

The Peasant Question and the Russian Revolution: Revisiting Old Orthodoxies ¹

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Abstract

It has been axiomatic for scholars of the Russian Revolution to echo Lenin and call the Russia of the early 20th century “one of” or even “*the* most petit bourgeois of all capitalist countries.” This paper will argue that this view is mistaken. It is true that the Russian empire of the revolutionary period was only lightly urbanized, its three major cities – St. Petersburg, Moscow and Kiev – surrounded by tens of millions of agrarian peasants. However, the term “petit bourgeois” in historical materialism has a precise meaning, referencing “small capitalists” who are motivated by production for the market and capital accumulation. By contrast, the agrarian economy in much of Russia was organized, not on the market, but on subsistence. There were some, particularly in Ukraine, who fitted the petit-bourgeois definition – peasants organized in family farms, producing for the market. But in Russia proper, the vast majority of peasants were organized in the “commune”, a semi-feudal patriarchal institution which controlled land distribution, and was relatively immune to any pressures toward capital accumulation. This mistake in theory was of little consequence when the left was isolated and small. But when the left took power, after 1917, mistaken theory led to catastrophic practice –during the “War Communism” years of 1918 to 1921, and the terrible “war on the kulaks” of the 1930s which killed millions, and set back the agrarian economy for decades.

Keywords: Russia; revolution; peasants; commune; petit-bourgeois

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Introduction

It has been axiomatic for scholars of the Russian Revolution to echo Lenin and call the Russia of the early 20th century “one of” or even “*the* most petit bourgeois of all capitalist countries.” This paper will argue that this view is mistaken. It is true that the Russian empire of the revolutionary period was only lightly urbanized, its three major cities – St. Petersburg, Moscow and Kiev – surrounded by tens of millions of agrarian peasants. However, the term “petit bourgeois” in historical materialism has a precise meaning, referencing “small capitalists” who are motivated by production for the market and capital accumulation. By contrast, the agrarian economy in much of Russia was organized, not on the market, but on subsistence. There were some, particularly in Ukraine, who fitted the petit-bourgeois definition – peasants organized in family farms, producing for the market. But in Russia proper, the vast majority of peasants were organized in the “commune”, a semi-feudal patriarchal institution which controlled land distribution, and was relatively immune to any pressures toward capital accumulation. This mistake in theory was of little consequence when the left was isolated and small. But when the left took power, after 1917, mistaken theory led to catastrophic practice –during the “War Communism” years of 1918 to 1921, and the terrible “war on the kulaks” of the 1930s which killed millions, and set back the agrarian economy for decades.

The Patriarchal commune (mir)

To properly understand the role of the peasants as a class, it is imperative to have a clear view of the economic and political contours of the countryside from which they emerged. Political economy was a key component of Lenin’s epistemology, and central to this political economy were analyses of dynamics in the countryside. Lenin’s early works “expose the Russian illusions concerning small-holder peasant agriculture.”² In this critique of Russian agriculture, Lenin was in fact extremely clear.

² Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin*, 86.

Not only is landlordism in Russia medieval, but so also is the peasant allotment system. The latter is incredibly complicated. It splits the peasantry up into thousands of small units, medieval groups, social categories. It reflects the age-old history of arrogant interference in the peasants' agrarian relationships both by the central government and the local authorities. It drives the peasants, as into a ghetto, into petty medieval associations of a fiscal, tax-levying nature, into associations for the ownership of allotment land, i.e., into the village communes.³

However, if in this instance he would clearly identify the village communes as "petty medieval", the overwhelming emphasis of his analysis was to see them as "petty bourgeois". The latter characterization was completely misleading and led to very big mistakes in policy.

The key institution in the countryside can variously be referred to as the "*mir*", "commune", "*obshchina*" or "mark community". It was a centuries old institution, but one which had been given a new role after the "emancipation" of the serfs in the 1860s. Ex-serfs received land through emancipation, but not as individuals. The land was "sold" to the peasants collectively through the *mir*, and since the *mir*, collectively, had very little money, this meant that the *mir*, collectively, was responsible for the enormous debt incurred. Because of this impossibly burdensome debt, the peasants, while legally free, were in fact tied to the land in a almost to the same extent as they had been before the abolition of serfdom. Their labour was needed by the village community to service the debt. Their labour was controlled by the village community – more precisely, by the male head of households who, in patriarchal assembly, controlled everything. The endless cycle of debt and labour meant that there was no incentive for the individual peasant to increase the productivity of labour. It was a life of eternal toil with no possibility of reward.

Rosa Luxemburg clearly outlined the manner in which this patriarchal institutional structure enforced economic backwardness in the Russian countryside. "According to a statistic from the 1890s, 70 percent of the peasantry drew less than a minimum existence from their land allotments, 20 percent were able to feed themselves, but not to keep

³ Lenin, "The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy [Book, December 1907. Confiscated. Published in 1917]," LCW Vol. 13, 424.

livestock, while only 9 percent had a surplus above their own needs that could be taken to market.”⁴ This is a point echoed by E.H. Carr: “By far the largest part of the population was engaged in near-subsistence farming, producing food crops primarily for its own consumption and for the satisfaction of its immediate obligations to some superior authority.”⁵

Without question the *mir* was economically backward. Rosa Luxemburg says that “membership in the mark community became like an iron chain of hunger around the necks of the peasants.” It was also politically reactionary. Luxemburg echoes the point about “rule by cudgels” mentioned earlier. “The natural desire of the poorer members of the community was to escape from this chain. Hundreds of fugitives were returned by the police to their communities as undocumented vagabonds, then made an example of by being beaten on a bench with rods by their mark comrades. But even the rods and the enforcement of passport controls proved powerless against the mass flight of the peasants, who fled from the hell of their ‘village communism’.”⁶

Lenin was acutely aware of these structures of exploitation and oppression. He consistently opposed the Russian socialists (a trend called “Narodism”) who romanticized the *mir* as somehow capable of being a jumping off point for post-capitalist communist production.⁷ Krausz provides an accurate summary of Lenin’s views on this process. “In his theorization, Lenin connected the features of the world market – today it would be called globalization – with the demise of traditional forms of village community.”⁸

Agricultural capitalism is taking another, enormous step forward; it is boundlessly expanding the commercial production of agricultural produce and drawing a number of new countries into the world arena; it is driving patriarchal agriculture out of its last refuges, such as India or Russia; it is creating something hitherto unknown to agriculture, namely, the purely

⁴ Luxemburg, “Introduction to Political Economy [Unfinished Book, 1910. First Published 1925],” 221–22.

⁵ Carr, “The Russian Revolution and the Peasant,” 69.

⁶ Luxemburg, “Introduction to Political Economy [Unfinished Book, 1910. First Published 1925],” 223–24.

⁷ Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin*, 80–84.

⁸ Krausz, 89.

industrial production of grain, based on the co-operation of masses of workers equipped with the most up-to-date machinery ...⁹

This proved not to be true. If his critique of the limits of the peasant commune was clear, his prognosis as to its future proved abstract and unrealistic. Lenin seriously overestimated the speed with which this economic system could transition to modern production techniques. He was telescoping historical processes into a foreshortened frame, a limitation his analysis shared with Luxemburg's. She also anticipated the relatively rapid disappearance of the *mir*, "considerably overstating the case ... since the *mir* hardly went out of existence by the time of the end of the 1905 Revolution. Not only did it still exist, in some respects it rebounded in strength immediately following the 1917 Revolution."¹⁰

Krausz acknowledges the stubborn survival of the patriarchal *mir* as an institution in the countryside, saying "... the imperialist world war ... had thrown the already weakened institutions and structures of social solidarity into disarray, breaking the moral checks on murderous instincts and allowing the "*obshchina* revolution" to spread quickly, mediated by the armed peasant soldier in the ranks."¹¹ The term "*obshchina* revolution" is one he approvingly appropriates from Vladimir Buharayev to describe the land seizures which occurred in the 1917 revolution. "The *obshchina* village was pitiless toward anyone who did not use land for its traditional, natural purposes but expected income from it, whether merchants, banks or those who did not cultivate their land themselves."¹² In other words, as was pointed out in the Introduction, it is not quite accurate to say that peasants seized the land in 1917. The peasant *mir* seized the land in the name of the peasants. Peasants as individuals, if they had managed to establish independent family farms, were expropriated along with the large landlords, pulled back into the *mir* from which some of them had, only just, managed to escape.

⁹ Lenin, "The Development of Capitalism in Russia [Book, 1899]," LCW Vol. 3, 339.

¹⁰ Editor's note in Luxemburg, "Introduction to Political Economy [Unfinished Book, 1910. First Published 1925]," 300.

¹¹ Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin*, 235.

¹² Quoted in Krausz, 510–11, fn.

Krausz accurately outlines Lenin's expectation of the relentless dissolution of the *mir* under the impact of what we would call globalization. He mentions the historical fact that this did not happen, and that in fact the 1917 revolution for a while strengthened the *mir*. But he does not link these two points together. Krausz indicates that Lenin saw only two paths of capitalist development possible in the Russian countryside – the “Prussian” and the “American.”¹³ However, he mentions this without critical commentary. With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that neither of the paths envisioned by the young Lenin were taken. He seriously over-estimated the extent to which insertion in the world economy would automatically lead to change in the Russian countryside. Pyotr Stolypin, prime minister in Tsarist Russia from 1906 until his assassination in 1911, tried to encourage the American road, but his experiment was cut short by war and revolution. Lenin, after the revolution, would assume that the Prussian road had been taken, seeing the “kulaks” as the “big peasants” of his youthful analysis, in spite of the fact that by the end of the civil war, the destruction of life in the countryside had been so thorough that kulaks – considered as a class of rich peasants – basically ceased to exist. The core institution of the countryside – the traditional patriarchal “commune” – proved massively resistant to the inroads of capitalism, and to workers' revolution, posing almost insoluble problems in the coming decades.

Petty producers and the Petit-bourgeoisie

The foundation for all of Lenin's subsequent theorization of the peasantry, was laid in Lenin's first major work. The *Development of Capitalism in Russia* and related writings of the same era, sketch out a schematic political economy with an unrealistic “class against class” projection for the future evolution of agrarian relations in the countryside. James White¹⁴ has suggested that this research might well have been influenced by the economic notebooks of Lenin's brother Alexander, who – before his execution – was deeply immersed in studying the economics of the countryside. Whatever the case, this schematic

¹³ Krausz, 106.

¹⁴ White, *Lenin*, 23 and 39–40.

political economy became encapsulated in Lenin's embedded practice of using the term "petty-bourgeois" or "petit-bourgeois" to describe agrarian labour in the Russian empire of Lenin's time. Sometimes he would describe Russia as "one of the most petty-bourgeois countries in the world."¹⁵ Often he would eliminate the qualification, and without ambiguity declare Russia to be "*the* most petty bourgeois of all capitalist countries"¹⁶, or "Russia is *the* most petty-bourgeois of all European countries."¹⁷

Lenin was by no means alone in this approach to the peasantry. Bertram Wolfe says, probably correctly, that: "Russian Marxists, both Bolshevik and Menshevik, tended to view the peasantry with strong reserve as a backward, property-loving, potentially hostile 'petty bourgeoisie'."¹⁸ When peasants were seen less negatively, they were still viewed from within the category "petty-bourgeois". Iulii Martov in 1917, argued that the peasantry as "a new force—petty-bourgeois democracy—was now moving into the foreground of the political struggle. The petty bourgeoisie, however, needed help in formalizing its status, recognizing its interests, and freeing itself from the harmful influence of the bourgeoisie."¹⁹ Wolfe argues that this framework was more prejudice than political economy. "Most Social Democrats knew so little about the countryside that the issues eluded them. Most, Bolsheviks included, faced the muzhik with ignorance, and a vague, unconscious dread, or with contempt, enclosed in the formula, "property-minded, petit-bourgeois."²⁰ Many – Lenin among them – would use the term "petty bourgeois" not as a scientifically grounded category describing a small accumulator of capital, but rather as a sociological description of someone engaging in small-scale or "petty" production. Karl Radek, in 1922, provides a

¹⁵ Lenin, "Bewildered Non-Party People [Newspaper Article, 4 October 1913, *Za Pravdu* No. 3]," LCW Vol. 19, 436.

¹⁶ Lenin, "Concluding Remarks to the Symposium Marxism and Liquidationism [Book Section, April 1914]," LCW Vol. 20, 269 [emphasis added].

¹⁷ Lenin, "Materials Relating to the Revision of the Party Programme [Pamphlet, May 1917]," LCW Vol. 24, 61-62 emphasis added.

¹⁸ Wolfe, "Lenin, Stolypin, and the Russian Village"; Wolfe, 52.

¹⁹ Savel'ev and Tiutiukin, "Iulii Osipovich Martov (1873-1923)"; Savel'ev and Tiutiukin, 61.

²⁰ Wolfe, "Lenin, Stolypin, and the Russian Village," 53.

classic example of this elision between a quasi-scientific category and sociological description when he talked about “the peasants” first as “petty producers of goods” and then without transition as “petit-bourgeois.”²¹

These two categories – petty producer and petit-bourgeois – are by no means identical. If the “petty” labour being engaged in is constantly reduced to subsistence – as was the case for the vast majority of Russia’s peasants trapped in the prison of the *mir* – then the word “petty” serves merely a descriptive role and is in no way a “scientific” description of the petit-bourgeois or small capitalist.

Lenin rarely clarified what he meant by the label petty-bourgeois. In 1904 in an off-hand way he defined “the petty-bourgeois mode of existence” as equivalent to “working in isolation or in very small groups, etc.”²² This repeats the error of Radek. In a more developed analysis in 1918, he wrote: “Clearly in a small-peasant country, the petty-bourgeois element predominates and it must predominate, for the great majority of those working the land are small commodity producers.”²³

Implicit in the use of both the term “petit-bourgeois” (small capitalist) to designate the class position of the peasantry, and the term “commodity” to designate the products of their labour, is an assumption that “small capitalism” oriented on the production of goods (commodities) for the market predominated in the Russia of his day. This was inaccurate, whether in 1904 or 1918. The “Glossary of Marxism” calls the “Petit-Bourgeoisie, *lit.*, “little city-folk” – the small business people, sometimes extended to include the professional middle-class and better-off farmers.”²⁴ But the problem confronting the Russian countryside in both 1902 and 1918 was precisely the *absence* of any such class. Overwhelmingly, production remained dominated – not by petit-bourgeois family farms – but by the patriarchal *mir*, where the local ruling elite comprised the male heads of households, whose authority was based not on the maximization of production, but on the protection of petty privileges which stemmed from their right to divide and redivide the

²¹ Radek, “The Paths of the Russian Revolution [Pamphlet. 1922],” 62.

²² Lenin, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back [Book, May 1904],” LCW Vol. 7, 267.

²³ Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Childishness [Pamphlet, 5 May 1918. Serialized in *Pravda*],” LCW Vol. 27, 336.

²⁴ Blunden, “Glossary of Terms: Pe.”

land cultivated by the *mir* community. There were exceptions to this picture. The dominant role of the *mir* was characteristic of Russia Proper (what would later become the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic or RSFSR). But in what is today Belarus, for instance “for historical reasons, the *mir* was virtually non-existent, and in the Ukraine west of Dnieper it was weak.”²⁵ These areas did have a mass class of family farmers – the petit-bourgeoisie of Lenin’s analysis. But in the Russian-speaking rural areas, these farmers were by far the exception rather than the rule.

The classification “petit-bourgeois” would have made sense, had the schema of *Development of Capitalism in Russia* been accurate, and the patriarchal *mir* been replaced by family farming – the quintessential rural institution of the small capitalist or petit bourgeois. However, as we have seen, so tenacious was the *mir* as an institution in the countryside, that it took state intervention from Stolypin to protect and encourage the development of a new class of petit-bourgeois family farmers. This new class of family farmers never comprised more than a minority of the Russian countryside; the process of transitioning to petit-bourgeois family farming was brought to a halt by the Great War; and the process was almost entirely reversed in 1917, when the “land to the peasants” meant the seizure of both landlord-controlled farms and petit-bourgeois controlled farms, by a temporarily invigorated patriarchal *mir*.

This is complex territory. The Stolypin reforms did find a hearing in the Russian peasantry and did *begin* a process of the dissolution of the *mir* and the creation of a mass class of small family farmers. “The policy of his [Stolypin’s] Government, in his own words, had:

“for its one object, the establishment of small individual property in land,” the destruction of the commune and the foundation of an economic system of free enterprise in rural Russia. As his daughter writes in her memoirs: “The abolition of communal land tenure and the resettlement of the peasants on homesteads (*na khutora*) was the dream of my father from the time of his youth. In this change he saw the principal security of the future happiness of Russia. *To make every peasant a proprietor* and give him the chance to

²⁵ Carr, “The Russian Revolution and the Peasant,” 88 fn 4.

work quietly on his own land, for himself, this must enrich the peasantry. . . .” (Emphasis added.)²⁶

In 1910, in discussing the progress being made so far with his reforms, Stolypin claimed: “During the three years that the provisions of this law have been in operation, i.e., up to 1 February 1910, over 1,700,000 heads of families have declared their desire to obtain their land in private ownership. This represents about 17 per cent of all peasants in village communes’.”²⁷ By the end of 1914: “nearly two million heads of families enjoyed private land-ownership, while an additional half million had received certificates entitling them to ownership of their communal lots in villages where there had not been a redistribution of land for the last twenty years. All told, this represented over 25 per cent of peasants in village communes.”²⁸ Some sources indicate that even the advent of war and the mobilization of millions of peasant lads into the army did not stop this process. “All through the war the movement continued, so that by January 1 1916, 6,200,000 families, out of approximately 16,000,000 eligible, had made application for separation . . . if the same trend had been continued at the same rate, all land would have been owned by individual peasants by 1935 or 1936.”²⁹

This clearly was a policy in sync at least with a sizeable percentage of the rural population. “A Soviet agrarian expert stated in 1918 that the yearning for a *khutor* was a characteristic inclination of peasants in many parts of the country on the eve of the 1917 Revolution.”³⁰

This process has been almost universally misunderstood. Earlier we outlined Lenin’s identification of two potential roads for capitalist farming in Russia: the “Prussian” path of large landowners hiring a wage-labouring rural proletariat; or the “American” path, the archetype of petit-bourgeois family farming, where rural wage-labour plays a marginal role. “Following Lenin [Soviet historians] . . . identified in the reform a conscious attempt

²⁶ Treadgold, “Was Stolypin in Favor of Kulaks?,” 6.

²⁷ Quoted in Strakhovsky, “The Statesmanship of Peter Stolypin,” 361.

²⁸ Strakhovsky, 361–62.

²⁹ Wolfe, “Lenin, Stolypin, and the Russian Village,” 46.

³⁰ Tokmakoff, “Stolypin’s Agrarian Reform,” 137.

on the part of Nicholas II's government to protect the interests of the large landowners by propelling Russia along a Prussian path of agrarian capitalism."³¹

Recall that the 1917-1918 agrarian revolution was characterized not by the seizure of the land by peasants as individual proprietors, but rather by seizure of the land through the *mir*. It is worth dwelling on this point in some detail. By 1917, there existed three categories of peasantry in the Russian countryside: 1) those working in the *mir*; 2) those working for a wage on the large estates; 3) those who had taken advantage of the Stolypin reforms and worked on individual family farms. Let us look at each in turn.

Those working in the *mir* might best be characterized, not as petit-bourgeois, but rather semi-feudal. We have already quoted Lenin to this effect, denouncing the village communes as “petty medieval associations of a fiscal, tax-levying nature”³² (interestingly completely at odds with his general characterization of their labour as petit-bourgeois). Feudalism is characterized by conditions of work and the products of labour being controlled by an all-powerful lord. No such lord existed as an individual in the *mir*, but the heads of households meeting in assembly acted as a patriarchal collective substitute for the feudal lord – hence, perhaps the characterization of the *mir* as semi-feudal. No one would think of calling the serfs in actual feudalism “petit-bourgeois”. Their production was not market-oriented, but rather oriented on a) subsistence; and b) satisfying the conditions of work dictated by the local aristocrat. In a like manner, no one should consider the peasants in the *mir* “petit-bourgeois”. Their production was similarly not market-oriented, but rather oriented on a) subsistence; and b) satisfying the conditions of work dictated by the local patriarchy-in-assembly. There is little incentive or possibility, in the patriarchal *mir*, for an increase in labour productivity. The tendency is towards stagnation and subsistence. From this kind of countryside – very much the opposite of anything resembling “small capitalist” – very little surplus was produced for the cities.

³¹ Pallot, *Land Reform in Russia, 1906-1917*, 9.

³² Lenin, “The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy [Book, December 1907. Confiscated. Published in 1917],” LCW Vol. 13, 424.

Lenin's offhand remarks on the medieval nature of the commune notwithstanding, we should resist deploying the descriptor "semi-feudal" for the peasant commune. The term "semi-feudal" has been a source of considerable debate – and could imply, for instance, that the Russian empire under Tsarism existed somehow outside the imperious grasp of global capitalism, which it clearly did not. Following Banaji, we need to differentiate between the mode of production understood as the labour process, and the mode of production understood as the regime of accumulation. That is, even if the mode of labour in the countryside of the Russian empire retained pre-capitalist relations and structures (which it certainly did), the commune was inserted in a national and world economy whose mode of production was capitalist, driven by the imperious needs of capital accumulation.³³ This is an important and interesting aspect of contemporary political economy, but we can leave that for future scholarship. For our purposes, the term "patriarchal" fits very well, capturing the power structure ruling the commune, the male heads of households and their cudgels. The key point is that the patriarchal commune was stagnant and unproductive – a terrible institution on which to rely for the production of surplus agricultural goods as commodities for sale to the hungry cities (and of course a terrible institution on which to rely for some "leap" into socialism).

Landlord farming on the large estates – the remnants of the old aristocratic holdings of the serf-era – employed landless labourers for a wage. Here, conditions of work very different from those in the *mir* pertained. These peasants were agricultural proletarians in a classic sense, unable to exist without selling their labour power. Unlike the *mir*, the production on these estates *was* completely market-oriented. The landlords required the production and sale of a surplus to sustain their holdings, and to accumulate wealth. From the exploitation of these agricultural proletarians, a considerable portion of the food surplus, necessary to sustain life in the cities, was produced.

The family farms – the great creation of the Stolypin era – comprised the third category. These family farmers were the one section of the peasantry which were petit-bourgeois in an absolutely classic sense. With ownership of their farm, and control of the

³³ Banaji, *Theory and History*.

product of their labour, they had – like the petit-bourgeoisie everywhere – a huge incentive to increase production of surplus for the market. Because the fruits of their labour – the surplus above and beyond that necessary for the sustenance of their family – was theirs to dispose of, the more that was produced and sold, the more they could accumulate. From this category of peasantry – nurtured and sustained by Stolypin’s reforms – an increasingly important portion of food for the cities was produced.

Private ownership did encourage personal initiative and consequently output, as subsequent critics, such as Chuprova, have admitted. ... Whereas in 1905, 7,278,000 puds of fertilizer were used, by 1913 this had risen to 34,256,000 puds, a five-fold increase. Mechanization also proceeded swiftly; in 1911 over 12 million rubles were spent on mechanized agricultural machinery, as compared with the nearly 7 million rubles spent in 1907. These figures reflect the government’s drive towards intensive cultivation, as well as the growing feeling on the part of individual families that land might yet prove a good capital investment.³⁴

Stolypin’s nurturing of this third category of peasant resulted in a sudden surge in agricultural productivity. Strakhovsky cites one Soviet economist saying:

“From 1906 to 1915 the total area of land under cultivation increased by 14 per cent; at the same time the development of productive forces in agriculture was the result not only of the increase in cultivated areas but also of a better productivity of the cultivated land, i.e., an increase in the yield of harvests.” Thus total agricultural production in 1913 increased in value by 79.5 per cent as compared with that of 1900. Truly it was said: “One does not know of such a rapid development of agriculture in the history of any European country.” Its stimulus was Stolypin’s agrarian reform.³⁵

The impact of the agrarian revolution of 1917 was to virtually eliminate the last two categories – the agricultural proletariat and the agricultural petit-bourgeoisie. The *mir* – in retreat during the years of the Stolypin reforms – massively re-asserted itself through the bayonets of the returning millions of peasant-soldiers. David Mitrany, in a classic 1951 study of Marxism and the agrarian question, provides a concise summary of the process.

³⁴ Tokmakoff, “Stolypin’s Agrarian Reform,” 129–30.

³⁵ Strakhovsky, “The Statesmanship of Peter Stolypin,” 361–62.

The land settlement of the previous decade was wiped out in many parts by the revival of the *mir*. The total extent of land seized by the communes in 1917-18 for redistribution was put at about 70 million dessiatins (189 mill. acres) from peasants and about 42 mill. dessiatins (114 mill. acres) from large owners. About 4.7 mill. peasant holdings, i.e., about 30.5 per cent of all peasant holdings, were pooled and divided up. The effect of the agrarian revolution, therefore, was in the first place to wipe out all large property, but also and no less to do away with the larger peasant property. In fact, as we have seen, more land was taken away and ‘pooled’ from peasant owners than from large owners, and the levelling and equalizing trend became more marked after October, 1917, and was sanctioned by the law of January, 1918, under which land was socialized.³⁶

Lenin’s attitude to these developments was confusing and contradictory. Krausz points out, “Lenin considered Stolypin’s reforms ‘progressive’ for their destruction of the feudal chains and their acceleration of the evolution of capitalism.”³⁷ Krausz could have added the adjective “grudgingly”. In 1907, just as the Stolypin reforms were beginning, Lenin described them as “progressive in clearing the way for capitalism, but ... the kind of progress that no Social-Democrat could bring himself to support.”³⁸ While *economically* progressive, Lenin considered the reforms to be *politically* reactionary, because Stolypin’s aim was to create a conservative, economically prosperous class in the countryside which could act as a counter-revolutionary buffer, a role such a class had performed admirably in France and England. “But” he continues, “can it be said” that this development “is reactionary in the economic sense, i.e., that it precludes, or seeks to preclude, the development of capitalism, to prevent a bourgeois agrarian evolution?”

Not at all. On the contrary, the famous agrarian legislation introduced by Stolypin ... is permeated through and through with the purely bourgeois spirit. There can be no doubt that it follows the line of capitalist evolution, facilitates and pushes forward that evolution, hastens the expropriation of the peasantry, the break-up of the village commune, and the creation of a

³⁶ Mitrany, *Marx Against the Peasant*, 226 note 7.

³⁷ Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin*, 98.

³⁸ Lenin, “The Fourth Conference of the R.S.D.L.P. [Newspaper Article, 19 November 1907, *Proletary* No. 20],” LCW Vol. 13, 142.

peasant bourgeoisie. Without a doubt, that legislation is progressive in the scientific-economic sense.

But then his reasoning becomes convoluted. He argues that in spite of Stolypin's reforms being "progressive in the scientific-economic sense", they cannot be supported. He claims that what Stolypin's reforms will lead to is "bourgeois evolution of the landlord type" which "implies the utmost preservation of bondage and serfdom (remodeled on bourgeois lines), the least rapid development of the productive forces, and the retarded [sic] development of capitalism". He counterposes that to "bourgeois evolution of the peasant type" which "implies the most rapid development of the productive forces and the best possible (under commodity production) conditions of existence for the mass of the peasantry."³⁹ As we have seen, in Lenin's schema, these two paths were characterized as the "Prussian" (large landlord farms) and the "American" (small family farms).

In the first case feudal landlord economy slowly evolves into bourgeois, Junker landlord economy, which condemns the peasants to decades of most harrowing expropriation and bondage, while at the same time a small minority of *Grossbauern* ("big peasants") arises. In the second case there is no landlord economy, or else it is broken up by revolution, which confiscates and splits up the feudal estates. In that case the peasant predominates, becomes the sole agent of agriculture, and evolves into a capitalist farmer.⁴⁰

Lenin saw Stolypin's reforms leading to a class of rich "Junker" landlord farmers. By contrast, he advocated the "American" path of small-peasant farming – a petit-bourgeois as opposed to a landlord-bourgeois path. Lenin was, without question, wrong. Stolypin's reforms were more "40 acres and a mule"⁴¹ than Junker-landlord in their effect. A classically petit-bourgeois class of small family-farmers was in creation, not a class of *Grossbauern*. "Stolypin headed in the "American" not the "Junker" direction. He neither declares for in words, nor provides for in deeds, the strengthening of landlord farming and

³⁹ Lenin, "The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy [Book, December 1907. Confiscated. Published in 1917]," LCW Vol. 13, 242-243.

⁴⁰ Lenin, 239.

⁴¹ See discussion in Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction [1935]*.

the chief authorities do not contest the fact that landlord farming declined more or less rapidly from the emancipation to the revolution”⁴². If we were forced to choose between these two ways by which to characterize the Stolypin reforms, they clearly fit more closely to the so-called “American path.”⁴³

Mistaken theory, catastrophic Practice

Unfortunately, Lenin clung to his completely incorrect understanding of the countryside through the catastrophic years of what later became called “War Communism”. He identified the biggest obstacle to the consolidation of communism in Russia, as the “anarchy of the petit proprietor ... whose life is guided by one thought: “I grab all I can – the rest can go hang.” This enemy is more powerful than all the Kornilovs, Dutovs and Kaledins put together.”⁴⁴ In fact, Lenin effectively collapses the two categories – petit-bourgeois farmer and wealthy landlord “Junker” farmer – into one category, the so-called “rich” kulak, identifying this kulak as the chief obstacle to the consolidation of the workers’ state in Russia. It was a completely incorrect political economy, which led to a generation of tragically wrong policies imposed on the countryside.

More than anyone, Isaac Steinberg captures this tragedy. Steinberg makes a persuasive case that while there were multiple “engines” of revolution in 1917 – the peasants on the land, the workers’ in the city, national minorities, and the intelligentsia in relation to all three – it was the peasant revolution in the land which was decisive – “the supreme slogan that carried the revolution as a whole was the peasant call, sanctified back in Populist days: *Zemlya I Volya*, (‘Land and Freedom’).”⁴⁵ Steinberg asserts that, so powerful was the wave of returning peasant-soldiers, arms in hand, determined to redistribute the land, that nothing could stand in their way and that – almost without resistance from either the landlords on the big estates, or the “Stolypin farmers” on the new

⁴² Treadgold, “Was Stolypin in Favor of Kulaks?,” 11.

⁴³ Pallot, *Land Reform in Russia, 1906-1917*, 10.

⁴⁴ Lenin, “Speech in the Moscow Soviet [Newspaper Article, 24 April 1919, *Izvestia VTsIK* No. 47],” LCW Vol. 27, 232.

⁴⁵ Steinberg, *In the Workshop of the Revolution*, 254.

family farms – they swept all land back under the control of the *mir*, redistributing it in strips to peasant families. The whole process was codified into law in a remarkable congress, “during the Third Peasant Congress (also held in Petrograd), which was the first to merge with the Third Soviet Congress of Workers and Soldiers. Nine hundred proletarian and six hundred peasant deputies established a unity of the Russian working people, a unity symbolized by the ‘handshake of Lenin and Spiridonova’,”⁴⁶ the latter being Maria Spiridonova, revered leader of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, a party, to which Steinberg belonged and which briefly shared governmental power with the Bolsheviks.

The deputies did not leave Petrograd until their law was officially ratified by the Central Soviet Executive. On January 27, 1918, this ratification took place in a solemn session. Spiridonova’s report on the work accomplished left those present shouting with enthusiasm. “No debates! Vote! Vote!” A forest of hands shot up. And still the deputies refused to leave Petrograd until they could hold printed copies of the law in their hands. Two printing presses worked a day and a night, and then the delegates departed, spreading the glad tidings to the far corners of the land.⁴⁷

The euphoria of this moment would not last. Within weeks, peace talks with Germany collapsed, and in the resulting chaos – only stopped with the punitive treaty of Brest-Litovsk – “the Germans occupied large parts of the food-producing areas, leaving Central Russia cut off from her sources of supply”. In that context, “the Government decided to requisition bread from the peasants by force” – the initiation of so-called “war communism”.

The Bolsheviks could not have called down a greater curse. The village had only just passed through its highest spiritual exultation. It had not only liberated itself from the landowners’ yoke, it had also laid the foundations for economic and social equality in its everyday life. ... And then, suddenly, the Bolshevik state launched something like a *class war* against them.

In the village itself the Bolsheviks – falling back once more on their outmoded theory – branded the working peasants as ‘small bourgeois,’ as men imbued with the psychology of trade, private markets and the instinct for acquisition. They organized the few remaining ‘paupers’ to oppose the

⁴⁶ Steinberg, 256.

⁴⁷ Steinberg, 260.

overwhelming mass of peasants; they established Soviets of ‘peasant paupers.’ They thus set themselves to demolish the foundations of the new revolutionary village. But even that was not enough: into the village they sent thousands of specially mobilized industrial workers for ‘bread requisitioning.’ ... these bands, which frequently turned into punitive expeditions against protesting peasants, corrupted their proletarian participants and led to acts of unbelievable brutality.⁴⁸

This cannot be seen as solely a terrible policy forced onto the Bolsheviks by imperious necessity. Lenin’s outmoded theory was informing Bolshevik practice *before* German occupation of the bread producing regions. Immediately after the historic peasant-worker congress and the “handshake of Lenin and Spiridonova” and before the punitive peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk – Lenin addressed a group of delegates from both the government parties, Bolshevik and Left Social~~ist~~ Revolutionary – delegates about to travel to the countryside to help with the advance of the revolution. It is a speech which a) repeats his view that the countryside has a large class of wealthy peasants (kulaks) – products of the so-called “Prussian” path taken by Stolypin; and b) acts as if this class had somehow survived the revolutionary expropriation movement. The truth is, there was no such class as “the kulaks” of any significance in the Russian countryside in 1918. This did not stop Lenin from warning delegates that: “Out there in the countryside, you will come across “bourgeois” peasants, the kulaks, who will try to upset Soviet power.”⁴⁹

You must explain to the people in the villages that the kulaks and sharks must be pulled up short. ... Ten working people must stand up against every rich man who stretches out his avaricious paw towards public property. ... The external war is over or nearly so. There is no doubt on that score. It is an internal war that is now before us. The bourgeoisie, its plundered goods hidden in its chests, is not worried and thinks: “We shall sit this out.” The people must ferret out the sharks and make them disgorge. This is your task in the localities. If we are not to collapse, we must get at them in their hideouts.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Steinberg, 264–65.

⁴⁹ Lenin, “Speech to Propagandists [Newspaper Report, *Pravda*, 6 February 1918],” LCW Vol. 26, 514.

⁵⁰ Lenin, 515.

He claimed that the peasants in the countryside would clearly see that: “it is not punitive expeditions but propagandists that are sent from the centre to bring light to the countryside, to unite those in every village who earn their own livelihood and have never lived at the expense of others.”⁵¹ But in fact, it was precisely as punitive expeditions that every subsequent intervention from city to country would be felt until War Communism collapsed of its own contradictions in 1921.

Krausz deals critically with the “dead-end of war communism”⁵² and rightly praises the turn to the New Economic Policy (NEP) as a way out of the morass that had developed. He also deals fairly with the ideas of Nikolay Rozhkov, who appealed to Lenin in 1919 for an end to War Communism. “Your threats of sending the requisitioning gangs are not going to help now” he wrote to Lenin, saying to him that “the essence of the situation is that your whole food policy is built on the wrong premises.”⁵³ Krausz says that “Rozhkov gave voice to the most important demand of the New Economic Policy in that he recommended a free market for basic food articles, the organization of the all-Russian market, and shutting down the requisitioning gangs.”⁵⁴ This is very helpful, and buttresses the argument developed in detail by Roy Medvedev in the 1970s, that “the Bolsheviks should have switched in early 1918 to the policy which was later called NEP, a policy they adopted in the much more complicated and difficult situation of early 1921.”⁵⁵

Vilification of the “kulak” would dominate Lenin’s writings in the civil war period, regardless of the fact that no such mass class existed in the wake of the 1917-1918 revolution. Perhaps no other word in the Russian Revolutionary vocabulary has been so abused. Originally, this had been a term of abuse directed towards those people in the countryside “whose wealth came from usury or trading rather than from agriculture.”⁵⁶ Later it came to signify a “new stratum of better-off peasants in the Soviet countryside”

⁵¹ Lenin, 514–15.

⁵² Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin*, 368.

⁵³ Rozhkov quoted in Krausz, 228.

⁵⁴ Krausz, 228.

⁵⁵ Medvedev, *The October Revolution*, 122–23.

⁵⁶ Lewin, “Who Was the Soviet Kulak?,” 189.

with terms such as “rural bourgeoisie” and “village capitalists” used interchangeably.⁵⁷ But the notion of the “rich peasants” – who sometimes were considered rich because they had one or two horses as opposed to none! – was completely out of step with the subsistence reality of the Russian countryside. Remember Tito’s previously quoted comment – “the test of being a *kulak* was not the size of a man’s holding, but whether he was for ‘socialism’ or against it.”⁵⁸ This is a reflection not of social science, but of political ideology.

More than anything else, the term “kulak” became a term of opprobrium. From 1918 until his death, Lenin hurled abuse upon what he saw as communism’s greatest internal enemy.

- He argued that if the communists “fight bag-trading, profiteering and the kulaks, again and again, a hundred times, a thousand times, and we shall win.”⁵⁹
- He described kulaks as “the criminals who are subjecting the population to the torments of hunger.”⁶⁰
- “The proletariat ... in alliance with the starving peasant poor, must start a desperate and uncompromising struggle against the rural kulaks.”⁶¹
- In a telegram to the Gubernia Executive Committee in Penza he argued for “a campaign of ruthless mass terror against the kulaks, priests and whiteguards; suspects to be shut up in a detention camp outside the city.”⁶²

⁵⁷ Lewin, 191.

⁵⁸ Treadgold, “Was Stolypin in Favor of Kulaks?,” 11.

⁵⁹ Lenin, “Report on Combating the Famine [Newspaper Report, 5 June, *Pravda* No. 111 and *Izvestia VTsIK* No. 113],” LCW Vol. 27, 436.

⁶⁰ Lenin, 438.

⁶¹ Lenin, “Report Delivered at a Moscow Gubernia Conference [Newspaper Report, 24 July 1918, *Pravda* No. 153, *Izvestia VTsIK* No. 155],” LCW Vol. 27, 548.

⁶² Lenin, “Telegram to Yevgenia Bosch – August 9, 1918 [Unpublished. First Published 1924],” LCW Vol. 36, 489.

- He described the kulaks as “the shameless rich peasants who fill their money-bags out of the people’s need and the hunger.”⁶³
- Seeing a growing class division in the countryside, he argued that “the bulk of the poor peasants, and of the middle peasants who are close to them, are on our side. Against the kulaks, who are our inveterate enemies, we have but one weapon—force.”⁶⁴

This anti-kulak discourse was completely at odds with reality in the countryside. Review the research summarized earlier. The Stolypin reforms had created a new class of family farmers, as we indicated above. But, when the expropriations swept the land in 1917, they were “not confined to landowners’ land. Large peasant holdings, created under the Stolypin reform or earlier, were also broken up and distributed – a process afterwards referred to as ‘a dekulakization of *kulaks*’.”⁶⁵ The seizure of the land by the peasants in 1917 had ended landlordism. It had also virtually ended family farming of the “American” type, at least in Russia proper. “Once the peasants ... had broken up the Stolypin holdings and flocked back into the *mir*, an overwhelming proportion of agricultural land in the RSFSR – as much as 98 per cent in some provinces – was held in this form of tenure, and subject to periodical redistribution.”⁶⁶

In sum, it is completely misleading to generalize from this history and pin the label “petty” or “petit” bourgeois on the Russian countryside. The *mir* exhibited no capitalist dynamic for increased productivity and production for profit. It was an institution which enforced subsistence. There was a brief emergence of a *new* class of petit-bourgeois family farmers as a consequence of Stolypin’s reforms. These farmers – freed from the *mir* – were

⁶³ Lenin, “Reply to a Peasant’s Question [Newspaper Article, 14 February 1919, *Pravda* No. 35],” LCW Vol. 36, 502.

⁶⁴ Lenin, “Session of the Petrograd Soviet [Speech, 14 March 1919, *Severnaya Kommuna* No. 58],” LCW Vol. 29, 25.

⁶⁵ Carr, “The Russian Revolution and the Peasant,” 81.

⁶⁶ Carr, 87–88.

in fact oriented on profit maximization in a classically petit-bourgeois fashion, and the rise of this class was accompanied by a general improvement in the productivity of agriculture in the Russian countryside. But – and this point cannot be stressed enough – this petit-bourgeois class was virtually completely destroyed by the land seizures of 1917. The family farm peasants were re-absorbed into the *mir*. Farming in this context was *petty* – the land available for each family was indeed tiny – but it was not in any way *bourgeois*: “the small peasant with his family lived at subsistence level, and grew for himself and not for the market.”⁶⁷

War on the Kulaks and socialist Consciousness

Trotsky was equally wrong on the question of the war on the kulaks. In Part III, in an examination of Trotsky’s political biography of Stalin, we will review the well-known criterion central to Trotsky’s understanding of the class nature of the Soviet Union – the question of nationalized property. The careful reader will notice that, in fact, he develops in that book another less well-known criterion. The counter-revolution, in Trotsky’s view, had “been unable to eliminate” not only the “nationalization of the means of production and the land” but also “the socialist consciousness of the masses.”⁶⁸ It is not self-evident where Trotsky will be able to find evidence of the continuing existence of this socialist consciousness, given the horrifying violence directed against the advanced urban workers in the years of the Great Terror.

He finds his evidence in the context of Stalin’s forced collectivization war on the “kulaks”, outlined above – the same forced collectivization which led to a horrendous artificial famine. In Trotsky’s view, “the nationalization of the means of production and of the land, is the bureaucracy’s law of life and death, for these are the social sources of its dominant position.” He then goes on to say that guarding this nationalization of the means of production and the land “was the reason for its struggle against the *kulak*. The

⁶⁷ Carr, 85.

⁶⁸ Trotsky, *Stalin [Book, 1940 – 2016 Edition]*, 690; see similar in Trotsky, *Stalin [Book, 1940]*, 405–6.

bureaucracy could wage this struggle, and wage it to the end, only with the support of the proletariat.”⁶⁹

Millions of peasants were killed in the war on the “kulaks”. Some of them died from the artificial famine. Some of them were killed by state policy as part of creating a climate of terror in order to drive peasants off their land. This story, so long denied, needs to be brought into the full light of day.

Professor Boris Brutzkus, one of the leading Russian specialists in agricultural economics at the time of the First World War, gives the following description of the typical procedure in the winter of 1929-30: The local authorities prepared a list of condemned families. Then at night they gathered, armed, together with the members of the local *komsomol* and perhaps a few poor peasants. They invaded the house of their victim; his means of production were confiscated for the local collective farms; a large quantity of consumer goods was usually looted for the private use of the executants of the dekulakization. All members of the family were pitilessly turned out of their homes into the snow-covered streets and it was forbidden to give them any help. The head of the family was generally imprisoned. The instruction was to divide the kulaks into three groups. To the first belonged those who could be considered as active counter-revolutionaries. These were to be shot immediately, without referring their case to the central authorities. The second – usually the most numerous – consisted of those who were destined to be deported to the northern forest regions. They were transported not in passenger carriages, but in railway trucks; the wagons were overcrowded to such an extent that there was no room to sit down. There was no heating, the people were very poorly clothed, and hardly had any food; so it was natural that a great number of them, and especially children, could not stand the long journey and died at a considerable rate. The third group consisted of those kulaks who were allowed to stay in the district, but were banned from admission to the kolkhozes. In this third group the death-rate was also very high because of hunger and cold in the first winter after dekulakization. Many children were parted from their parents; they formed the bands of homeless children which were one of the great social problems of Soviet life ⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Trotsky, *Stalin [Book, 1940 – 2016 Edition]*, 584; see similar in Trotsky, *Stalin [Book, 1940]*, 408.

⁷⁰ Swianiewicz, *Forced Labour and Economic Development*, 118.

We earlier saw that one official called what happened to the peasants during this war on the so-called “kulaks” a “cavalry march.”⁷¹ Replace “cavalry” with “calvary” – referencing “a place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull)”⁷² – and the essence of what transpired is better captured.

Yet Trotsky gave his qualified support to this one-sided war against the peasant masses. He sees it as flowing not from the venal ruling class needs of a new elite, but rather from the progressive social foundations of a new order. “Thanks to the support of the proletariat, it ended with victory for the bureaucracy” he says elsewhere.⁷³

The Soviet state’s one-sided war against the peasantry is not evidence of socialist consciousness. To the extent that the proletariat did support what Souvarine rightly calls “the nightmare of collectivization” they were making themselves complicit in a mass murder so extreme, some have given it the name genocide. It resulted in “an agricultural disaster, justly compared to the effects of a major war.”⁷⁴ And in the end, it was a disaster in the countryside which was accompanied in the cities – first in 1934 in the purge of Leningrad, and then in 1937-38 in the Great Terror – by another disaster, crushing the remnants of the organized workers themselves. How Trotsky can find evidence of “socialist consciousness” in all this is unclear.

We earlier quoted Wolfe saying: “Most Social Democrats knew so little about the countryside that the issues eluded them.”⁷⁵ He is clearly correct. This paper has identified a theoretical confusion; wrongly categorizing the labour inside the patriarchal commune as somehow “small capitalist” in nature. The key mistake was Lenin’s, as it was Lenin who was decisive in setting Bolshevik policy towards the peasantry. Lenin never abandoned his “petit-bourgeois” analysis of labour in the countryside, and it led to catastrophic errors in policy. His – and the Bolsheviks’ – agrarian policy was premised on the existence of a rapacious “peasant bourgeoisie” – a so-called kulak class – which was hoarding grain and

⁷¹ Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 330–39.

⁷² Matthew 27:33 in May and Metzger, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1210.

⁷³ Trotsky, *Stalin [Book, 1940 – 2016 Edition]*, 581; Trotsky, *Stalin [Book, 1940]*, 408.

⁷⁴ Souvarine, *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism*, 551.

⁷⁵ Wolfe, “Lenin, Stolypin, and the Russian Village,” 53.

starving the cities. They declared a war on this peasant bourgeoisie, banning trade, sending armed urban gangs into the countryside to confiscate grain – a dead-end policy against which they were warned by many – Martov, Rozhkov, Shlyapnikov and others – and which only ended with a mass uprising of peasants, workers and sailors in the fateful “Kronstadt” days of March 1921. But that is a story for another day.

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