number of those leaving began. 398

Only from 1909 onward were the separate figures published for *khutora* and *otruba* that were formed on land purchased from the Peasant Bank or from *pomeshchiki* with the help of a bank loan. By correlating the information about 1909-1914 with that on 1907 and 1908 and extrapolating from it, and also taking into account the small number of those who bought from *pomeshchiki* without assistance from the Peasant Bank and State (33,000), it can be seen that 104,000 *Khutora* and 214,000 *otruba*, and 1,324,000 individual households organized overall. From calculations in 1916 of the number of households (13 millions households, excluding *povorniki* [those with garden plots only-ed.], the number of individualized households hardly exceeded one-tenth of the whole. Such were the modest results of the actual “privatization” of the Russian peasant countryside from 1907-1914” (400). In regard to the *khutora*, Yaney states, “The *Khutory* flourished almost exclusively in Western Russia where the peasants were generally the most advanced. Of the few *khutory* that formed in the rest of European Russia, most were single households that broke away from their villages by themselves” (290). It should also be noted that according to Mosse, the majority of *khutors* were

already in existence prior to 1905 and the peasants had consolidated their land on their own (271).

What all scholars do agree upon is that the process of reform was difficult and fraught with problems. Yaney states, “The problems of peasant land arrangement were so complex as to appall even the most efficient of administrations” (281). To further demonstrate some of the difficulties, Yaney continues:

Under the circumstances, the peasants did not usually identify their own strips by land survey or by legal contract. Land was generally held in accordance with myriad personal verbal agreements, often very hazy in their meaning to begin with and even more so after they had passed down through one or two generations...With the village fields divided into strips, no individual peasant could fence his own land, because this would cut his fellow villagers off from theirs...The most complex of the areas dealt with by the Reform contained a confusion of plots and strips belonging to 20 villages, 144 separate small owners, and 8 large estates. 281-83

Yaney, along with other scholars place an emphasis on the fact that the Stolypin reforms were primarily intended to aid peasants regarding land sales and distribution, it had little to do with the needs of those peasants who were land poor (283).

The reform’s aim was to encourage the creation of the *khutor*, and when that was not possible, they would grudgingly accept the development of the *Otrub*. Judith Pallot describes these two types of farmsteads:

[A]...*khutor* -This was a farm that approximated as nearly as possible to a square an consisted of a single parcel of land incorporating the house and garden plot

with not residual land, such as pastures and meadows, left outside its boundaries...*Otrub* was a single parcel...but house and garden plot physically detached... 118-19

Yaney's description of how the peasants actually had possession of the myriad of plots and the difficulties in figuring out the boundaries of each peasant allotment, were only one of the many problems the land reforms faced. George Tokmakoff believes that the backwardness of the peasants, their ignorance and that fact that they were "inordinately superstitious" also adds to the problem of reform (126).

One of the major issues confronting the land reform were the laws and decrees that were created for the reform and those laws that were already in existence prior to 1906 regarding land laws and peasants. An example of this was a law made in 1911. In effect, if a peasant consolidated his land, this land "was still subject to redivision in the event of a village consolidation" (yaney 286).

The allotment land that many of the peasants consolidated were insufficient to relieve poverty. As stated previously, allotment land was only enough for subsistence, and many times, not even this, as overpopulation and redivision shrank the amount of land each peasant had. The Peasant Bank was set up to assist peasants in purchasing land. Yanni Kotsonis explains the complications with the laws in effect regarding the Peasant Bank:

The Decree of 9 November 1906 had allowed for peasants to consolidate their lands and hold them as individual property, but it did not alter the nature of peasant individual property. That property remained, as it had been since the 1860's, largely inalienable. A series of regulations since 1861 culminated in the

law on the inalienability of peasant possessions of 14 December 1893, by which peasants were banned from mortgaging any lands whatsoever. Creditors and even tax collectors were banned from seizing peasant lands. Much of this referred to allotment land but the law also excluded from seizure any possession necessary for the household to survive, and this was interpreted to mean nonallotment land along with almost all peasant possessions. 32

What this essentially caused was for the peasants to be “legally insolvent” in reference to credit markets. Basically, peasants could consolidate their land, but they could not use it as mortgage. One thing that peasants could do was to apply for ameliorative loans, which could only be obtained through the Peasant Bank. This would ensure that the land would remain with the peasantry. The ameliorative loans were, for the most part, a non-reality. The Minister of Finance Vladimir Kokovstov, refused to fund the Peasant Bank for the purposes of ameliorative loans, as he did not believe the Peasant Bank was empowered to provide those types of loans (31-3). Kotsonis plainly puts forth the issues regarding mortgages:

In 1914, most types of mortgages of peasant lands were illegal in Russia, and the state enjoyed a monopoly on mortgages that it hardly ever used. Every time one part of the government issued regulations that implied a right to mortgage peasant lands, the Ministry of Finance quietly issued regulations that disallowed them. This occurred in 1906, when the Decree of 15 November on mortgaging allotment land was followed by the regulations of 29 November and 11 December forbidding cooperatives or any private credit institution to accept any land owned by peasants as security. When the State Duma passed a law in

July 1912 that again suggested that peasant lands could be mortgaged, the Ministry of Finance followed with an explicit exclusion of all possessions that constitute a “necessary” item of peasant household, ranging from all allotment land (whether separate or within the commune), all items needed for production and subsistence, and most nonallotment land as well. 35

In addition to the above-mentioned obstacles to reform, another of the major issues obstructing the successful implementation of land reform was shortage of land and the inequality of actual soil available for farming. Another important factor that affected the reforms were the peasants themselves not wanting to move away from their lands. According to Mosse: “Certain parts of the empire, it is clear, were ripe for the change [reforms] while others were not” (264). In the central agricultural region, officials believed the peasants had a stronger attachment to communal farming, in this area there was also a large shortage of land, and widespread industrial and migratory employment. South West Peasants did not show any interest in consolidating their land, mainly due to a shortage of land. Many peasants did not farm their *nadel*, instead choosing to rent their land out the sugar refineries. In the Eastern areas, reform was mixed and progressed unevenly. Peasants were not interested in land settlements in areas of the east. There was plenty of land, but the problem was that the land needed to be drained in order to be used for farming. Peasants did not have the money needed to make the changes necessary for the land to be used and they were unable to obtain amelioratory loans (267). Mosse states:

Inequalities in the fertility of the soil made division difficult and controversial. Where the village meeting had any say in the matter, it was,

understandably, the poorest and remotest acres which were formed into plots for the seceders. All this was, moreover, reinforced by the fact that many peasants simply did not to make a change. In fact, looking at the different factors involved, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that separation was for the large numbers of peasants an impossibility and for many more at least a positive disadvantage. 270

In reviewing Stolypin's land reform and its effects, it can be concluded that the Reforms at the time were unsuccessful. Although some scholars believe that given enough time, as Stolypin himself stated the reform would take 20 years before the Russian landscape changed, the reforms would have been successful. However, after careful considerations of not only the statistics, but also the laws that were in effect, it is clear that the reforms could not have achieved Stolypin's desired goals of individual *khutors* and it did not improve the lives of peasants in any significant way. As Mosse states:

The evidence, therefore, clearly indicates that in the central black earth provinces-and it was here that the basic problems of land shortage and rural over-population were most acute and the numbers involved that largest- the policy of land settlement encountered obstacles retarding or even preventing its implementation. The relative failure of the policy in these provinces is indeed so striking as to suggest that it might have taken a century rather than ten or even twenty additional years before serious inroads could have been made on communal forms of organization. The resistance to Stolypin's policy among the rank and file of the Russian peasantry was far greater than is sometimes supposed. 268

Although as stated, some peasants in the Western regions did consolidate and form successful *khutors*, for the most part, this was achieved by the peasants themselves and not as a result of land reforms. The majority of the peasants remained a part of the commune for the safety it provided. This alone, shows that Stolypin's reforms were not successful. The ineffectiveness of the government, lack of good quality land and lack of monetary support would not have allowed for improvements for the living conditions of peasants.

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